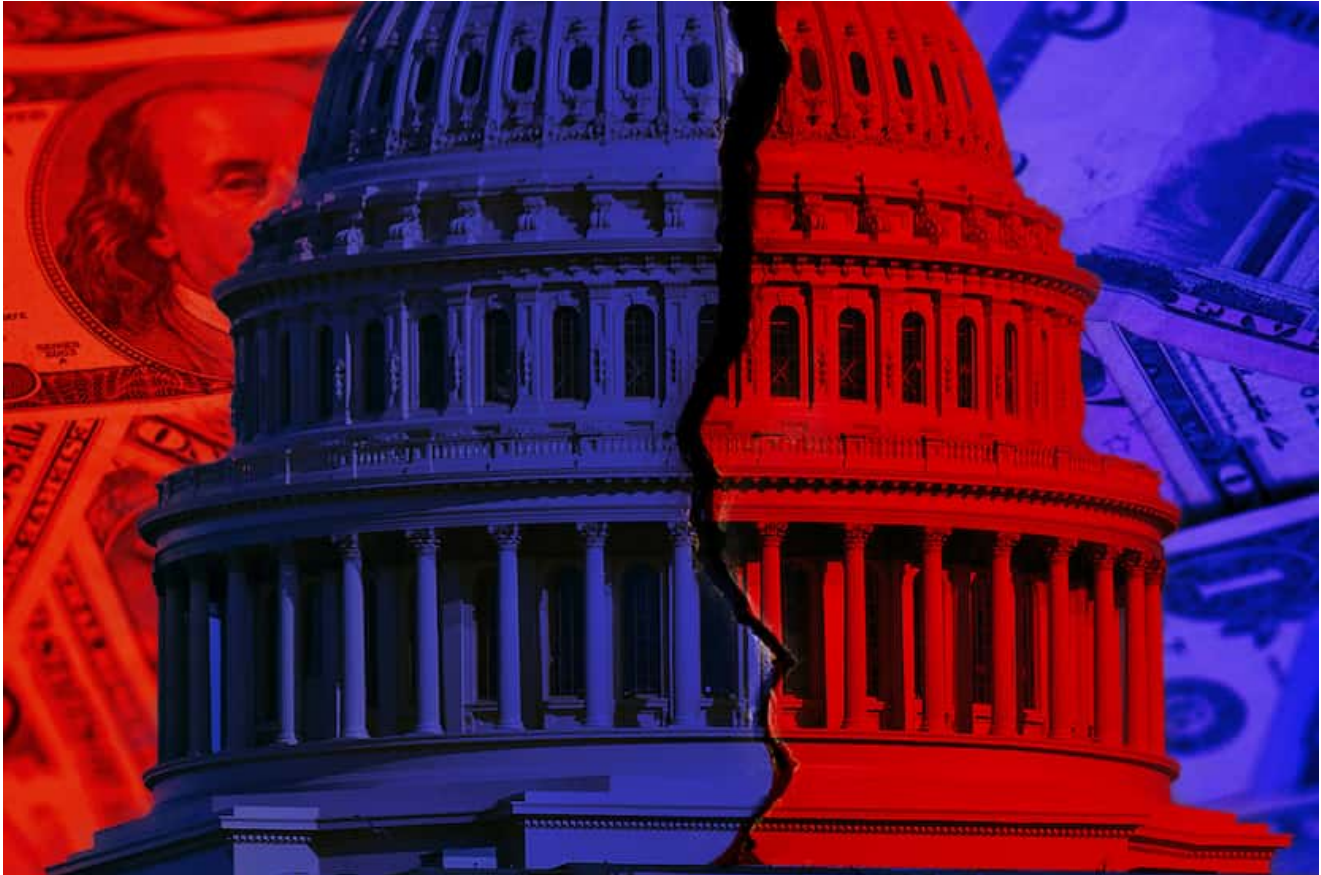


The gamble on unlimited campaign contributions is backfiring

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In recent years, Republicans at the state and local levels have begun seeing the truth about how special interests and even foreign adversaries have infiltrated our political system, and they're taking note that lately "dark money" is now boosting Democrats, write Matt Howerton and Ann Drumm. (iSTOCK / Getty Images)

If the overwhelming influence of money in politics is a concern to you, you are not alone. In fact, reducing the influence of money in politics is now the third-highest policy priority for Americans.

Every presidential election, the U.S. sets a new record for total election spending, and this year will be no different. From 2016 to 2020, the total spending in U.S. elections more than doubled from \$6.5 billion to \$14.4 billion. As the influence of big money continues to grow, that of ordinary Americans continues to decline.

Fifteen years ago, in the wake of the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, Republican power brokers in Washington, D.C., gambled on a future where an unregulated campaign finance system would work in their favor. However, they failed to heed the warning from the Gospel of Matthew about the foolish man who built his house upon sand. Just as shifting winds and tides inevitably eroded the foolish man's foundation, these power brokers were blind to the possibility that the very system they embraced could one day undermine the party's core principles and stability.

The political establishment's shortsighted bet on an unchecked flow of campaign cash has left the Republican Party vulnerable to the whims of wealthy individuals and special interests, threatening to erode the party's foundation and leave it struggling to maintain its identity and relevance in our changing political landscape.

Citizens United ushered in unlimited corporate and union spending and the modern era of "Super PACs" — entities that can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money to influence campaigns. But in recent years, Republicans at the state and local levels have begun seeing the truth about how special interests and even foreign adversaries have infiltrated our political system, and they're taking note that lately "dark money" is boosting Democrats.

According to one report: "After years of dark money overwhelmingly boosting Republicans, [2020] marks the first presidential election cycle where dark money benefited Democrats. That's a continuation from the 2018 midterm elections when Democrats benefited from more dark money than their Republican counterparts at the federal level for the first time since Citizens United."

In this state, money from billionaires in Pennsylvania and West Texas has fueled an unprecedented civil war within the state Republican Party. One state legislator who lost his seat after being targeted by this money told The Dallas Morning News that "having a few billionaires have that much control over state government is not the Texas way or the American way."

Republicans in other states are taking action. Wyoming Republican state lawmakers are warning voters about the influence of hard-to-trace outside spending. According to the president of the Senate and speaker of the House: "The influx of D.C.-style politics, with alarmist language designed to incite fear and anger, seeks to influence public opinion by appealing to our worst instincts, and often has nothing to do with real life in Wyoming."

It's no secret that our pay-to-play political system tilts power in favor of monied interests. While the median household income in Texas is about \$73,000, the vast majority of Texans don't have the disposable income to shell out thousands (or millions) of dollars to boost their preferred candidates. They can volunteer for candidates, attend town halls and campaign

events, write letters to the editor, or send emails to their legislators — but those efforts can feel pointless in the face of a torrent of big money. Many constituents feel like their voices are being drowned out by floods of cash.

Texas Republicans should confront the destructive role of money in politics by joining American Promise's national movement for the For Our Freedom amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would empower the states and Congress to set reasonable guardrails on money in campaigns and elections. So far, 22 states have called for such an amendment, and there is momentum growing — across the political spectrum — in places such as Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

Instead of building our politics on a foundation of money, it's time for lawmakers across the country to prioritize the voices and interests of their constituents.

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