

Systemic corruption undermines democracy in the United States

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ALTHOUGH the United States today is threatened by multiple kinds of private and public corruption, stories about these seldom appear in the media. Perhaps this is because most citizens regard “corruption” largely as individual acts — such as a politician pledging support for certain policies in return for generous campaign contributions — that must be prosecuted when verified. But, in fact, corruption can take many forms, the most insidious of which are both systemic and institutional.

Zephyr Teachout’s “Corruption in America” not only traces these various forms of corruption throughout US history, but he also reminds us that America’s Founders believed that any type of corruption was inevitably fatal for a republic. Not only had their study of history led them to conclude that widespread corruption was the primary cause of the downfall of the ancient Roman Republic, but their own experience convinced them that — unless quickly confronted and eliminated — corruption breeds rapidly, inevitably serving private gain over the public good.

Throughout most of the 19th century, speculation in frontier land ensnared lawmakers and private citizens alike. Much of the original territory of the US — bounded by the French at the Mississippi, the Spanish in Florida and in the key port of New Orleans, and the British in Canada — was only sparsely settled at the time of the Revolution.

With the conclusion of the war of independence, and the acquiring of the vast lands west of the Mississippi from the French in 1803, interest in settling the interior spiked. As new settlers flowed into those lands, many members of Congress — who had earlier bought up vast tracts of land in the old Northwest (the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys) — profited immensely by selling their holdings at a handsome gain.

The rise of large cities, fueled by the rise of industrial manufacturing as well as by the continuing influx of immigrants, soon gave birth to political “city machines” — such as Tammany Hall in New York — that offered food, jobs, and even funeral assistance to immigrants in exchange for their electoral loyalty. The technological and scientific innovations that followed the Civil War of the 1860s enabled some corporations and individuals to amass significant wealth which, in turn, was used to influence city councils, state legislatures and governors, and congressional representatives to be well-disposed toward corporate and wealthy interests. The obvious role played by the moneyed interests is why this period is remembered as America’s “Gilded Age,” a time not so very different from present-day America. Mark Twain expressed popular opinion when he commented that Congress was “the best that money could buy.”

Because of how both corporate and government figures portray the “workings of the market system,” most citizens in the West regard capitalism as an inevitable outcome of how a “free market” works. However, as Dean Baker argues in his important book “Rigged: How Globalization and the Rules of the Modern Economy Were Structured to Make the Rich Richer,” all economic structures function within laws structures and culturally reinforced expectations that are the consequence of human decisions.

Dr. Baker reveals how the elites have arranged the existing system so that the political and economic “rules of the game,” far from being neutral, are actually designed to favor their interests, both within and between nations.

Little outcry

Janine Wedel's "Unaccountable: How Elite Power Brokers Corrupt our Finances, Freedom and Security" shows how deeply the ideal of being accountable to the citizens has weakened in both public and private life. "Ethics," she writes, have shrunk, "reduced to individual choice" with little if any reflection on the public good. Through the proliferation of "think tanks" and use of "area experts," figures inside and outside of government have been able to often cloak their true identity and motives behind veils of "unaccountability." Things — and spokespersons — are often not quite what they present themselves to be. Recall headlines revealing how "leading scientists" who pooh-pooed the dangers of smoking or, more recently, have cast doubt on the findings of others on climate change, have been found to be in the (at least partial) employ of cigarette and fossil fuel energy companies.

As bad as the foregoing kinds of corruption are, it is even worse when a faction or party colludes to maintain power at all costs, as this strikes at the very heart of government integrity. Unfortunately, this is precisely the kind of corruption that is rapidly eroding majority rule in the United States and which is detailed in Zachary Roth's "The Great Suppression: Voting Rights, Corporate Cash, and the Conservative Assault on Democracy." He provides a thorough survey of the multiple tactics that the Right in the United States is employing in their ongoing efforts to return to the very conservative legal, social, and economic structures that existed prior to President Roosevelt's New Deal — a time when the interests of property, corporations, and employers were favored over those of workers, women, ethnic minorities, and the health of the environment.

Fueled by the infusion of ample funds from the wealthy elite, the Right is using false "data" and "fake news" in order to manipulate public opinion while employing multiple tactics — including voter suppression and partisan gerrymandering of congressional and state legislative districts — in order to lock in their control of state houses and the Congress.

Despite the fact that this has been going on for many years, there has been relatively little outcry. Why?

Partly, because much of this is occurring behind the scenes and is, also, intricate and hard to track, even for those trying to pay attention. There is the "noise" of hot-button social issues and the constant heated exchanges between ideologues. Too, with the decline of print media and the sound journalism it represents — and the rise of much less responsible, even deliberately biased "news" sources — less resources are available to dig into exposing these machinations.

But I also believe some of citizens' civic malaise is simply due to a type of psychic numbness. An increasing number not only believe that the government — indeed, "the system" in all its manifestations — is irredeemably corrupt but are also so caught up in their own struggle to survive that much of this simply washes over them.

Ben Franklin warned his contemporaries that the Republic enshrined in the Constitution would last only as long as citizens cherished and defended its values and institutions. The stench of the widening pool of corruption must awaken us to the deadly threat it poses, lest the United States become one more example of a failed republic.

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