# DEMOCRACY REQUIRES FREE ELECTIONS

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I've a friend who was always saying, "If only I would win the lottery!" Someone finally asked, "Have you ever bought a ticket?"

There are sometimes things that need to be done first, to get where you want to go. Foundations before walls, if you're building a house. Getting on the plane, if you want to fly to Boston. Filling the gas tank if you're driving off across the desert.

Yet too often we forget to connect the dots. Why are Oregon's legislative proposals on global warming 20 years out of date? Why is Washington stonewalling single-payer health plans that would halve the costs of healthcare? Why is it such a struggle to even get discussion on the major changes we need today?

We've missed the first, and essential, step - restoring free elections. Democracy requires them. What we're getting from our elected leaders can't work.

I'll say it plain and simple. Our election system is corrupt. We don't even realize how weird and twisted it is. What we have can only give one outcome. The Wall Street Meltdown was no accident, and only the beginning.

Let's spell it out. Our electoral system is centered on legal bribery. It takes money, lots and lots of money, to get elected to public office today - in the U.S. It doesn't need to. It cost incumbent Gordon Smith $13 million dollars to LOSE his 2008 Oregon senatorial race to Jeff Merkley, who had to raise $6 million to win. David Wu had to raise $1 million to be reelected, Greg Walden $1.5 million, Earl Blumenauer $1.1 million, and Peter DeFazio $730,000. Kurt Schrader spent $1.4 million to beat Mike Erickson, who spent $2.5 million. That's just small-town Oregon, just 2008 congressional races. And Oregon '08 was way atypical. In general, successful candidates outspend opponents 3 to 1, and those advertising expenditures are crucial to the results.

A Los Angeles Times poll reported that 53 percent of Californians believe their legislators are "taking bribes," two-thirds think "most state legislators are for sale to their largest campaign contributors," a large percentage believes "state government is pretty much run by a few big interests rather than for the benefit of all the people," and the average respondent thinks that nearly one-third of legislative and executive branch members attained their positions "by using unethical or illegal methods." They're right. How could it be otherwise with the rigged system we have?

The money obviously comes largely from the wealthy (mostly corporations) who expect to, and do, profit handsomely from their investment. (Go to the website "Unfluence" to check out who gave how much to which candidates in recent elections.) What happens if an elected official votes against their sponsor's wishes? They can be sure 1) not to get those "donations" again, and 2) probably bigger donations will go to an opponent at the

next election to get them booted out. And regardless, our officials have to spend half their time fund-raising for their next election.

Free elections mean elected officials have twice the time to figure out good things, and incentive to support what their constituents (that's us) want, not their $$$ donors. It needs to happen, now, because the present system is sucking our society down the rathole.

Media expenditures for advertising make up half of the entire cost of election campaigns. In a political system where candidates have to pay huge fees to use the public airwaves (yes, remember, they ARE public), the only result is elected officials having to follow the wishes of corporate "donors". For a democratic society, we need democratic elections. For democratic elections, we need free candidate access to our airwaves.

So wake up - almost every country in the world, *except* the USA, provides that to candidates. It's not accidental that we don't.

A survey of the 20 democracies of Western Europe, Canada, Japan, Israel, Australia and New Zealand reveals the following approaches:

1) Outright restrictions on the amount of campaign spending for legislative races;
2) Restrictions on the amount of donations;
3) Public financing of elections; and
4) Free media access to candidates and parties, coupled with a prohibition on paid political advertisements.

The U.S. only restricts the amount of individual donations.

Paid political advertising is forbidden in most Western European countries. Most of the countries which do allow political advertising limit the duration, frequency, scheduling, or maximum expenditure permitted. In the vast majority of countries, parties are granted free airtime to present their programs, sometimes in the format of short advertising spots. Broadcasters are usually reimbursed for their technical costs either by the State or directly by the parties. Walter Cronkite, among others, has spoken out strongly for such changes in our election and media laws.

We can, and we need to, change our election laws. And, like other countries, give our candidates free and equal media access. It's the first step, and an essential step - to consensus and action on programs that can restore democracy and stability to our country.

SOME RESOURCES:

"The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy", Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, 2013.

"Financing Democracy", OECD, 2014.
"U.S. Election Will Cost $5.3 Billion", Center for Responsive Politics, 2008.

"Political Advertising: Case Studies and Monitoring", EPRA, 2006.

"Fair Elections Now Act" U.S. Congress, 2013.

"A Proposal: Media Access for All Candidates and Ballot Measures", Aspen Institute,

"Building Confidence in U.S. Elections - Section 7", Commission on Federal Election Reform, 2005

"The Spectrum Check Off Alternative", Aspen Institute, 2006.