

Gagain's Ideas and Opinions

MARCH 6, 2012 · 6:11 AM | EDIT

Op-Ed, Citizens United & Super PACs

By John R. Gagain Jr.

The movie “The American President”, starring Michael Douglas, taught us something critical. In the midst of all the wheeling and dealing in Washington DC, there is still time for lovemaking. Douglas’s love for actress Annette Bening, an environmental lobbyist in the movie, only grew deeper as they worked toward their own individual political interests—he for his reelection and crime bill and Bening for her environmental legislation. In the movie’s end, politics gets in the way of love.

The President chose supporting his crime bill over the lobbyist’s environmental legislation. Bening gets fired from her DC-based firm, finds a job elsewhere, and has to move out of Washington. The President responds “I don’t want to lose you over this”. Bening replies, “Mr. President, you got bigger problems than losing me. You just lost my vote”. It is reassuring to see, at least in the movies, that a citizen’s vote is still the most important thing—maybe even more than love.

Many Americans, however, including President Obama; believed that the people’s vote would no longer be as meaningful. Americans believed that the power of a citizen’s vote would be seized by the US Supreme Court’s 2010 decision to open campaign spending to an avalanche of unlimited contributions. President Obama declared the outcome, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, No. 08-205*, “a major victory for big oil, Wall Street banks, health insurance companies and the other powerful interests that marshal their power every day in Washington to drown out the voices of everyday Americans.”

However, we should not be mistaken. Money cannot buy an election. Past evidence shows that money has not always been the key factor in a candidate winning an election. History shows us successful candidates win because of their powerful message and communication skills. Today’s GOP primaries are an example. Although Mitt Romney has received more than 26 times the funding of his chief competitors, they all have either crept up on him, have been neck and neck with him, or even passed him in the polls—despite their small dollars versus Romney’s big dollar contributions.

The real problem is not that money is undermining American democracy. Corporate money and special interests have always pervaded campaigns and elections. The real problem is that money undermines our human well being. Like the Rober barons of a century ago, today’s billionaire warriors are corrupting our system. For those who think this corruption and abuse of financial power is a problem today, just wait. Tomorrow will be worse. Tomorrow is when Americans will be in even more danger.

The reason is that the American system is plagued with “transactional voters” versus “real American voters”. Transactional voters get involved with their millions of dollars because they want something in return. American democracy for them is a quid-pro-quo. They want something for their money. American democracy is their financial investment. For example, Billionaire casino man Sheldon Adelson already single handedly donated US \$11 million to Newt Gingrich’s campaign; and

announced he would be willing to donate up to US \$100 million. The big question is: what is he is looking for in return?

The problem is that tomorrow our elected politicians will not be there for the real American voters. They will be too preoccupied responding to their campaign's big dollar supporters. They will be busy fulfilling the needs and interests of the millionaires and billionaires that showered their campaign with big number donations.

The Citizens United decision creates a big problem. The main problem is not elections. Washington is in the problem. The big problem is when these politicians arrive in Washington DC after a Super PAC dominated election. The voting Americans end up becoming the loser. American voters want simple things such as a decent job, a roof over their head, or the ability to go home at night and not have to lock up the doors because of a crime-infested neighborhood. Billionaires, on the other hand, want things like laws repealed (i.e. the health care law, The Dodd Frank Act, etc.). They want to be free from government regulation. They want free reign for lucrative reasons. They want the US to take sides in long-standing conflicts and religious wars around the world. The list of special interests goes on and on.

The unlimited funds to campaigns set off by Citizens United is a problem because it is destroying Washington DC. It exacerbates the current distaste Americans have for their elected officials. Not to mention, the unlimited nature of campaign money is also joined by a loophole, which allows interest groups and their campaigns to funnel donations anonymously through so-called "social justice" organizations. This practice is anything but social; and definitely nothing related to justice.

Congress needs to clean up the swamp. They need to pass the 2012 Disclose Act. This will bring back transparency to campaign contributions by requiring US \$10,000 donations and above to be reported to the Federal Electoral Committee within 24 hours. It will make Super PACs put their money where their mouth is, by making them stand by the campaign ads they fund. Also, this legislation would require lobbyists to disclose their contributions in order to highlight the conflicts of interest. By taking these measures, Congress will make President Michael Douglas value Annette Bening and her precious vote.