

Is our country being run by oligarchs?

Pat Perriello | Apr. 9, 2014 NCR Today

I am not a constitutional lawyer, and I am not prepared to argue arcane points of law with Supreme Court justices.

Yet there are some areas of deep concern that emerge from the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision as well as [the latest McCutcheon ruling](#) [1] on April 2 that permits unlimited contributions to political parties. The Supreme Court has ruled that corporations have a right to free speech in the form of unlimited financial contributions. The result has been to enable the rich and powerful to control the political process and essentially the reins of government.

In general, these rulings have been viewed with a partisan perspective. Republicans tend to applaud the decisions while Democrats take issue with them.

Yet [the perspective of a conservative columnist](#) [2] from Orange County, Calif., seems to have hit the mark perfectly.

Joel Kotkin makes clear that both Republicans and Democrats have their billionaire donors who receive preferential access and are able to promote policies they advocate for personal or corporate advancement. He demonstrates how their millions help create an insidious climate that threatens much of what we hold dear in our democracy. He points to the dangers of placing so much power in the hands of a wealthy oligarchy. Kotkin says the oligarchs "are dominating the electoral map in ways that have not been seen at least since the abuses of the Nixon years." He sees the actions of the Supreme Court as having emboldened the wealthy.

Kotkin also goes back to the Founding Fathers to illustrate the dangers he sees in the direction we are heading. He quotes both James Madison and Thomas Jefferson and highlights their concerns about too much property being concentrated in the hands of a few.

He also quotes Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis: "We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." For Kotkin, if we continue on our present course, "our politics will continue to devolve like those of Rome in the late Republic, undermining the last vestiges of citizen-based politics."

My own view for limiting the influence of money and power in politics lies in public financing of political campaigns. I know this is not a popular view, but it could help create a level playing field for candidates. Members of Congress would no longer need to spend the vast majority of their time between elections fundraising. It could also help reduce the length of campaigns and limit the number of TV ads.

Genuine equal time coverage of candidates on TV and meaningful candidate debates could also contribute to more sensible campaigns. Negative and deceptive campaign advertising could be a thing of the past. We may not be able to control the Supreme Court, but we can change the way we conduct our campaigns.

For what it's worth, I continue to check the box on my income tax form to direct \$3 to finance presidential elections.

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Links:

[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/supreme-court-strikes-down-limits-on-federal-campaign-donations/2014/04/02/54e16c30-ba74-11e3-9a05-c739f29ccb08_story.html

[2] <http://www.oregister.com/articles/-606468--.html>