THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY:
CAPITAL, LEGISLATIVE INFLUENCE, AND POLITICAL EQUALITY

A Thesis

by

Kevin Scott Erbe

Approved by:

____________________________, Committee Chair
Mark Brown, Ph.D.

____________________________, Second Reader
Monicka Patterson-Tutschka, Ph.D.

____________________________
Date
Student: Kevin Scott Erbe

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__________________________, Graduate Coordinator
James Cox, Ph.D.
Department of Government

__________________________
Date
Abstract

of

THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY: CAPITAL, LEGISLATIVE INFLUENCE, AND POLITICAL EQUALITY

By

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This study demonstrates that the individualistic side of American culture supports a political system in which economic elites have unequal political influence, but the communal side of American culture provides resources for promoting a constitutional amendment to ban all private money from politics. Culture permeates every facet of the human experience, including how economic and government systems function. The American cultural acceptance of capitalism, individualism, and a private market ethos is used by economic elites to justify using their private capital to secure a higher level of political access and influence than the majority of Americans. This use of private capital causes harm, because not every citizen can afford to compete in this economic environment, which impedes political equality and democracy. Individualism complements capitalism in that it justifies self-interest over the common good. However, American culture also includes communal tendencies that have led to government programs that promote the common good. The individualistic side of America’s dual culture tends to dominate, which is evident in several Supreme Court decisions that have promoted a market society, but the communal side of American culture provides
resources for challenging such decisions. An imperfectly legitimate coercive response—that is, a constitutional amendment—is presented as one plausible solution to remove private capital from politics and thereby prevent economic inequality from producing political inequality. Such a response is not likely to be enacted except as a result of communally oriented, public demonstrations reminiscent of the civil rights movement and the protests during the Vietnam War. Such mass demonstrations could compel the government to terminate the use of money as a First Amendment right via a constitutional amendment.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Mark Brown, Ph.D.

_______________________
Date
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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

The impact of powerful business interests in the American political system is well documented in political science and economics. The U.S. Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission solidified the association of free speech with a corporation’s right to funnel large amounts of money into the political process. This buys the kind of political power and access that most American citizens simply do not possess. Why should we care about the infiltration of private capital into the American political system when the Court has ruled that such a practice is constitutional?

One cannot argue that the government represents all citizens when not everyone has equal access to their representatives. Political equality means that each citizen has an equal opportunity to influence public policy. This is what makes political equality important. That is to say, political equality is important because it allows all citizens some meaningful method of influencing the laws that will govern their lives. However, this is difficult to do when a person—or a majority of people—does not have the ability to secure the level of access to policy makers that others do. We now have a system that allows a person to purchase unequal political access instead of placing one’s citizenship and vote as the primary way of ensuring equal access and political representation. Unequal political access means that a person or corporation can use large campaign
donations to get privileged meetings and attention from policy makers in order to secure special consideration regarding legislation relevant to their private interests even when doing runs counter to the public good. Lessig (2011) explained the link between unequal political access and money. He asserted that there is agreement even by people who support the current campaign system that money does have an effect in securing government access. Former Senator Paul Simon noted that people who can contribute large sums of money to a party committee will receive substantially better access to political leaders than those who can only afford small donations (as cited in Lessig, 2011, pp. 145-146).

The power that economic elites wield is financial—and it is through this method that they buy access and preferential representation. This kind of transaction occurs in government institutions that are obligated to represent all Americans—and it is this situation that subverts America’s representative form of government. A representative democracy demands that more than a few citizens have the ability to access policy makers equally. If one’s financial standing is indeed a factor in influencing our political system, then the growing economic gap in America is very relevant because it determines who will secure greater levels of access.

Various scholars have argued that our level of economic disparity is connected to our level of representative equality. Corporations use a system of inducements to influence legislation in the pursuit of profits that appears to leave many policy makers unable and/or unwilling to act in the public good (Lindblom, 1982). There is no question
that capitalism is responsible for generating great prosperity in the United States and indeed throughout the international system. However, capitalism also fosters American individualism and a private market ethos, which are in turn partially responsible for causing great harm in the form of unequal political access. How so? Cultural notions of individualism—things such as self-reliance, self-interest, autonomy, and independence—provide a sociopolitical foundation that allows a market ethos to flourish and infiltrate into every aspect of American life. This ethos justifies the belief that one’s private property can be used to purchase all sorts of things—houses, cars, clothes, more property, and even unequal political access.

It is apparent that we now have an oligarchical system—a system that violates the basic democratic ideal of political equality. Hanna Pitkin (2004) rightly asserted that our representative government has evolved into a new form of oligarchy, “with ordinary people excluded from public life” (Pitkin, 2004, p. 335). How can the United States be a government of, by, and for the people if the vast majority of its citizens are left out of the political process via unequal access? This issue is truly what is at stake regarding the health of our representative form of democracy.

It would appear that we have now reached the point in our American political development where an “imperfectly legitimate” coercive response is necessary (Mansbridge, 2012). That is to say, we need to promote political equality through the coercive power of government, even if such a law enacted under the current system cannot meet a high standard of democratic legitimacy. One way to do this, I argue, would
be to enact a constitutional amendment to ban private contributions to political candidates. This is simply offered as one plausible reform option.

The objective of this study is to demonstrate that America’s private market ethos harms our democracy. Some people would disagree with the argument of this thesis. One could make the claim that citizens are equally represented even though they do not have the money to secure substantive access. This depends on what a person means by “equally represented.” To the extent that citizens have the power to vote and communicate with their representatives, one could say that they are all equal. However, what if some portion of the electorate can get special attention from their representatives that the majority cannot due to the amount of money the first group contributed to the legislator’s last campaign? In this case, there is a clear bias for those individuals who contributed large sums of money. Is there an injustice operating in this type of political system? Is this a fair system? That is to say, is representation balanced when the level of one’s access is contingent upon the amount of money he or she contributes? This situation is unfair in that it is not free from bias, and it is unequal in that access is not close to being evenly proportional because not everyone’s vote is the same. It seems that the infusion of private capital into the political process gives those who can afford to do this a privileged status in relation to others who cannot. The money that is used to secure a heightened level of political access would indicate that representation is not distributed evenly. Gilens (2009) argued that the preferences of the rich typically outweigh the
preferences of the poor in matters of public policy. Bartels (2008) provided evidence that politicians on both sides of the political spectrum are influenced by money.

Another objection is that government should serve as an umpire—officiating the rules of the game in order to ensure that each person plays by the rules (Friedman, 1962). This is another way of saying that government has a duty to protect the contractual agreements between parties so that each side is treated fairly and equally. Otherwise, government should not get involved in the private affairs of citizens—including what they do with their private property. However, what if how people use their private property impedes equal political access and representation because the system is not fairly applied? Even libertarians agree that people should be able to use their private property in the manner they choose as long as doing so does not harm others. The point here is that allowing one group to purchase greater levels of political access than other groups can harm society by limiting fair and equal representation. It degrades the democratic process due to an incongruent relationship. This incongruence is created by claiming that each citizen is entitled to equal representation when the political reality is that only those of a certain financial standing can actually secure that which is promised to all. Even if this is not always the case, it creates the perception that it is. It creates the mindset in the electorate that their voices and votes do not count, and ultimately it results in people disengaging from the political process (Lessig, 2011).

Finally, many Americans would argue that they should be able to buy whatever they want with their own money. Doesn’t liberty dictate that they should be able to do
so? They are certainly well within their legal right to buy political access. So, what is
wrong with this situation? The trouble with this line of argument is that we should not be
able to buy whatever we want with our own money. We cannot legally buy radioactive
material, heroin, certain types of weapons, or people. Doing so harms individuals, and it
also degrades society. We have decided as a society that certain things are off limits—
even when someone has the financial means to purchase things like radioactive material
and heroin. Certain things are simply not for sale because doing so would negatively
affect other people and the buyer. Allowing people to buy political access cheapens
liberty with a lie about how equal we really are as a society. How can we talk about
liberty when vast numbers of citizens are not free to truly participate in a process that
claims equality for all? The current situation not only degrades the actual political
process, but it attacks notions of liberty, equality, and fairness. The argument under
examination is a call for heightened government intervention, rather than a desire to limit
liberty, or a scheme to punish the successful. It is actually a position that asks the
American people to insist that their government live up to the notion “that all men are
created equal.”

This study links what for many Americans might be two distinct parts into a
cohesive unit: free-market capitalism and representative democracy. The American
cultural system—with its strong inclinations towards self-reliance, autonomy, and
independence—provides a societal framework that accepts and justifies a private market
ethos. This market ethos is committed to the premise that one’s private capital can be
used to purchase unequal political access. American individualism shapes and constrains the political system, most particularly with respect to how the U.S. Supreme Court has responded to free-speech issues. As a result, the Court has limited campaign-finance laws that were designed to place serious constraints on money and its infusion into the U.S. policy-making apparatus. The joining of capitalism and democracy not only degrades the reputations of both systems—but it also more specifically places a question mark as to which Americans are actually being represented. The individualistic inclinations of American society might make rectifying this situation difficult to achieve. However, there is enough evidence to believe that this society’s communal tendencies—when faced with significant sociopolitical dissatisfaction—will lead people to rise up to meet what is an unacceptable situation confronting political equality and thus compel government to take action in the name of the people (Walzer, 1990).

The liberal side of America’s dual culture tends to be more pronounced—and this is evident in several Supreme Court decisions. An imperfectly legitimate coercive response, as mentioned previously, is a plausible communal solution in order to separate business from government. Such a response would most likely occur only in the wake of intense public demonstrations reminiscent of the civil rights movement and protests during the Vietnam War. The goal of these mass demonstrations would be to compel the government to terminate the use of money as a First Amendment right via a constitutional amendment.
The thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 draws on various political theorists to examine libertarian and communitarian aspects of American political culture, arguing that the libertarian view is culturally dominant. Chapter 3 examines the relation between politics and economics, and between capitalism and democracy. Chapter 4 looks at selected U.S. Supreme Court cases to show how they reflect America’s individualistic culture and thus allow people to purchase political access—even when doing so causes unequal political representation. Chapter 5 examines empirical political science research on whether money actually buys both unequal political access and unequal influence over policy outcomes. Chapter 6 presents the case for a constitutional amendment that would, first, ban private financial contributions to political campaigns, and second, require that political campaigns be financed through tax dollars.
Chapter 2

EXPLANATORY FACTORS: CULTURE AND GOVERNMENT

In reviewing the work of various scholars, we can be confident that money in the political process creates political inequality for most Americans via unequal political access. This access enables those with great financial resources to make investments in the public sphere. This, however, does not fully explain the how and why of this political phenomenon because it only gives a superficial account of the aforementioned situation. In this chapter, we will discuss how American culture includes a market ethos that encapsulates both libertarian and individualistic tendencies, and ultimately creates gross political inequality via inequitable access to decision makers. However, America also has an important subordinate tradition of communitarianism or republicanism that emphasizes cooperation and interdependence. In this chapter, I first discuss American individualism, and then I turn to examples of America’s communitarian tradition. Individualism is most associated with self-interest and a private market ethos, whereas communitarianism places more emphasis on communal pursuits that aim at the common good.

Cultural Roots in the American Political Landscape

The American sociopolitical landscape is built on a solid foundation of what most would describe as an individualistic cultural framework. This shapes how people interact, what issues are important to them, how they view and define relationships with their
families and fellow citizens, and even how their government and economic structures are built and operate. Culture is all encompassing, and can help us understand America’s inclination to justify a private market ethos that accepts the purchasing of unequal political access. We will start by discussing some broad theoretical notions about culture before moving on to how these ideas apply to America’s cultural inclinations and the effect they have on political access.

Hall (1976) noted that there is not one aspect of the human experience that is not shaped and constrained by culture, including “how economic and government systems are put together and function” (Hall, 1976, p. 17). According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), the mindset of a particular group of people impact the type of political system found in a specific country, and Triandis stated that “it would seem plausible that the type of culture predisposes a particular political system” (Triandis, 1995, p. 50). Triandis (1995) argued that “culture emerges in interaction. As people interact, some of their ways of thinking, feeling and behaving are transmitted to each other and become automatic ways of reacting to specific situations” (Triandis, 1995, p. 4). We can pretend that culture and how a nation thinks and behaves can somehow be isolated, but this is simply naïve. This is true even for an immigrant nation like the United States. A general cultural framework—even in this type of nation—persists and pervades. The cultural framework typically associated with the United States, according to various cross-cultural scholars, is individualism.
Triandis (1995) defined individualism as a “social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives” (Triandis, 1995, p. 2). In contrast, collectivism is defined as a “social pattern of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (Triandis, 1995, pg. 2). In individualistic cultures “people are supposed to look after themselves and their immediate family only, while in collectivistic cultures “people belong to in-groups or collectives which are supposed to look after them in exchange for loyalty” (Hofstede & Bond, 1984, p. 419). Individualistic cultures thus lack an interdependent construal of self. “Experiencing interdependence entails seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one’s behavior is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 227). Stated differently, “the understanding of one’s autonomy as secondary to, and constrained by, the primary task of interdependence distinguishes interdependent selves from independent selves, for whom autonomy and its expression is often afforded primary significance” (Markus et al., 1991, p. 227).

These basic notions of individualism help explain why notions of private property and liberty are so pervasive and sacrosanct in the American psyche. American individualism as a cultural norm tends to represent independence, self-reliance, and competitiveness rather than interdependence. Working for financial gain is a competitive idea that comes from a frontier and entrepreneurial spirit (Patterson, 2011). Being told by
government what one can do with her private capital runs counter to the ideals of the American Revolution regarding independence from abusive and intrusive government, personal liberty, frontier self-reliance, and libertarian notions of the ownership of one’s private property vis-à-vis the state. Can there be “liberty and the pursuit of happiness” when government can dictate what one can do with his money? This notion seems to violate American cultural principles of individualism, the ideals of the Revolution, and the basic system of liberal economics. So, how does culture apply to the American psyche?

**The Reluctance to Help Our Compatriots: The American Frontier Spirit**

One way to understand American culture is to look at the debate over universal health care. Clearly, one would think that each person would want access to quality health care, but this notion is not acceptable to many people in the United States. Why? Patterson (2011) reported that in 2009 the Pew Research Center discovered that only 24 percent of Americans fully agreed that the government should take care of people when they are unable to take care of themselves (Patterson, 2011, p. 9). This statistic helps explain President Obama’s inability to secure a complete overhaul of the country’s health-care system. The United States is the only industrialized Western nation that does not provide health care for all of its citizens, and it is last in social-welfare spending as a percentage of GDP at 16 percent to Sweden’s 29 percent, France’s 27 percent, and Germany’s 26 percent (see Patterson, 2011, p. 9). How can we explain these statistics?
Patterson argued that one of the primary obstacles to universal health care is America’s belief in individualism. He asserted that this belief has its roots in America’s wilderness society, where people had to stand on their own two feet without the help of others to defend their property, themselves, and their families. From this frontier experience grew the perspective that people should make it on their own (Patterson, 2011). Patterson’s description appears to match our earlier theoretical discussion about individualism. The private market is built on America’s frontier spirit and self-reliance, with secondary importance given to one’s compatriots—especially on matters pertaining to private capital. How so?

Individualism compels Americans to use their private property in a manner that maintains their safety and security, much like the Winchester rifle did for American pioneers moving across the vast expanse of the western wilderness. Our market ethos is just a new form or type of weapon. America’s revolutionary heritage regarding the sanctity of private property complements individualism in that we feel it necessary, acceptable, and justifiable to use money to place ourselves into positions of security via political power. The political process can cause harm to one’s financial pursuits, so it makes sense that a person would want to dominate and control this system, much like America’s 19th century doctrine of manifest destiny. We use our private property in a way that places ourselves in a secure position in order to maintain our survival in the marketplace. Our frontier cultural mindset tells us that we cannot rely on others or government to protect us, so we act in a manner that places our needs before our
neighbor’s. This does not mean that we never do things that are in the best interest of the community. However, our individualistic inclinations are the predominant feature of the American psyche. This drives us to implement a market ethos that is predicated on the notion that it is acceptable to use one’s private resources in whatever way necessary to ensure our safety, security, and survival. This brings us to libertarianism.

Libertarianism embodies many of the fundamental components of American culture, including independence, individualism, self-reliance, and the freedom to do with one’s money and property as one sees fit. Libertarianism gives us another way of explaining the independent nature of American culture in that it places great significance on a person’s freedom to use private capital in separation from others.

According to Arneson, libertarianism “holds that each person has the moral right to do whatever she chooses with whatever she legitimately owns, provided she does not thereby cause harm or impose undue risk of harm to others in specified ways” (Arneson, 2010, p. 169). In addition, Arneson argued that each person has the right not to be harmed by others. The libertarian perspective seems to pre-suppose a commitment to the self that is the bases of individualistic cultures—cultures that separate the person from his or her duties and obligations to society. For example, Arneson asserted that under a libertarian perspective one has “the right to exclude others from using” his or her private property (Arneson, 2010, p. 170). This seems to be in step with the notion of separating the private person found in individualistic cultures from society—and what she or he owes to others. How can we explain this mentality? Individualism dictates that developing the self is an
independent affair. One is supposed to look after himself without much thought to society. As Markus and Kitayama pointed out, the individual sees herself apart from collectives. Her behavior is predicated on the idea that loyalty to oneself comes before loyalty to society. Libertarianism embraces these cultural notions. It allows a person to place great importance on a frontier spirit that drives a private market ethos that justifies one’s freedom and right to use capital without interference.

However, do people have the moral right to use their private property in whatever manner they choose—including using money to purchase unequal political access? Those with a libertarian bent would have us believe that it is not only their moral right to use money to buy political access, but that doing so does not harm others. After all, they are simply exercising their First Amendment right. Individualism tends to breed the idea that we can do whatever we choose with our money. It both drives the person to accumulate capital in order to survive in a liberal society, but it also degrades the community by encouraging one person to compete against the other. That is to say, individualism fosters a Social Darwinist perspective that encourages a survival-of-the-fittest mindset that constitutes the justification and acceptance to purchase unequal political access because one can afford to do it. The process that is used to accomplish this is a market system. This type of market ethos has as its dominant feature the belief that one’s private property can be used to buy unequal political access in order to ensure greater levels of representation.
The Basic Components of Sumner

We can gain further insight into the attractions and limits of American individualism with a look at the work of the influential American sociologist William Graham Sumner. Addressing his viewpoints helps us conceptualize American individualism. His ideas explain how this cultural framework shapes the libertarian mindset into believing that they have the moral right to apply their private property in any way they see fit. Much of Sumner’s thinking can be traced to scholar Herbert Spencer. A supporter of laissez faire and Social Darwinism, Spencer applied the notion of survival of the fittest to economics. He combined biological theory with social development and argued that nature’s process of weeding out the unfit “was a necessary consequence of the laws which governed the development of the human species” (Grimes, 1983, p. 305). Spencer believed that only by allowing this weeding out process could humans and society improve. He argued that life was a competitive struggle for survival whereby some achieved success in the competitive market and others did not—and this was simply the laws of nature working as intended. According to Grimes, laissez faire had been originally justified on the premise that man’s “liberty was best realized where the state did not interfere with his activities” (Grimes, 1983, p. 305). Under a Social Darwinist, free-market system, the individual is tasked with making the best deal he can with his fellow man, while the state is obligated to ensure that each individual lives up to the terms of the transaction via a contract (Grimes, 1983, p. 305). Grimes commented that many classical economists argued that a “policy of laissez faire maximized productivity
and achieved in fact the greatest good of the greatest number” (Grimes, 1983, p. 305). Other scholars have also commented on the virtues of the capitalist system.

Sumner, like Spencer, also combined laissez-faire principles with evolutionary science. This merger of ideas blended liberal economics with a survival-of-the-fittest doctrine. Sumner stated “a free man in a free democracy has no duty whatsoever toward other men of the same rank and standing, except respect, courtesy, and good will” (Sumner, 2003, p. 34). He argued that the free-market system allowed every man to compete for survival with others without state favor or privilege (Grimes, 1983, p. 306). Sumner believed that the free man living within the confines of a free government cut off all ties to others who might pull him down and those who might help pull him up (Sumner, 2003, p. 34). This basic notion is in keeping with an individualistic society. The type of individual Sumner described is essentially an isolated man who must accept the consequences of this status. These philosophical notions nicely encapsulate the independent, self-reliant man living in an individualistic culture within a free government supported and guided by a liberal economic system. He argued that in a “free state every man is held and expected to take care of himself and his family, to make no trouble for his neighbor, and to contribute his full share to public interests and common necessities” (Sumner, 2003, p. 35). If a man, Sumner asserted, failed to do these things, then he placed burdens on others. In fact, Sumner concluded that if a man accepts any help that he himself did not earn, then he cannot be an independent citizen.
Such ideas are consistent with the American political psyche, including notions of self-reliance, independence, and individualism. Grimes pointed out that this philosophy places those with financial power in an advantageous position against those who would use government to modify or curtail the exercise of this power. This seems to suggest that one’s financial power protects a person from intrusive government behavior (Dahl, 1998). This, too, supports the notion that the American psyche is predisposed to supporting a frontier, self-reliant mindset.

From Sumner’s perspective, one can be a political equal to others, but not be similar in financial standing. One has to do with achieving a level of financial independence in a competitive, free-market environment, while the other has to do with equal political rights as set forth by laws and institutions of the state (Sumner, 2003, p. 30). The trouble with Sumner’s point is that one’s financial standing has been given political significance by the federal government. Wealthy people can now use their private capital to gain privileged access to legislators in order to discuss matters that may have nothing to do with the will of the people—and ultimately use this wealth to advance their political preferences in a way that citizens of lesser means cannot (Gilens and Page, 2014).

**Thoreau and Emerson on American Culture**

Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson can help us further conceptualize the strength of individualism in the American sociopolitical and cultural
landscape. The writings of Thoreau and Emerson exemplify the individualistic tendencies that at times seem to dominate today’s American psyche, but it is important to note that they did not advocate that a person should entirely disengage from politics. Indeed, we will address the communal aspects of American culture later in this chapter.

Thoreau supported the notions of self-reliance and individualism. Thoreau used these ideas to question the state’s value for the citizen by stating “government is best which governs not at all” (Thoreau, 1993, p. 1). Whereas many people have claimed that the government acts through the people’s will, Thoreau correctly noted that the “government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before people can act through it” (Thoreau, 1993, p. 1). He went on to say that government has not furthered any enterprise, nor has it kept the country free, settled the West, or educated the masses. Thoreau claimed that the character inherent in the American people accomplished all of the above—and would have done more if it were not for the governmentimpeding their progress (Thoreau, 1993, p. 2). This suggests that the American people are capable of realizing significant sociopolitical reforms via collective action in spite of cultural inclinations and government policies. However, this same issue demonstrates that the American psyche is predisposed to self-reliance and an intense level of independence.

Thoreau even took issue with the concept of majority rule because he argued that it is not based on right, justice, or fairness, but rather based on the notion of government’s strength. Thoreau seemed to suggest that the government essentially robs citizens of their
ability to choose and decide what they believe is right via their conscience, and instead acts according to what laws dictate a person must do. From Thoreau’s perspective, government forces citizens to abandon their common sense about matters they know to be the right course of action. In so doing, laws and governments limit a citizen’s ability to employ her own personal intuition in choosing a course of action that is in keeping with what she believes is right. Stated differently, the government hampers a person’s individualistic nature and his overall self-reliance that is so much a part of the American psyche. This, Thoreau argued, is done not out of “superior wit or honesty, but with superior strength” (Thoreau, 1993, p. 12). Grimes (1983) argued that Thoreau was not an anarchist, nor did he wish to abolish government. He did, however, advocate resisting what he thought was bad government. According to Grimes, Thoreau wanted to terminate government’s use of force and advocated the development of a system that would prepare man to be fully governed by his own will and not by another. This type of conscience would govern the behavior of men (Grimes, 1983, p. 207). Thoreau believed that this type of society would initially require reforming man’s character and the reform of government (Grimes, 1983, p. 207). What Thoreau described is in keeping with our earlier definitions of individualism. This is a person who supported one’s autonomy from government and society, and who sought to dwell within the parameters of his own intellectual space.

Thoreau believed that no American legislator could solve the vexing problems of the country. He asserted that if society “were left solely to the worldly wit of legislators
in Congress for its guidance, uncorrected by the seasonable experience and the effectual complaints of the people, America would not long retain her rank among the nations” (Thoreau, 1993, p. 18). These politicians do not resist the state for the most part, but instead go along with its laws in robotic fashion without truly caring about the type of state they serve or doing what is right. He paints a very dismal picture of the value of government in bringing about what is right. It is Thoreau’s opinion that there will never be a really free and enlightened government until “the state comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power” (Thoreau, 1993, p. 18). His ideas suggest that the individual politician is intertwined with cultural individualism and thus is more of an impediment than a help in resolving the problem of political inequality and access.

Another viewpoint on the individualistic aspects of American culture appears in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson seems to epitomize the American notion of individualism and what Thomas E. Patterson referred to as America’s frontier heritage. In 1837, Emerson delivered his Phi Beta Kappa address, The American Scholar, at Harvard University. In this address, he urged people to use their own intellectual powers and reject their dependence on others (Grimes, 1983, p. 203). His perspective on individualism nicely encapsulates Hofstede et al.’s (1984) conceptualization of individualism. Both look at individualism from the perspective that people are supposed to look after themselves and their immediate family only. Emerson counselled man to “trust thyself,” and adopt the self-reliance necessary to counter the habits of society (Grimes, 1983). Emerson encouraged the individual to “carry himself in the presence of
all opposition as if everything were titular and ephemeral but he,” and not to capitulate with respect to badges and names and large societies (as cited in Kramnick & Lowi, 2009, p. 472). His notion of nonconformity mirrors the cross-cultural idea held by individualistic cultures in that each embrace an “I” identity over a “we” identity—and this is certainly the overall centerpiece of Emerson’s philosophy (as cited in Gudykunst et al., 1988). Emerson concluded that “what I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think” (as cited in Kramnick & Lowi, 2009, p. 472). He believed that all institutions in society were the result of men who constructed them—and this condition was due to the “products of self-reliant men who struck out a new path counter to the prejudices of orthodoxy” (as cited in Grimes, 1983, pp. 203-204). This issue concerning institutions leads us to Emerson’s thoughts about politics.

Emerson—like Thoreau—did not think highly of government. He believed that it neglected the growth of the individual and did not extend equal rights to all individuals (as cited in Kramnick & Lowi, 2009). He supported the notion that we would be better off with less government, and proposed that government should cultivate an independent, self-reliant character necessary for a democracy (as cited in Kramnick & Lowi, 2003). Emerson argued that the end of government was the culture of men and, if they could be educated as such, this would bring about better institutions and laws written on the basis of moral sentiment (Grimes, 1983, p. 205; Kramnick & Lowi, 2003, p. 478). If men were wise and unselfish, then this would counteract the need of government force. However, this necessitated that political action provide a method to cultivate and purify the masses
Emerson believed that this type of situation would result in the absence of government, but it “hinged upon the attainment of the perfection of men” (as cited in Grimes, 1983, p. 206). He argued that the antidote to the current form of government rests with a combination of private character and individual growth. This growth, Emerson argued, includes the cultivation of people via individual development that leads them to a better character and thus the wisdom necessary to make the state obsolete (as cited in Kramnick & Lowi, 2003, p. 482). He believed that people could conduct the affairs of government, including such things as the building of roads, ensuring that the mail is delivered, and securing wages. Emerson concluded that the private citizen—developed over the course of time—could be a good neighbor without the government’s use of force. He asserted that the power of love, and “a reliance on the moral sentiment and a sufficient belief in the unity of things,” could bring about a wise citizen who could govern reasonably and rightly. This, he said, would renovate the state.

Again, both Thoreau and Emerson help us understand the construct of individualism as it pertains to the American psyche and political landscape. They give us a sense of the strength of America’s individualistic tendencies, including self-reliance, autonomy, and independence. This cultural notion runs throughout America, and helps explain why our market ethos drives us to accept the purchasing of unequal political access when people have achieved the financial means to do so. In other words, the aforementioned market ethos builds upon America’s autonomous nature and thus results in the belief that one’s private property can and should be used to purchase whatever one
deems appropriate—including the purchasing of political access. These, then, are some of the key points Emerson advocated regarding individualism and the state—and how they pertain to the subject of this study.

We have so far covered how individualism is conceptualized. We have discussed how this construct applies to our sociocultural and political mindset by reviewing the writings of Sumner, Thoreau, and Emerson. They each present a specific, liberal conception of the American political culture. Sumner’s version presents a libertarian notion that one’s private property is sacrosanct, and can therefore use her private capital in any way she feels necessary, including the buying of unequal political access. Thoreau and Emerson present the idea that the individual is the superior unit in society—and should therefore live by his or her own precepts vis-à-vis society. Sumner’s version of individualism seems to place more emphasis on societal and financial exclusion and government disengagement than do Thoreau and Emerson, but all three still promote the individualistic tendencies of the American psyche that help explain the acceptability of a frontier self-reliance that ultimately allows for the unequal infiltration of capital into the political realm. Studying individualism gives us a way of understanding why capitalism has been allowed to infiltrate the political sphere. It makes sense that this frontier self-reliance would be able to easily merge into a free-market system—a private market ethos that places a high degree of importance on entrepreneurship, the right to exclude others from one’s private property, and the appropriateness of using one’s own money to
purchase political access. However, this only explains one aspect of the American psyche. We now turn our attention to the communal side of American political culture.

**Edward Bellamy: The Social Classes and the Role of Government**

America is not simply an individualistic society, but rather a mixture of independence and interdependence. Communitarians support the notion that our individualistic tendencies can and do interfere with the achievement of the common good. They also believe that—while these liberal tendencies exist—communal inclinations co-exist within the same sociopolitical and cultural framework. It is this type of propensity that allows government and groups of citizens to counter our self-interested tendencies in order to achieve a common good like the Fairness Doctrine (discussed later) and civil rights.

Edward Bellamy exemplifies the communal side of American political culture. According to, Bellamy argued for the nationalization of large industries and public services. In his novel, Looking Backward, Bellamy created a scenario that re-constructs the U.S. economic system to establish guarantees for the basic livelihood and material welfare of all Americans, using their political equality as a basis for economic equality. Interestingly, the societal backdrop in Bellamy’s story has similarities with today’s economic situation. Like in Bellamy’s time, there is a great deal of wealth disparity in the United States today that is exacerbated and abetted by a market ethos. Bellamy’s story describes a wealthy nineteenth-century Bostonian, Julian West, who lapses into a deep
sleep in 1887, and awakes in the year 2000. He is told by the other primary character of the story, Dr. Leete, that poverty and squalor have been eradicated by new social policies—and that the capitalism known to him in the nineteenth century had been replaced with an economic system that focused on equality via cooperative association (Grimes, 1983, p. 336).

Grimes stated that Bellamy’s novel was written at a time when the teachings and ethic of capitalism, and the conceptions of morality that went along with such a system, precluded this type of political action. The type of economic system Bellamy advocated was futile due to the fact that notions of individualism and free-market competition were the dominant beliefs favored by the general public (as cited in Grimes, 1983, p. 337). It seems likely that this same dominant belief remains essentially intact today. Even with various social programs currently in practice today (e.g., social security), many Americans feel strongly that people should stand on their own two feet without the help of their compatriots or government, though many of these same people are all too happy to accept their social security and unemployment checks. The question before us is how did a new economic and social order arise in Bellamy’s novel?

Bellamy described a situation where the workers attempted to secure their rights from large corporations, an action that was exacerbated by ever-growing concentrations of capital by powerful monopolies. As the corporation grew in power via greater and greater accumulations of capital—vis-à-vis the average worker—the importance of the laborer shrank to insignificance (Kramnick et al. 2009). To add insult to injury, the
average laborer was not able to rise through the corporate ranks to achieve the rank of employer, so the worker in Bellamy’s story unionized with his fellow proletariat. The working class feared that the vast wealth and power of large monopolies would result in baser levels of servitude and an ever-growing tyranny. Nor was it possible for small businesses or individual entrepreneurs to achieve success unless their ventures were financed by powerful corporate interests. Even among small capitalists, the system in question precluded them from having their own businesses, so the only investments they could make went to stocks in the large corporations, thus making themselves doubly dependent on these monopolies. Bellamy wrote that even the victims of this economic system could not deny that it brought forth great wealth and efficiency—though this wealth went primarily to the rich and thus created a large gap between rich and poor.

Perhaps even more disturbing was the fact that it became impossible to check the corporation’s power and influence by the masses (Kramnick et al., 2009, p. 749). This was the situation described in Bellamy’s story. In response to this economic inequality, the people took control of corporate interests without any bloodshed and convulsions, with the state assuming control over labor and industry (Kramnick et al., 2009).

The nation assumed the function of the corporations. Gone was the industrial warfare that caused years of economic dull times and crisis, “while the laboring classes starved and rioted” (Kramnick et al., 2009, p. 755). This new political order, Julian West remarked, differed dramatically from the function of government known in the nineteenth century, which was “limited to keeping the peace and defending the people against the
public enemy” via the police and military (Kramnick et al., 2009, p. 755). Under this new system, the government had no war powers, but it did possess the capacity to protect all citizens from the effects of poverty, and “provided for all his physical and mental needs” (Kramnick et al., 2009, p. 756). The nation—in Bellamy’s utopian world, was the sole capitalist and employer, and it was in complete charge of national industries. Each citizen served the nation via an industrial army starting at the age of 21—and worked for a period of 24 years. There was no money, but each citizen was given an amount of credit based upon his or her share of the annual product. The person received, according to Bellamy’s description, an ample of non-transferable credit, and did not receive a surplus but in only the most extreme cases. Any surplus balance was returned to the national general surplus. In Bellamy’s story, wages (i.e., credit) were fixed by the government, and all workers received the same share of the aforementioned credit. Inducement no longer rested with “fear of want and love of luxury,” but by the motivation to serve the nation, patriotism, and a passion for humanity rather than by self-service known during the days of private industry (Kramnick et al., 2009, p. 763). As Dr. Leete explained to Julian West, this concept is no different from what inspired and motivated soldiers to serve the nation in times of conflict. In Dr. Leete’s day, the people, via the government, took control of private corporations and replaced military organizations and war with an army of industry devoted to the eradication of economic inequality. This system, noted Dr. Leete, did not undermine human nature per se, but the new political order changed the human condition. Gone were issues of money and poverty, what one deserves, and
raw competition that pitted one person against the other in the accumulation of capital and material quantity (Kramnick et al., 2009, p. 762). How do Bellamy’s ideas help us understand American culture? His ideas help us see America as more than a self-reliant, autonomous, and intensely individualistic society. Bellamy helps us grasp its dual nature—one that is communal rather than purely self-interested.

Both Thoreau and Emerson would have clearly not supported Bellamy’s scheme. Each epitomized American notions of self-reliance, individualism, less government intrusion, a basic distrust of government, and the overall worth of the person over the importance of government. Unlike Bellamy, Thoreau, for example, was generally committed to terminating government’s use of force. Bellamy’s use of social legislation to take control of private industry seems to run counter to Thoreau’s overall perspective in that he advocated less not more government in the lives of citizens. In addition, Thoreau did not believe that legislators could actually solve societal problems, but this perspective is obviously contrary to Bellamy’s. As for Emerson, he believed that people should use their own intellectual powers and reject dependence on others (as cited in Grimes, 1983, p. 203). He also argued that government actually neglected the growth of the individual, though what it should do is to cultivate an independent, self-reliant character (as cited in Kramnick et al., 2009). In contrast, Bellamy’s notions use government to build a collective society not a community of independent citizens. By using Thoreau and Emerson, in conjunction with Sumner, it would appear that Bellamy’s ideas are not in step with basic notions of the American political psyche. The foundation
of the American sociopolitical position is based on independence and frontier self-reliance, with less emphasis on communal or collectivistic traits. Adopting Bellamy’s scheme would indeed mean serious sociopolitical convulsions that would result from a forced and complete shift in the general American cultural system.

The writings of Sumner, Thoreau, and Emerson give us the tools to fathom the power of the libertarian mindset that tends to permeate much of American capitalism, but they only tell one side of a more complex story. If individualism was the only component that explained the American psyche, then there would be no way to change the current political system of unequal access and representation. Communitarians such as Walzer and Tocqueville tell a different story—one that can lead us to a constitutional amendment that removes private capital from our political process.

American Communitarianism: Tocqueville, Walzer, Sunstein

We have seen that there is a strong cultural explanation that links the acceptance of a private market ethos to the purchasing of unequal political access. And while Bellamy reflects a more communal ethos, his socialist utopia seems unrealistic for the United States. One could ask, then, how we can ever hope to correct the incongruity of equal representation for all Americans in a cultural system that is so intimately connected with the individual and her self-interests. How do we—or how can we—recapture political equality in an economic system that allows the very few to purchase political access and power as a constitutional right—even when doing so eclipses the needs of the
vast majority of American citizens? This problem seems insurmountable given that the
government itself is behind the joining of state and business (Kuhner, 2007). The
question seems to be whether we can transcend our own political and sociocultural
propensities. Can government and its citizens undo that which culture, a market ethos,
and government have created? Are there actually two notions that simultaneously
describe the American psyche—and can communitarianism somehow counteract the
political inequality affecting representation?

America is replete with inconsistencies. Although American political culture is
dominated by individualism, it also has a history of communal tendencies capable of
transcending its liberal and individualistic traits. Michael Walzer noted that in liberal
societies the individual “imagines himself absolutely free, unencumbered, and on his
own—and enters society, accepting its obligations, only in order to minimize his risks”
(Walzer, 1990, p. 8). From a Marxist account, American society is the home of isolated
individuals and rational egoists who are protected and divided by their inalienable rights
(Walzer, 1990, p. 7). America is often described as an asocial society of liberals’ own
making, entirely opposed to community and authority. However, is this the whole story
with respect to liberalism and its association with individualism? In other words, does
liberalism in America accurately represent reality? Are citizens in America cut loose
from all social ties, fully fragmented, with no sense of community, no connection or
cohesion, and no common standards (Walzer, 1990, p. 9)? This seems unlikely, and this
is why we must view the American psyche as possessing a dual cultural mindset.
Walzer argued that our relationships are based on communal connections rather than mere market interactions. How could it be otherwise? How could we be no more than strangers when we are connected by parents, friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers, and fellow citizens—all relationships that are inherited more than chosen (Walzer, 1990, p. 10). Liberal theory—insofar as we allow it—creates the myth that we are disconnected from our communal ties. This acceptance of separation and exclusion is—according to Walzer—reflected in our politics. The liberal notion of separation explains why we as a political union are often incapable of cohesive solidarities and stable movements that might make our otherwise deep convictions efficacious (Walzer, 1990, p. 10).

Nevertheless, this problem is sometimes overcome—even in liberal societies.

Tocqueville argued that there is an established connection between civil and political associations. In the political sphere, it is necessary to form associations to get things done, at least according to Tocqueville. He asserted that each man imagines that he is capable of being self-sufficient. However, politics “causes a host of men who would have otherwise lived alone to want to join together—and it teaches them the art of doing so” (Tocqueville, 2000, p. 215). Tocqueville noticed that in America people in great numbers see each other, interact with one another, and this in turn inspires them to form associations in all sorts of endeavors. People see that it is in their individual interest to work for the happiness of others. This isolated observation gradually multiples and becomes a “general doctrine” which translates into a common mindset that in helping his fellow man one helps himself, and thus his individual interest translates into doing that
which is right (Tocqueville, 2000, p. 220). We saw how individualism can have a debilitating effect on political equality, but Tocqueville helps bring to light how individualism can also create a sense of community. For example, Tocqueville asserted that Americans have adopted a doctrine of “interest rightly understood” in that they “obligingly show how the enlightened love of oneself leads them constantly to help one another” (Tocqueville, 2000, p. 221). We can see Tocqueville’s notion of “interest rightly understood” in various forms throughout American history.

During his 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. pointed out the contradiction between America’s sacred principle noted in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal” and the reality facing African Americans regarding their lack of civil rights. Out of King’s efforts and the civil rights movement came the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. What was a policy of state-sponsored discrimination became rectified by government involvement, precipitated by group and individual action. People of all backgrounds rose up to meet this threat to the aforementioned American creed. The civil rights movement exemplified what Tocqueville meant when he wrote that political associations draw on different types of people. Similarly, Walzer noted that the American civil rights struggle shows that the nation’s collective moral and political language was and is completely adequate. He argued that King’s speeches “evoked a palpable tradition, a set of common values such that public disagreement could focus only on how (or how quickly) they might be realized” (Walzer, 1990, p. 14). Both Tocqueville’s and Walzer’s statements point to a
common philosophical trait that transcends the cultural norm of individualism—as well as the darker side of human nature—to a doctrine that it is in the best interest of each individual to exercise a common and mutual decency towards one’s fellow man (Tocqueville, 2000; Walzer, 1990). We can see this same type of “interest rightly understood” when looking at the Fairness Doctrine.

In 1934 Congress passed the Communications Act in order to regulate broadcasting, which culminated in the creation of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to oversee this process (Patterson 2011). One of the policies that came out of the aforementioned Act was the “Equal Time” provision. This provision prohibited the broadcasting community from selling or giving airtime to a political candidate unless his or her opponent was given or sold an equal amount of airtime. As the number of televisions increased in American homes at the start of the 1950s, the FCC imposed a second restriction—the Fairness Doctrine—on broadcasters (Patterson, 2011). The Fairness Doctrine was based on what Tocqueville referred to as a doctrine of “interest rightly understood.” That is to say, the Fairness Doctrine created a sense of community in that it brought to bear what was in the best interest of the community over the needs or desires of the few. This prohibited the broadcasting community from using their news programs to promote one political party or issue at the expense of another (Patterson, 2011, p. 334). With the advent of cable television, the FCC rescinded the Fairness Doctrine because of the increasing number of television programs which allowed for various views and opinions that offered the American public balanced
political coverage (Patterson, 2011, p. 335). The Fairness Doctrine demonstrates that government can use a “power over” method to protect the interests of the average citizen, much like advocating the use of a constitutional amendment to decouple the harmful effects of the capitalist system on political access and equal representation.

More recently, America witnessed a disparate group of citizens demanding equality in the economic realm via the Occupy movement. The Occupy Wall Street movement was a visceral reaction and movement by various types of citizens who became deeply troubled that the financial well-being of the nation was damaged by a handful of corporations that left a wake of economic destruction for countless average Americans. They demanded equitable economic treatment for those who Joseph Stiglitz referred to as the 99 percent, and insisted—among other things—for the end of the campaign finance and lobbying rackets (Gitlin, 2012, pp. 3-30). The Occupy movement reflects the communitarian tradition because it consisted of a community-based group of average citizens who asked the country to re-consider how it views economic fairness.

This same perspective can be explained by what Cass R. Sunstein referred to as liberal republicanism. Specifically, the American sociopolitical and cultural mindset can present self-interested behaviors in the political realm, but it can also reveal itself in the form of civic virtue whereby “political participants subordinate their private interests to the public good” via collective self-determination (Sunstein, 1988, p. 1547). For example, Sunstein argued that both pluralist (i.e., politics consisting of a struggle among interest groups for scarce resources) and republican perspectives were present in the writing of
the American Constitution. He noted that John Adams was at times skeptical about the notion that anything other than self-interest “could be the basis for political behavior” (Sunstein, 1988, p. 1558). Sunstein stated that the Founding Fathers did not abandon their belief in deliberative government, the need for civic virtue (i.e., political participants subordinating their private interests to the public good), or the capacity of a large republic to attract publically spirited representatives who would not necessarily be swayed by constituent pressures (Sunstein, 1988, p. 1559). However, today’s America has two cultural perspectives—one self-interested and the other communal.

We can see this dualism by looking at how Sunstein conceptualized liberal republicanism. In other words, we can explicate how the theory of republicanism should work within the current American political landscape, such as equal representation for all, and how this actually works in a system that places a great deal of importance on the financing of elections. The former being communitarian in nature, and the latter exhibiting liberal traits.

Sunstein described republicanism as possessing four qualities, including deliberation, equality, citizenship, and universalism. One of the key components of deliberation rests on the notion that political actors should maintain a degree of “critical distance” from prevailing desires and practices, and subject such desires and practices to scrutiny and review (Sunstein, 1988, pp. 1548-1549). Unfortunately, what has transpired over the last several decades is an ever-growing interplay and interconnectivity between democracy and capitalism, which has created a shrinking gap in the critical distance
between the wealthy and our political representatives. We can see this lack of critical
distance by the association between the high cost of federal elections and the political
access enjoyed by major donors that many former legislators unequivocally acknowledge
is a political reality (Bartels, 2008). Sunstein argued that the opposite of republican
deliberation is the imposition of outcomes by self-interested political groups that often
undermine deliberative processes by disparities in political influence.

Even with notions of self-interest that certainly reside in the American
sociopolitical landscape, we can also see examples of civic virtue (e.g., the New Deal, the
Affordable Care Act). The American experience is replete with examples of both
exclusion (e.g., African Americans, women, Native Americans) and inclusion (e.g., Civil
Rights Act of 1964). The dichotomous nature of individualism and collectivism in
America can be explained simultaneously with what Walzer referred to as the
“unencumbered individual” juxtaposed with its communal tendencies. This same
dichotomous situation can be witnessed in the economic realm with the focus on the
commodification of virtually all things in the quest for greater private financial gain, and
various private charitable organizations and government-sponsored social programs.

The troubling point about the dual cultural nature of America is when self-interest
affects political equality. Sunstein argued that republicanism supports the notion that the
“motivating force of political behavior should not be self-interest, narrowly defined, and
that civic virtue should play a role in political life” (Sunstein, 1988, p. 1539). For
Sunstein, political equality means that all individuals and groups should have access to
the political process, with large disparities regarding political influence being
unacceptable. As we will see in this study, differences in wealth can greatly affect one’s
level of political access—and this makes a person wonder just what type of people are
actually being represented. For example, Lessig (2011) reported that one former
legislator admitted that he was more likely to return the phone call of a big contributor
than he was other calls he received from lesser-known people in the course of a day.
Sunstein maintained that such disparities regarding access are inconsistent with
republican conceptions. Differences in wealth cause great inequality in representation and
yet co-exist with other republican notions, such as citizenship.

Sunstein noted that another significant component of republicanism is citizenship.
An important factor pertaining to citizenship is one’s degree of participation and how it is
used to monitor the behavior of elected officials in the pursuit of reducing self-interested
representation (Sunstein, 1988). Here again, we can see the dual nature of the American
sociopolitical culture. On the one end, we have a normative theoretical notion of what
ought to be the case. On the other end, we have in practice political inequality in the form
of inequitable access brought about by gross economic disparities supported by court
decree. How can the people’s representatives be monitored when they are beholden to a
small fraction of the electorate? The theoretical notion of citizenship is sound in that it
addresses the problem of political inequality and uneven access by holding our elected
officials accountable, but the political reality is something quite unacceptable and
different to Sunstein’s notion of liberal republicanism.
Republican philosophy also includes a belief in universalism. From a republican perspective, universalism suggests that a common good can be realized via discussion among political equals. More specifically, republicans believe that a universal common good exists. Sunstein noted that various conceptions of the public good can be mediated via discussions and dialogue among political equals (Sunstein, 1988). This theoretical viewpoint is part of American political thought, but in practice it is obvious that we cannot achieve any universal notion of the common good when political access is predicated upon one’s financial standing. This is not a far-fetched notion when one considers that the level of a person’s political equality in America was long the result of his or her race—and some would argue that this situation continues today in the undercurrent of the American sociopolitical landscape. If one’s race or financial deficiency overrides a person’s basic political rights as a citizen, then it is difficult to imagine how a republican notion of universalism can be taken seriously. Stated differently, how can we as a democratic society achieve a universal or common good, via mediated public discussions and dialogue, when not all of us are political equals because of differences in economic standing? This seems to be yet another example of the dual nature of the American sociopolitical dilemma—and this issue can be seen in the work of Tocqueville.

Rogers M. Smith (1993) noted that American political culture has often been described by commentators and scholars as the preeminent example of a modern liberal democracy that extols the virtues of popular consent and equal rights for all. This was,
Smith argued, the overall assessment reached by Tocqueville. He described an America that was predominately shaped by egalitarian ideas, but such an assessment “centered on relationships among a minority of Americans (White men, largely of northern European ancestry), and analyzed via references to categories derived from the hierarchy of political and economic statuses men have held in Europe: monarchs and aristocrats” (Smith, 1993, p. 549). Given the sociopolitical comparison between the new nation and the old world, it is no surprise that Tocqueville’s description is deceptively narrow (Smith, 1993, p. 549). America’s lack of the type of sociopolitical hierarchy found in Britain at the time made such a context seemingly remarkable to European observers like Tocqueville. Smith pointed out that America has been deeply constituted by the relationship between the White male demographic and subordinate groups. This unequal relationship makes Tocqueville’s description of America look incongruent when compared with its heavy presence of liberal-democratic values and institutions—and this incongruity is at the center of the dual cultural mindset of the American psyche (Smith, 1993).

Smith argued that America is better described as possessing multiple traditions. By this he meant that American political culture is made up of a more complex pattern of incongruent components that is not solely liberal or republican. The multiple-traditions thesis—according to Smith—holds that Americans share a common culture but one that is more complex and multi-faceted than is typically described. It is therefore possible to understand that the American political landscape can be both egalitarian and
inegalitarian. The incongruity lies in the hypocrisy of the Declaration of Independence when it states that “all men are created equal,” with America’s exclusion of Blacks, Native Americans, and women (Smith, 1993).

We can also see these disparate notions in how the political and economic realms have been allowed to blur to such an extent that one’s financial wherewithal can purchase political access and thus denigrate the notion of equal representation. During the course of the twentieth century, America has made progress on the egalitarian front by building a more inclusive democratic regime with such policies as the New Deal, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, in the last several decades, the federal government has made it possible for a few members of the electorate to override the will of the majority by allowing them to purchase access to the policymaking apparatus of the people’s government. The American political culture has two parallel paths by which citizens travel—and these two paths are at odds with one another. Hanna Pitkin observed that one of the main obstacles to a meaningful form of representative democracy is the “age-old tension between the power of wealth and people power” (Pitkin, 2004, p. 341). This explains why America can hold its most sacred documents in one hand, while the other hand allows some citizens to thwart fairness and equality for all because they have the financial ability to perpetuate the careers of government elites (Pitkin, 2004).

All of these issues—all large and important sociopolitical issues—came about in a highly individualistic culture that places a great deal of importance on a frontier mindset
that embraces the self-made man standing alone in a hostile market environment (Patterson, 2011). This, however, explains only one-half of the American psyche. We are a nation replete with contradictions between what Walzer discussed as the “myth of liberalism,” and what Tocqueville called “interest rightly understood.” America is both a separate and communal nation—and this causes a great deal of sociopolitical dissonance. Is it possible that we as a people can rise above our own notions of liberal separatism to realize a greater good? We defeated legally established racism in America, created a government that insisted on fair political advertising, and built a sociopolitical framework that enabled disparate bands of citizens to demand economic fairness. It thus seems likely that this same communal tendency can be implemented in order to eradicate the use of money to subvert the American representative process.

**Overall Analysis: Can America’s Sociopolitical Structure be Changed?**

These are some of the dominate features of America’s communitarian tradition, but are these issues consistent with the American political psyche and culture of today? It would appear that they stand in direct opposition to basic American notions of independence over interdependence, individualism over collectivism, and general issues of liberty and equality. How so? For liberal individualists, communitarianism robs the individual’s right to pursue his own happiness as he sees fit, and it uses the government to interfere in the private lives of citizens. However, giving one group more access to
legislators, simply because they possess more money than another group, subverts the political system.

We appear to have a complicated sociopolitical mix in America (Smith, 1993). This includes the use of money in the political system as a First Amendment right, and an ever-expanding financial gap between the rich and poor that exacerbates the first issue. These are manifestations of our liberal mindset. This is a problem because while government is obligated to create a system whereby each person is guaranteed the chance to succeed in the marketplace, citizens should not be given the right to rise above their compatriots in how they are represented by virtue of their great financial resources. This makes no more sense than allowing a person greater political access due to his or her race. To the contrary, democratic government is obliged to ensure that all citizens are represented equally regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and financial status. This means that one’s ability to buy expensive things does not include political representation—especially when purchasing that political representation typically runs counter to the will of the majority. In a capitalist system, government should create the parameters that give people the chance to succeed in the marketplace, but this obligation is limited to the economic realm. Government also has an obligation to ensure that all citizens are guaranteed equal representation. This obligation is located in the political realm not the economic realm. These different realms have blurred to such an extent that political equality has suffered.
The foundation of the American political system is based on powerful and broad constructs of individualism—and these very ideas shape the political structure of the nation. Cohen claimed that “political culture, in brief, cannot be understood in isolation from the wider culture, and it is a pity that this artificial distinction has become widely accepted” (Cohen, 1991, p. 11). Fukuyama added that “culture remains an irreducible component of human societies, and that you cannot understand politics without reference to cultural values” (Fukuyama, 2006, p. 342). We can pretend that culture, and how a nation thinks and behaves, can somehow be isolated, but this cognition is simply naïve. However, individualism is not insurmountable. In the face of societal and state-based racism, enough collective action was brought to bear that forced the federal government to enact laws that made slavery, and other forms of discrimination, illegal. This same type of process is appropriate, necessary, and historically speaking, feasible, with respect to separating business and state. This change will most probably require an “imperfectly legitimate” coercive response to eradicate economic-based discrimination that creates unequal access and representation. This type of response would be much like the legally sanctioned racism that was terminated with the enactments of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Thirteenth Amendment.
Chapter 3

CAPITALISM, MARXISM, POWER, AND THE AFFLUENT

There seems to be a popular notion that capitalism, capital, corporations, and the affluent should be examined separately with respect to how each influence the American political system generally and the U.S. Congress specifically. This is a mistake. Each are intertwined. However, each exists in an individualistic cultural framework that allows the aforementioned components to coalesce. This situation enables business and government to intermesh. We can define capitalism as an economic system that employs the means of production to create and maintain wealth by private citizens within the context of the corporation or some other type of entrepreneurial means (Kaufman et al., 2004). Capital is wealth, money or property, owned and used in business by an individual or corporation (Kaufman et al., 2004; Lustig, 1982).

Capitalism and its Objective

Liberal economics is used as a way to secure the ownership of capital. These private funds are invested in areas that are crucial to further the corporation’s (or wealthy entrepreneur’s) means of production in its quest for additional monetary accumulation. Because government policies can pose a threat to a corporation’s ability to secure additional capital (Lindblom, 1982), the organization uses its vast financial resources to make strategic investments designed to maximize profits by influencing legislative decisions (Stiglitz, 2013). These corporations are not only viewed as people in the eyes of
the law, but these private citizens also have a vested interest in the continuation of the firm and its profitability with no real commitment to the common good (Lustig, 1982).

Because capitalism is entrepreneurial in nature, wealthy private citizens, too, can use their private property to influence government via unequal access. Due to the constitutional authority given to firms by the First Amendment via court decree, all private citizens can use the capitalist system to invest in the public realm in order to secure a return on their investment (Stiglitz, 2013). Simply put, the capitalist system allows corporations, protected by the constitutional status of personhood, to influence the political system—a system that can have a deleterious effect on its ability to maximize profits. This situation can bring about political inequality by allowing those with greater economic resources to have more political access and influence over less well-off citizens and thus an increased likelihood to advance their cause over the latter group’s needs (Gilens and Page, 2014).

Looking at capitalism, capital, corporations, and wealthy private citizens as distinct entities limits a person’s ability to connect how this specific type of economic system can impede representative democracy in America. Unlike democratic government, which has some duty to uphold the common good, capitalism is a “system in which production is undertaken for private profit rather than social need” (Lustig, 1982, p. 15). This incongruence between the common good and the pursuit of private profit should not be surprising if one looks at some of the basic tenets of Marxist theory.
Marxist ideology presumes that economics determines politics (Lynch, 2004). If this is correct, then productive forces determine how people structure society into a particular political form and thus the type of social relations found among humans (Lynch, 2004, p. 537). In other words, capitalists use their financial power to control the political system without regard to how this action will affect the ordinary citizen. More to the point, the orthodox Marxist position holds that “the reins of control are held by a small number of capitalists” (Bowman, 1996, p. 29). This provides a different explanation than the one offered in this essay, but Marx does help us understand that economics and politics are not separate. If Marxist theory has any semblance of truth regarding the interconnectivity between economics and politics, then it is reasonable to conclude that the capitalist system is used by private firms and wealthy citizens to secure greater public sector access. This is accomplished by making political investments that are designed to elicit favored policy positions with the assistance of elected officials interested in seeking re-election (Stiglitz, 2013; Mayhew, 1974). Some scholars have pointed out that politicians might also acquiesce to the wishes of capitalists simply in an attempt to avert the negative economic impacts of a corporation’s reaction to an unwanted policy (Christiano, 2012, 2012; Lindblom, 1982). Regardless of which explanation is exercised with greater frequency, it is clear that the wealthy have tremendous power in affecting and accessing the political system.
The Link Between Economics and Politics

The link between economics and politics is not only described in Marxist theory. The relationship between the economic system and the political system was also discussed by Hacker and Pierson (2010). They asserted that economic freedom and political freedom tend to go together. However, democracy and capitalism—they argued—are in tension with one another. This tension arises because while democracy is based on the ideal of political equality (i.e., each citizen is supposed to have the same potential for influencing what government does), money should not matter in so far as influencing what government does or does not do. In capitalism, money matters a great deal, with the market responding to what economists refer to as “effective demand” (Hacker and Pierson, 2010, p. 74). This means that preferences in the marketplace are both influenced and expressed by money. Private business has a strong incentive to use large amounts of capital to resist government regulations in order to secure the level of political access that is necessary to perpetuate its interests. In so doing, “markets frequently trample on valued social priorities about which large numbers of citizens care deeply,” such as clean water (Hacker and Pierson, 2010, p. 74). In other words, private interests use capital to influence government in order to further their business concerns.

Hacker and Pierson argued that this happens because there is not a “firewall” to separate the private sector from the public sector that would otherwise protect political equality. The current system allows individuals and corporations with vast sums of money to purchase political access to secure policies that may not be in the best interest
of the majority and thus undermine “the basic ideal on which democracy rests” (Hacker and Pierson, 2010, pp. 74-75). This brings us the following question put forth by Kuhner (2014): Should politics be a market? In other words, should we insist that a firewall be put into place to separate the state from business, or should the political sphere be yet another area where business can exert its influence by inducement via money?

Kuhner (2014) suggested that when “lawmakers restrain political spending they separate economic power from political power, and move away from economic conceptions of core values” (Kuhner, 2014, p. 10). In doing so, things like speech, equality, and citizenship mean one thing in a democracy and another thing in capitalism (Kuhner, 2010). This type of policy separates speech from money, equality from non-discrimination in political spending, and citizenship from incorporation (Kuhner, 2010, p. 10). Those private interests harmed by these distinctions under campaign-finance reforms have persuaded the Court that such decoupling has constitutional ramifications. Decisions such Buckley and Citizens United, discussed in chapter 4, have granted to private interests not only the use of vast financial resources in the political process, but also First Amendment rights for powerful corporations. This further links democracy with the free market. This lack of decoupling has allowed economic elites to more easily purchase political access and thus create greater political inequality. This is not an issue regarding differences of economic standing, but rather how one’s economic position can be transferred into unequal political power via financial investment as a constitutional right. This creates an environment whereby a person or corporation can purchase political
access—access that is not equally distributed and thus alters the level of representation afforded to Americans based upon their economic wherewithal.

The vast sums of money that are invested into political campaigns tend to exclude the majority of Americans from equally participating in the political process because they cannot afford the sum of money necessary to gain access into the policy process (Gilens, 2012; Kuhner, 2014). Such wealth disparity—as we shall see in subsequent sections of this study—negatively affects political equality via voice and representation. While many analysts and scholars are skeptical of how influential money is in the American political process, it seems difficult to imagine how the basic philosophical notions of capitalism would not be used as a way to invest in government processes in order to secure greater profits. Lustig (1982) made the following point about the concentrated power of corporations vis-à-vis government and society:

This concentration of power confers on its chief holders the ability to invest or tie up capital, to build, relocate, or close plants and thus to issue birth certificates or death sentences to entire communities; to subsidize inventions and use them or prevent their use; to discover, exploit, or lock up raw materials; and to control loans for (and often production decisions of) other businesses. In addition to the familiar ability to buy the votes of lawmakers, draft laws, and limit the options of government, all this adds up to a decisive influence in society (Lustig, 1982, p. 14).

It becomes clear that leaving capitalism out of the analysis when addressing issues of capital, and its influence on America’s representative form of government, ignores the problem with the system itself. The CEO and private entrepreneur—many of whom have great private wealth—have an incentive to make financial investments in the political
realm in order to gain unequal access and thus secure legislative decisions favorable to their business needs—and these needs are typically contrary to the needs of average citizens (Lustig, 1982; Stiglitz, 2013).

Marx and Engels recognized this fact. They argued that the bourgeoisie has conquered for itself, in the modern representative state, exclusive sway in the political realm, with the executive of the modern state merely a committee member who manages the common affairs of the bourgeoisie (Marx & Engels, 1848, 2005, p. 9). Politicians, in order to meet the financial challenges necessary to sustain their political careers—accept monetary donations from corporations and entrepreneurs who have a vested interest in making this type of investment so that they can alter or sustain legislation that is favorable to their goal of accumulation (Christiano, 2010, 2012). All of this happens in a culture that tends to place greater emphasis on self-actualization over the common good, and a private market ethos that is predisposed to infiltrate government, via investment, in order to secure greater capital accumulation (Lustig, 1982). Lindblom and Christiano argued that there is a link between business, capital, and government. Their views help to justify why a clear separation between business and government is necessary.

Lindblom (1982) argued that business interests negatively affect political decisions designed to promote the public good. He divided government and business interests into systems of commands and systems of inducements. In a command system, government officials can be ordered to perform various functions, whereas business leaders cannot be commanded but only induced into action (Lindblom, 1982, p. 327).
When government policies negatively influence some aspect of business, this particular system produces a punishment response that creates a poor economy and unemployment (Lindblom, 1982, p. 327). This response not only produces a sluggish economy that obviously affects society, but it can also hurt a politician’s chances for re-election (Lindblom, 1982, p. 328). According to Lindblom, this punishment response is a powerful disincentive on policy makers to enact laws that inconvenience the profit goals of business. Is there any evidence to support Lindblom’s statements?

He reported that when Philips Electronics threatened to move one of its factories from The Netherlands to Poland, the Dutch economic minister exclaimed that all government can do is “provide for a maximally attractive place” for international firms (Lindblom, 2001, p. 248). Lindblom noted that this punishment response is not necessarily done with conspiracy or intent, but “nowhere else is there so effective a set of automatic punishments established as a barrier to social change” (Lindblom, 1982 p. 326). This impediment to democracy is what Lindblom referred to as the “market as prison.” He argued that no market system can achieve a fully developed democracy when it imprisons society’s policy-making ability. Unfortunately, various positive measures generated by the legislature are essentially terminated by the market-driven inducement process (Lindblom, 1982, p. 329). Let us now address how corporate capital can have a deleterious effect on government institutions.

Christiano (2010) addressed how the exercise of private property by private firms diminishes the basic norms of democratic decision-making. Specifically, he argued that
the exercise of property rights by private firms can serve as a negative influence over a democratic government and thus thwart the will of the general public (Christiano, 2010, p. 195). Christiano examined how private firms can influence government’s intent to raise the minimum wage. He noted that government will often try to raise the minimum-wage level in order to elevate the standard of living of the worst-off workers. The government does this due to promises some of its elected officials made during the last election cycle—reasons for which many were ostensibly elected. Government officials subsequently renge on this promise out of fear that a certain company or companies will lay off workers “as a consequence of this kind of policy” (Christiano, 2010, p. 196). Government officials do this because they fear the layoffs will cause greater harm to low-wage workers than abandoning the promised policy. Other firms might very well institute the minimum-wage policy only to “pass on part of the cost to consumers [as a way of absorbing] some of the loss in profitability” (Christiano, 2010, p. 196). This issue is even more problematic for democratic governments due to global economic integration. Christiano noted that owners of capital can now move money across national borders allowing them to escape government regulations that are not desirable to these firms, and this ability enables private industry to defeat the aims that are “chosen democratically and pursued by governments” (Christiano, 2010, p. 197). He exclaimed that private firms can legally act in this way, but in doing so they undermine the government’s goal in attempting to combat a societal problem—a goal that the people have chosen through the democratic process (Paul et al., 2010, p. xii). A question one might ask is why it has been
so difficult to remove the influence of capital from the U.S. political process after so much debate about such things as campaign finance. Let us look at what Christiano referred to as conditions of feasibility in answering this question.

Christiano defined “conditions of feasibility” as those “conditions under which it is possible to realize some ends and not others, and which constrain how one is to achieve those ends” (Christiano, 2010, p. 200). These conditions encompass three components, including the citizens who collectively choose the aims, independent conditions that determine how much of said aims can be achieved, and the government. The government—in assessing what aims can be achieved and how they can be achieved—“enacts laws and policies as means to the achievement of the feasible aim” (Christiano, 2010, p. 201). Christiano argued that companies do not influence the choice of policies by participating in the democratic decision-making process per se (Christiano, 2010, p. 201). Instead, private firms make it more difficult for government to enact a program not supported by private industry (Christiano, 2010, p. 201). Similarly, Sheldon S. Wolin (2008) argued that “government rarely challenges corporate power [allowing] capital to define the political terrain to fit its own needs” (Wolin, 2008, p. 144). Firms do this by their expected responses and thus make these unsupported schemes “self-defeating or stop the policies from being enacted” by the assembly (Christiano, 2010, p. 201).

According to Christiano, private firms ought to adopt a commitment to democratic norms by cooperating with government in its pursuit of accomplishing policies the people have chosen—“even when this cooperation leads to a reduction in the firm’s profits” (Paul et
Doing otherwise—Christiano argued—is clearly abridging the “democratic norms of equality by failing to cooperate with the pursuit of the democratically chosen aim” (Christiano, 2010, p. 205). When a private firm acts in this way (i.e., when they fail to cooperate), it replaces the democratically chosen goal with one of its own (Christiano, 2010, p. 205).

Christiano’s suggestion is noble, but it is horribly naïve. As Gilpin asserted, liberal economics is not concerned with the equity of economic outcomes. This is why an “imperfectly legitimate” scheme holds greater promise to rectify the aforementioned situation rather than simply hoping that private industry does what it should. These, then, are some of the basic assumptions of Christiano’s theoretical notions regarding the relationship between private firms and representative democracy. Let us examine how money factors into Christiano’s analysis.

Christiano (2012) argued that money is a significant aspect of modern liberal democracies, but it can also undermine the common good by treating citizens as unequal participants in the democratic process. One way that money can undermine the democratic process is by the private financing of political campaigns. Christiano asserted that those with a great deal of money can and do secure “special treatment” for themselves or their companies in exchange for campaign donations. Is this statement true? Bartels (2008) stated that there is some indirect evidence that the rich are more influential than the poor because they contribute an amount of money that drives contemporary campaigns. For example, Bartels reported that researchers Verba,
Scholzman and Brady discovered that three-fourths of the total value of campaign contributions came from individuals in the top quarter of the income distribution—with people from the bottom quintile accounting for only two percent of total campaign contributions (Bartels, 2008, p. 280). This evidence, though not direct or strong, does give some indication that Christiano’s assessment is correct. Christiano also noted that money functions as a gatekeeper in the political realm and can thus undermine the democratic process. This “gatekeeper” function works as a kind of agenda setter for decision-making (Christiano, 2012). How does this mechanism function? If there are strong commonalities of opinion among affluent contributors that are distinct from less well-off groups, then it is reasonable to assume that the interests of the affluent group will be better represented in political campaigns than the less well-off electorate (Christiano, 2012, p. 4). The idea is that the more money one gives to a member of Congress, the more attention that person will ostensibly receive by the legislator. This, in turn, allows the contributor to promote her or his policy preferences at a higher rate than someone who cannot afford to give large campaign donations. When we multiply this situation many times over, it is easy to understand why the specific policy preferences of the wealthy tend to receive greater attention by legislators, and why these specific policies are then enacted at a greater percent than those policy preferences favored by the less well-off—even if the less well-off represent the majority (Gilens and Page, 2014). For example, Bartels (2008) discovered that senators’ roll-call votes were very responsive to the views of their middle- and high-income constituents, whereas the “views of low-
income constituents had no discernable impact on the voting behavior of their senators” (Bartels, 2008, p. 260).

These, then, are some of the ways Christiano argued that the capitalist system undermines representative democracy. The important point to consider is that individualism provides the societal justification to allow the merging of capitalism and democracy. This cultural mindset accepts a private market ethos to be incorporated into the state’s decision-making apparatus via the purchasing of unequal political access. The next two sections of this thesis will first address the positive and negative aspects of the capitalist system, and then discuss the economic context of America and its relationship with our representative form of government. Addressing these two issues gives us a balanced look at capitalism vis-à-vis democracy and how large income gaps relate to political inequality—especially regarding one’s ability or inability to purchase political access. Dahl offers a balanced look at the pros and cons of the interaction between democracy and capitalism.

**Robert Dahl on Capitalism and Democracy**

There are certainly positive aspects to capitalism, but do these positive issues outweigh the apparent harm created by the relationship between this system and democracy? Dahl (1998) argued that capitalism helps create economic growth that is favorable to democracy. This growth, he argued, can cut poverty and raise the standard of living, which—at least in theory—helps reduce social and political conflicts by creating
some level of stability (Dahl, 1998, pp. 167-168). When conflicts do occur, the resources created by capitalism affords each side a “mutually satisfactory settlement” whereby both gain something (Dahl, 1998, p. 168). The growth that comes from the market can also provide a surplus of resources, allowing people to educate themselves and thus produce a literate citizenry. This economic system, in turn, gives people the incentive to live under the rule of law in order to protect various rights, including the right to participate in government affairs, live autonomously, and own property (Dahl, 1998, p. 168). The decentralized nature of capitalism also relies less on government to make all the economic decisions that private firms are perhaps better able to make. This means that there is less worry about the limiting effects of a powerful, authoritative central government interfering in private lives and private industry (Dahl, 1998, pp. 168-169). Overall, capitalism has a stabilizing effect on society that promotes personal freedom, places more resources in the entire community rather than in the hands of government leaders, and encourages a de-centralized form of government over an authoritative form of government. These benefits of capitalism are, however, in perpetual conflict with the limitations it imposes on democracy.

How is capitalism a negative influence on democracy? Dahl argued that the main objective of capitalism is one of gain and not the public good. In other words, the sole purpose of the market is the accumulation of wealth by way of self-interest (Dahl, 1998). Economic leaders, as Lindblom argued, have little interest or incentive to take the good of others into account when not doing so allows them to acquire profits. Capitalism is not
only focused on self-interest over the common good, but it can also affect the functioning of democratic political institutions when government does not effectively regulate its behavior (Dahl, 1998, pp. 176-177). This consequently generates inequalities that result in limits on democratic potential that ultimately affect the distribution of political resources (Dahl, 1998, p. 177). These political resources can include access to things that people and groups can use to influence the behavior of other people. Dahl asserted that many things can be converted into political resources, including money, wealth, and the control over doctrine and beliefs. He pointed out that capitalism is not the only cause of the unequal distribution of resources, but it is important in causing an unequal distribution of key resources, such as wealth and income. Due to inequalities in political resources, some members of society are able to gain more influence than others over government’s policies (Dahl, 1998, p. 178). This situation means that citizens are not political equals, and this consequently violates the moral foundation of democracy.

Dahl’s analysis about capitalism and democracy lead us to an important question: Is our representative form of democracy compatible with capitalism? If government regulates the market in order to protect its citizens from gross economic inequality and political isolation, then capitalism is compatible with democracy and generally beneficial to society (Dahl, 1998). Milton Friedman’s idea that the role of government is to “determine, arbitrate, and enforce the rules of the game” is applicable in this respect (Friedman, 1962, p. 27). However, as Dahl pointed out, if society and politics are transformed by the market (rather than visa-versa), then one can see vast differences in
the amount of resources one group has in comparison to the other. These economic differences can bring about political inequalities regarding political access, agenda setting, and constituent responsiveness (Christiano, 2012; Dahl, 1998). Dahl’s discussion would indicate that there is a compatibility problem between the capitalist system and representative democracy.

The Widening Economic Gap, Political Access, and Policy Outcomes

Before charging ahead into the disconcerting world of American politics and capital, it might be a good idea to discuss the economic situation our society now faces, and its impact on representative democracy. Discussing income inequality provides some context in which to understand the connection between the use of private capital and access within the American political process. It also provides a way of demonstrating that this situation gives those at the economic bottom little hope that their participation is necessary or efficacious. This economic condition occurs in an individualistic context that helps justify a market ethos that finds great wealth disparities acceptable—much like Sumner’s notion of economic Darwinism. The aforementioned situation exacerbates the issue under investigation in this study in that it allows fewer and fewer Americans to purchase political access.

Hacker and Pierson (2010) reported that the overall economy expanded significantly between 1979 and 2005, but the “average incomes of the poorest fifth of households increased only around 6 percent and the middle quintile of households saw
their incomes rise just 21 percent—even when inflation and government taxes and benefits are taken into account” (Hacker and Pierson, 2010, p. 157). Conversely, the average after-tax incomes of the wealthiest one percent rose to almost 230 percent, while the after-tax incomes of the top 0.01 percent rose from approximately $4 million to nearly $24.3 million between 1979 and 2005. How does this economic inequality translate into political inequality?

If wealthy individuals could not use their great financial resources to secure a favored status by way of representative access, then it might be difficult to connect economic inequality with political inequality. This, however, is not the case. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that money is speech, as I discuss in detail in chapter 4, and can therefore be used by individuals in the political process as a First Amendment right. As we shall see in subsequent pages of this thesis, only a small number of Americans have the financial wherewithal to command the attention of policy makers and thus purchase the level of access necessary to have their preferences heard over the needs of the majority. This might lead a person to conclude that “one person, one vote” means little to the vast majority of the electorate who cannot equally compete within a system that allows representative access to be purchased. Interestingly, even dedicated capitalists would be the first to agree that equal competition is a critical factor in a fair and healthy free-market system, and benefits the consumer in securing the best price for goods and services. Moreover, to ensure such an equal free-market system, most economists would support the notion that government should play a role in ensuring that basic rules and
regulations are followed by businesses so that monopolies do not impede fair and equal competition. These basic notions do not seem to apply in the areas of private capital, political access, and policymaking. In such circumstances, it may very well be the case that a small fraction of the American electorate’s voice is heard, while the needs and preferences of the general public are left unaddressed or simply paid lip service.

One way to explain this is by looking at the concept of drift. Hacker and Pierson defined drift as a “politically driven failure of public policies to adapt to the shifting realities of a dynamic economy and society” (Hacker and Pierson, 2010, p. 170). Drift is more than simple inaction on the part of policy makers. It occurs when politicians fail to update policies—even in the face of known alternatives—due to pressures from minority interests or policy makers exploiting their veto powers within the political process (Hacker and Pierson, 2010, p. 170). This type of favorable treatment is not just a matter of socioeconomic status. It points to a much more troubling issue of being able to use one’s economic status to influence the political process, with policy preferences going to those who have the capital to access legislators who possess the power to agenda set and thus decide which policies are addressed and which are not. This is an issue of political inequality because it excludes the vast majority of the electorate—much like voting policies did for Blacks in the South prior to the Voting Rights Act of 1965—who cannot afford to purchase such access and thus receive limited attention from their representatives. Let us turn to a 2013 study that addressed economic inequality in the United States and how it affects the American political system.
Stiglitz (2013) argued that the simple story of America is that the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer and more numerous—with the middle class essentially being obliterated. The incomes of the middle class are falling or stagnating—and “the differences between them and the truly rich is increasing” (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 9). Not only is overall inequality growing, but so have inequalities in wages and salaries (Stiglitz, 2013). Stiglitz asserted that in the last three decades in the United States, those in the bottom 90th percent have only experienced an increase of approximately 15 percent in their wages, while those in the top one percent “have seen an increase of almost 150 percent, and the top 0.1 percent by more than 300 percent” (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 9). The gains of the recovery since the recession have been secured predominately by the wealthiest Americans, with the top one percent gaining 93 percent of the income generated in the United States in 2010 (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 3). Homeownership—once the ticket to financial stability for the middle class—did not help this segment of the population weather the 2008 financial crisis (Stiglitz, 2013). As home prices fell, many poor and middle-class Americans—especially those with large mortgages—watched as their wealth vanished (Stiglitz, 2013, pp. 3-4). Moreover, through all of this financial hardship, CEOs were able to maintain their high salaries. Stiglitz reported that “the ratio of CEO annual compensation to that of the typical worker by 2010 was back to what it had been before the crisis—243 to one” (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 4). Is there a deeper issue relevant to the aforementioned inequality? Politically speaking, this is not a “right” or “left” issue (Muller, 2013). Muller suggested that if inequality and economic insecurity
are left unchecked and unaddressed, then it may very well “erode the social order and generate a populist backlash against the capitalist system” (Muller, 2013, p. 1).

What does all of this mean to our representative form of democracy? There are two serious issues. The first has to do with the ascendancy of mistrust that seems to be spreading in many Western democracies around the world, including the United States (Stiglitz, 2013). Stiglitz argued that if trust between the people and their government fails, then disillusionment and disengagement follows. Why should the average citizen participate when she feels her voice will not be counted? This brings us to the second major problem with the current system—one that is deeply connected to the issue of trust. This disillusionment and disengagement actually helps the well-off secure their political and economic ends (Stiglitz, 2013). How so? By using their vast economic resources to manipulate the political system, they cripple the average voter’s perception that their voice will have an effect on the outcome of legislative decisions. This diminishes poor and middle-class America’s capacity to use the vote to secure political changes that would benefit the majority of the population (Stiglitz, 2013). Stiglitz pointed out that individuals who turn out to vote are “those who see the political system working, or at least working for them” (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 151). He argued that the current political system favors disproportionately those at the top, and it is these very people who primarily engage in the political process—a system that inevitably serves their needs best by virtue of hearing their voices most (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 151). Is such a thing possible in the United States?
Put differently, does unequal access to political decision makers actually lead to policy outcomes that favor the wealthy? In his research, Gilens (2012) discovered that policy outcomes for issues that generated preference gaps over 10 percentage points between low- and high-income respondents exhibited a “strong association with the preferences of the affluent, but no association with the preferences of the poor at all” (Gilens, 2012, p. 79). He also noted that when there is a divergence between the preferences of the well-off and the poor, government policy is not congruent with the preferences (either in support or opposition) of the poor (Gilens, 2012, p. 81). When the preferences of the well-off and the less well-off are the same, then Gilens found that citizens in the low- to middle-income range were just as likely to get what they wanted as the wealthy. Gilens (2009) discovered an indirect association to economic interests regarding a greater appeal to free markets by the affluent, and greater support of government regulations by low-income Americans. However, when the views between well-off Americans and low- and middle-income Americans differed, then Gilens discovered that government policy was more responsive to the affluent members of the public, and “virtually unrelated to the desires of low- and middle-income citizens” (Gilens, 2012, p. 81). Gilens (2009) reported that preference gaps were not significant between high- and low-income Americans on topics of job-training programs and child care for welfare recipients (Gilens, 2009, p. 339). Interestingly, when policy preferences diverged from the affluent, even “Americans at the 70th income percentile appear to be as powerless to shape government policy as their less-well-off-fellow Americans”
(Gilens, 2012, p. 82). Both Dahl and Gilens stated that this type of concentrated political influence exhibited by wealthy Americans is not compatible with the core democratic principles of political equality. We will return to the question of policy outcomes in chapter 5.

Solt (2008) supported these arguments by showing that declining political interest among poorer citizens—coupled with rising inequality—demonstrates the increased ability of the wealthy to render the political process essentially meaningless for those individuals with lower incomes (Solt, 2008, p. 58). One must stop and wonder why polls consistently show that there is a large discrepancy between what most of the electorate wants on many issues (though not all) and what the governmental system actually delivers (Stiglitz, 2013, p. 149). This seems to be the present state of our Union. It seems from our discussion about the sociopolitical and cultural tendencies of America that its citizens have enough communal inclinations to transcend their individualistic traits. We saw this during America’s civil rights movement, FDR’s New Deal, the Fairness Doctrine, and even—to a lesser extent—the Occupy Wall Street protests. However, there are powerful structural issues at work that make these communal inclinations difficult—but not impossible—to act upon.

The preceding chapter addressed the link between economic and politics. This interconnectivity occurs in a liberal cultural context that justifies this connection. It enables a private market ethos to flourish—and this mindset justifies the use of capital to
purchase unequal political access. This same cultural context shapes how governments function. We will look at this issue in the next chapter.
Chapter 4

STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS: THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

How much blame can be placed at the doorstep of the U.S. federal government regarding the association between access, money, and political inequality? The government plays a significant role in creating the situation that allows a minority of Americans to use large sums of money to purchase political access and hence their preferred policies. Hacker and Pierson (2010) concluded that government involvement in the modern economy is quite significant. Government can and does structure the market in “ways that shape both economic outcomes and the capacity for organized action among economic interests” (Hacker and Pierson, 2010, pp. 169-170). Earlier in this thesis, we demonstrated that culture has a great impact on the people of a nation, but it can also have an impact on economic and government systems. Why is this the case?

One answer has to do with various U.S. Supreme Court decisions, which we will briefly address momentarily. The other answer has to do with the vast sums of capital needed to run a successful political campaign, especially because modern campaigns have become more focused on media and advertising (Hacker & Pierson, 2010, p. 181). This requires politicians to solicit funds from wealthy donors to finance their political ambitions (Hacker and Pierson, 2010). Both of the major political parties, according to Hacker and Pierson, contact one-quarter (Democratic Party) and one-third (Republic Party) of the wealthiest Americans directly during campaign seasons in order to secure
the necessary funds to run and typically win elections. Interestingly, Hacker and Pierson pointed out that the rising costs of financing a political campaign has occurred at the same time that income inequality has risen in the United States. This places the wealthy in a key position, vis-à-vis political access, and thus presents them with the opportunity to secure policy preferences on various economic issues (Hacker and Pierson, 2010, p. 181). Hacker and Pierson noted that the scant research data on this subject suggests that the “rich are more conservative economically—and, on average, better informed about policy than are ordinary Americans” (Hacker and Pierson, 2010, pp. 181-182). This suggests that the rich are in a position to elicit the level of access they need to bring about the kind of legislation necessary to advance their accumulation of capital, even if such policies run counter to what the vast majority of Americans need just to secure a middle-class existence.

Therefore, government provides a structural explanation with respect to unequal political access and its association with private capital and political inequality. Looking at the Court also provides some structural insight as to how the purchase of political access, and the vast amounts of capital funneled into the political sphere, creates political inequality. Again, this situation occurs in a cultural setting that accepts the merging of business and state—and the upcoming series of U.S. Supreme Court rulings appear to support such a notion.
The U.S. Supreme Court

Bowman (1996) asserted that various decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court have both accommodated and encouraged the dramatic surge in political activity by private industry in recent decades. He stated that the Court has adopted a “self-regulating political marketplace” position. According to Bowman, this means that the unfettered expression of ideas in the marketplace of ideas—regardless of the source of those ideas—is critical to liberty in a democratic society (Bowman, 1996, p. 155). Giving a complete history of the Court’s decisions regarding this area of political theory is well beyond the scope of this study, but a brief account of three U.S. Supreme Court decisions will suffice to the extent that it provides an explanation of structure as one of the causes of political access and political inequality.

In *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976), the Court expanded First Amendment rights to include “financial contributions to candidates or parties and independent expenditures made on behalf of candidates, parties, or ballot issues” (Bowman, 1996, pp. 155-156). The Buckley decision introduced the constitutional notion that the use of private capital for the purpose of expressing political views constitutes a form of speech under the First Amendment. The Court reasoned that “a restriction on the amount of money a person or group can spend on political communication during a campaign necessarily reduces the quantity of expression by restricting the number of issues discussed, the depth of their exploration, and the size of the audience reached” (see Bowman, 1996, p. 157). Limiting the use of money to secure those three issues regarding political communication—
according to the Court—could not be permitted unless the government could make a compelling case for restricting the First Amendment (Bowman, 1996).

In *First National Bank v. Bellotti* (1978), the Court extended to the “corporation itself constitutional guarantees of political speech under the First Amendment” (Bowman, 1996, p. 156). This decision, according to Bowman, reversed the Court’s long-standing position of “denying such rights to nonmedia business corporations” (Bowman, 1996, p. 156).

In *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that corporations and unions could not be prohibited by the government from spending money on political campaigns (Patterson, 2011). The Court asserted that corporations and unions possess the same First Amendment rights as individuals as they pertain to campaign spending, though it did place limits on the amount of money these organizations could directly contribute to a specific candidate or party (Patterson, 2011). Specifically, the Court ruled that private industry has the right to free speech, and thus struck down the long-standing prohibition regarding corporate political advertising (Kuhner, 2014). This long-standing prohibition precluded the use of general treasury funds for “express advocacy” and “electioneering communications” that are designed to address specific candidates (Kuhner, 2014, p. 127). Prior to *Citizens United*, a corporation’s views could be expressed in a number of ways, but it could not support or oppose a particular candidate using the “booming voice of its general treasury in that time period” (Kuhner, 2014, p. 129). The Court accepted limits on the amount of money organizations could give to a
politician or party, but it said that both unions and companies could “spend freely from
their treasuries on independent efforts that might benefit a candidate or party” (Patterson,
2011, p. 277). How did the Court’s decision change the existing law?

The 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) made it illegal for
corporations and unions to use their funds to pay for broadcasts and other types of
advertising that were designed to advocate the election or defeat of a political candidate
(Patterson, 2011, p. 488). According to Barbour and Wright (2014), the most problematic
aspect of the Act for political parties was the provision that made it illegal to collect
unlimited soft money contributions (i.e., unregulated campaign contributions by
individuals, groups, or parties that promote general election activities but do not directly
support individual candidates). The Court’s Citizen United decision reversed BCRA’s
provision that prohibited corporations, unions, and interest groups from paying for media
ads that were for or against a specific candidate (Barbour et al., 2014, p. 543). The Court
left in place provisions requiring disclosures and limitations on direct contributions
(Barbour et al., 2014, p. 543). It is questionable as to whether BCRA was actually
effective because practices such as “bundling” (i.e., the collection of many individual
contributions by political action committees) allowed political parties to retain their
function as major providers of campaign services to candidates (Barbour et al., 2014, p.
459). In addition, even with the McCain-Feingold Act, so-called 527 groups can raise
money from corporations, labor unions, and interest groups in order to mobilize voters
using issue-advocacy ads as long as they do not specifically advocate the defeat or
election of a candidate. (Organized under section 527 of the Internal Revenue Service Code, these groups are not subject to the laws regulated by the Federal Election Commission—see Barbour et al., 2014, p. 495).

So, what is the real significance of these cases vis-à-vis money in politics? First, the combined decisions essentially limited the strength of campaign-finance laws in the United States. Second, they have erased any semblance of equality and fairness regarding the influence of money in politics. Third, this infiltration of capital in the political process has made it very difficult if not impossible for Americans of modest means to have any significant voice in securing policy preferences and outcomes. Kuhner (2014) argued that free-market theory now governs the law of democracy, and only a change in the Court’s membership or a Constitutional amendment can bring about any significant limits on money in the American political process. This emphasis on the structural elements of government, and its role in the creation of political inequality—vis-à-vis government’s acquiescence to capitalistic infiltration—is a major component of the problem of access and political inequality in the American political landscape. Thus far, we have covered a lot of material, so let us review some of the major points of this essay before moving on to the next chapter.

**Government and Political Inequality: A Summary of Key Issues**

It is illegal to discriminate against particular racial groups within the political process (e.g., giving a favored voting advantage to Whites). One should, likewise, not be
allowed to buy political access because not all citizens possess the financial means to do so. Allowing a well-off person to buy political access when a less well-off person cannot appears to be an issue of political inequality because such a system treats the first differently than the second in how they are represented by policy makers (i.e., giving a favored advantage to those with a great deal of financial resources over those who do not). Giving one a favored status within the political realm because they are wealthy or White ignores the fact that all citizens must be treated as equals in how they are represented. Such issues should not enter into the public-policy process (i.e., race or financial means). People should be free to exercise their First Amendment rights as long as doing so does not trample on the rights of other citizens, but this is exactly what has happened in so far as political access is concerned. This is an issue of political inequality rather than an issue of class based on income, with strong cultural underpinnings that seem to place self-interest above civic virtue.

Dahl pointed out that a “key characteristic of a democracy is the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals” (Dahl, 1971, p. 1). Government’s function, even according to a libertarian like Sumner, is to construct a system of laws whereby all citizens are given a chance at happiness but not to guarantee their happiness directly. However, citizens are not afforded a chance when some receive a favored political position based on their income, while others of limited means find it difficult to gain access to adequate political representation. The Constitution establishes all citizens as political equals. Within the
realm of liberal economics, however, there is no right that guarantees that all citizens must be equally successful in the marketplace (Sumner, 2003). These are mostly matters worked out in the marketplace and between private individuals. With respect to liberal economics and equal political representation, we find ourselves talking about two distinct issues, and yet they have been joined to the extent that representation is distributed disproportionately—with one group’s voice being considered to a greater extent than the other.

We live in a culture that celebrates and reveres the self-reliance of the individual to make his or her way in society as an autonomous person with all the benefits and risks associated with such a philosophy. However, our democratic form of government does have an obligation to provide a level playing field with respect to equal political access and representation, though it has failed to do so. Alexander Hamilton argued that a strong central government was necessary in order to regulate commerce, but it would appear that the merger of business and state has undermined the federal government’s obligation in this regard. According to various scholars, political representation has been harmed by powerful financial interests, and this has been done with the help of the federal government. The question is whether these strong structural and cultural impediments can be overcome—and the answer is yes. America is not a monolithic society, but rather operates in a dual system of liberal separatism and communal inclinations—and these communal tendencies can work as an “imperfectly legitimate” coercive response that has
the power to separate business from state via constitutional amendment (Walzer, 1990; Mansbridge, 2012; Kuhner, 2007).
Chapter 5

CORPORATIONS, MONEY, AND CONGRESS

Why address the influence of corporations in a study that is predominantly about the role culture plays in affecting unequal political access? This chapter is relevant to this study for three reasons. First, it demonstrates that the great financial resources of corporations have an impact on the American policy-making process, as commented earlier by Lustig. Second, this impact means that large sums of money used by corporations to purchase unequal political access subverts the political process because such behavior allows them to secure special considerations by policy makers in how they vote (Lustig, 1982). Third, this section demonstrates that corporations and other economic elites often combine forces that gives them extreme political influence via the use of money to purchase unequal political access. This situation becomes especially problematic when one considers the vast sums of money that are combined with a particular and focused policy preference that is often at odds with the policy preferences of the majority (Gilens, 2005). The individualistic side of American culture supports the marriage between business and government that drives a private market ethos. Therefore, corporations play a major role regarding the issue of unequal political access, and so this discussion is imperative in order to achieve a complete and proper analysis of this subject.
Corporate Unity and Political Influence

Mark A. Smith (2000) challenged the unity-leads-to-strength assumption put forth by other academics. Specifically, Smith asserted that this assumption suggests that legislative decisions would reflect the influence of business via lobbying and other forms of corporate infiltration if private firms unified as one unit (Smith, 2000, p. 9). This type of infiltration would not allow the preferences of ordinary citizens to have any impact on the decisions made by their government (Smith, 2000). Smith argued that corporate solidarity or unity neither increases the direct influence of business, nor does it reduce the democratic control of citizens (Smith, 2000, p. 8). Instead, he claimed that issues that receive business unity are those policies that are affected most strongly by the constituents of office holders and election outcomes. Corporations achieve legislative success only when citizens—via their policy preferences and voting choices—“embrace ideas and candidates supportive of what business wants” (Smith, 2000, p. 8). When an issue elicits a unified position by private industry, the aforementioned issue typically becomes politicized (i.e., salient) among the electorate and thus meets resistance (Smith, 2000).

Smith's argument does appear to have theoretical support. E.E. Schattschneider (1975, 1960) asserted that the scope of conflict about various issues—including free enterprise—can be limited by keeping it “so private that it is almost completely invisible” (Schattschneider, 1975, 1960, p. 7). He also argued that the free private business enterprise depends on the privacy of information for its survival, mostly because
publicity would lead to so many conflicts that “large-scale public intervention would be inescapable” (Schattschneider, 1975, 1960, p. 12). Schattschneider’s notions would suggest that Smith’s rejection of the unity-leads-to-strength argument is valid—at least from a theoretical perspective. This situation gives legislators the incentive to respond to their constituent’s preferences and places a great deal of importance on elections (Smith, 2000, p. 9). This, in turn, limits the influence companies have on public policy (Smith, 2000).

Stated differently, Smith claimed that issues that unify corporations have a tendency to stimulate debate that allows public opinion to form—and this often impedes the goals of business. This creates a connection between what the electorate wants and what government does (Smith, 2000, pp. 29-30). Sometimes what the people want coincides with pro-business policies and the office holders who support such issues (Smith, 2000). It is also the case, Smith argued, that the unified desires of corporations are often thwarted due to public opinion and election outcomes when these goals attract noticeable attention and debate. This means that the business community cannot always employ its economic resources to “cause policies to deviate substantially from public desires” (Smith, 2000, p. 30). If issues are not salient in the electorate’s mind, members of the business community are not unified, and public opinion is imprecise or even nonexistent, then office holders are less inclined to react to views that might be held by their constituents (Smith, 2000, p. 31). This lack of focus and clarity allows companies
greater opportunity to “steer legislative decisions in their favor” (Smith, 2000, p. 31). It is in these situations, Smith argued, when democracy faces its greatest threat.

Smith also acknowledged that the great amounts of money needed to win elections makes office holders more responsive to contributors (especially large contributors) than to ordinary constituents. Similarly, Patterson (2011) noted that a successful House campaign in a competitive district costs more than a million dollars, whereas a successful Senate campaign in a competitive district can range from several million dollars to 20 million dollars, depending on whether the campaign occurs in a small or large state (Patterson, 2011, p. 370). Smith commented that many analysts believe that these astronomical figures needed by office holders and candidates create money-biased policies that favor the desires of companies “from which the largest share of contributions arise” (Smith, 2000, p. 129). He acknowledged that candidates receive substantial amounts of cash from corporations, but he argued that citizen preferences and elections essentially override the commonly held belief that corporate contributions bias legislative decisions (Smith, 2000, p. 129). Smith argued that nonprofit organizations do not abandon their objectives just because they need to find and use donors to support their causes. He asserted that this is also the case for political candidates and office holders who do not need to sever their ties with citizens simply because they use corporate donors to finance their campaigns in order to win elections (Smith, 2000, p. 129).
Does Smith’s unity argument represent reality? Bowman (1996) argued that corporate power is the dominant type of power in the United States. This, as Bowman asserted, does not mean that governmental power is nonexistent in its ability to constrain corporate autonomy, nor did he argue that corporate power necessarily dominates democratic institutions. However, he did argue that when corporate power in government presents a unified front, “leaders of large corporations, by mediating conflicting interests in Congress, act from a position of strength to influence policy” (Bowman, 1996, p. 32). Much of this influence comes in the form of money. Bowman reported that the institutionalization of “corporate influence in Congress involves a type of cooperation and planning that resembles the organizational role of political parties more than it does the behavior of traditional interest-groups” (Bowman, 1996, p. 152). Corporate PACs are a prominent feature in this organizational network and provide coordinated electoral strategies and the dissemination of information among businesses (Bowman, 1996, p. 153). These types of PACs have supplanted national parties as the primary means of political fundraising for campaigns (Bowman, 1996, p. 153). Organizations such as the Business Roundtable—a group formed in the early 1970s and composed of top business executives from approximately 200 U.S. Corporations—work as a supra-corporate lobby and forum on various policies using issue-oriented task forces that develop common corporate goals and policies (Bowman, 1996, p. 22). This unified group—along with other associated business interests—has “successfully forged a new direction in
American politics by institutionalizing corporate influence in the electoral process and in Congress” (Bowman, 1996, p. 152).

Bowman’s thoughts on the influence of business in the political realm suggest that unified corporate interests do indeed have an impact on policy formulation in the Congress, and the use of money is an integral part of this relationship. Smith’s argument that ordinary citizens can exert more political influence than a unified corporate advocacy campaign might also be true if enough public support can be brought to bear in opposition. However, Bowman’s point about the instrumentality of groups that can supply large campaign donations and disseminate strategic messages means that private capital and corporate unity (e.g., the Business Roundtable) are powerful and significant features in the American political system.

So, perhaps both Smith and Bowman are correct, but who is more correct? It would seem that the high cost of running a political campaign would give more importance to the money side of the argument, but securing a large number of committed citizen support is certainly important, too. The question is whether one’s financial standing has any bearing on his or her ability to secure the level of representation that corporations and well-to-do private citizens can achieve via money and political access. How can someone with a middle-class income compete with a large corporation, especially when each have different policy objectives? Is there an issue of political inequality when one group can purchase political access and one group cannot? Does this impede the notion of one person one vote?
Issues of Perception and Trust

Smith’s arguments appear to be logical, but the arguments of Lindblom and Christiano discussed previously points us in the opposite direction. Even if Smith’s arguments are at times true, then one still has to contend with the fact that many Americans believe that money and corporate unity work as powerful impediments to legitimate representative democracy (Lessig, 2011, p. 166). This, as Lessig mentioned, negatively affects the trust and legitimacy many Americans place in the political system, including the notion that money buys legislative results (Lessig, 2011, p. 167). The issue of trust creates the perception that the political system is undermined by private firms. This encourages citizens to spend less time exercising their democratic rights (Lessig, 2011, pp. 167-168). The aforementioned lack of trust has a serious and negative impact on one’s political efficacy (Lessig, 2011). Lessig reported that a person’s feelings of low political efficacy and uneven government responsiveness affect voter participation (Lessig, 2011, p. 168). In fact, Gilens’ research studying the likelihood that government would enact the policy preferences of the low- and middle-income population over the affluent’s policy desires concluded that most middle-income Americans hold the perception that politicians are essentially apathetic about the preferences of “people like me” (Gilens, 2005, p. 794). For example, a poll conducted by Rock the Vote! asked its members if they planned to vote in the 2010 election. The single biggest reason young voters said they would not be voting in the aforementioned election was because corporate interests have too much power and prevent change (Lessig, 2011, p. 169). This
belief, Lessig argued, is “producing a world where the vast majority of us disengage,” at least individuals in the middle (Lessig, 2011, p. 169). Such beliefs essentially shape the perceptual political landscape into a place where money buys access and thus sets up a system that gives those with significant amounts of capital greater influence in the legislative decision-making process. If this is indeed true—as many political scholars argue—then the average citizen is unequal in her ability to have an impact on what happens in Congress and other U.S political institutions (Lessig, 2011). Interestingly, Schattschneider argued that approximately “90 percent of the people cannot get into the pressure system” (Schattschneider, 1975, 1960, p. 35). If this is correct, then Smith’s notion that the voter is significant in exerting influence over policy makers in curbing corporate influence on the legislative process appears to be highly questionable. Smith makes a clever argument—an argument that might even have some basis in truth in certain situations—but the preponderance of the evidence does not favor his conclusion that corporate unity and voter preferences can counter the corrupting influence of capital infiltration into the legislative process. Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Kimball and Leech (2009) also argued that factors other than monetary resources might explain policy outcomes.

**Other Explanations: Is Money Everything in American Politics?**

Baumgartner and his colleagues (Baumgartner et al., 2009) argued that even the substantial monetary resources of interest groups do not necessarily guarantee a successful policy outcome. They asserted that policymaking is a continuous process, and
many of these issues have been settled in previous political debates. This would suggest that when one side of a policy debate proposes a change, another side attempts to keep the status quo. This means—according to Baumgartner and his associates—that there is already a bias regarding established policies to keep the status quo (Baumgartner et al., 2009, p. 19). If Baumgartner’s statement is correct, then such a bias would be difficult to change even using great resources (Baumgartner et al., 2009). Major changes in policies do happen, but Baumgartner and his colleagues made it clear that “defenders of the status quo usually win in Washington, DC” (Baumgartner et al., 2009, p. 239). This is the fundamental premise of their argument, but what did Baumgartner et al. say about money and its apparent influence in U.S. politics?

First, Baumgartner and his colleagues argued that large sums of money used to support or thwart a particular policy are often met by opposing groups with a great deal of monetary backing as well. If one accepts their notion of the seemingly impervious nature of status-quo policies, then it would appear to be difficult—regardless of financial resources—to change this type of policy.

Second, Baumgartner et al. noted that another reason why money might not be as significant in determining political outcomes as some scholars suggest is that the policy process is very difficult to control. They argued that very few elected officials have enough authority to produce policy changes desired by powerful interest groups. This would suggest that even if these politicians received a great deal of money by economic
elites, it would still be very difficult for any single official to have an effect on policy outcomes.

Third, PACs are not the only type of influence an interest group can use to secure a desired policy outcome. For example, Baumgartner and his associates mentioned that there are other resources that one should consider regarding how much influence an interest group can exert, including the size of an organization’s budget, staff size, number of lobbyists, and the size of an organization’s membership (Baumgartner, 2009, p. 194). Monetary resources can sometimes be overcome by the sheer number of an organization’s members, according to Baumgartner and his associates. They claimed that large numbers of members provide legitimacy to the cause and place pressure on elected officials who seek reelection (Baumgartner, 2009, p. 194). For example, credit unions and banks are often at odds with one another. This is because credit unions have often expanded their services into areas that banks wish to be restricted. As Baumgartner explained, banks typically have greater resources than credit unions, but they (i.e., banks) are not always successful in securing the kind of legislation necessary to limit the expansion of services offered by credit unions. Why? Baumgartner suggested that credit unions have a “mom-and-pop” reputation in their communities, and this tends to translate into increased public support for these local financial institutions. So, we might be able to conclude that the number of group members, and “the degree to which public opinion supports a particular idea,” are resources that can be of great assistance to an organization
when attempting to enact a specific policy—“even an organization that may not control large financial resources or have a large PAC” (Baumgartner et al., 2009, p. 194).

Fourth, interest groups and members of Congress often share the same policy position, and this may not have anything to do with a campaign contribution (Baumgartner, 2009). Each side can use the other to accomplish things that the other cannot do, according to Baumgartner and his colleagues. For example, government officials can set agendas and meet with other Congressional members, whereas interest groups tend to have more staff time, “the ability to do research and publicize findings, and the luxury of working on just one or a few issues at a time” (Baumgartner et al., 2009, p. 195).

The aforementioned four issues give a great deal of weight to the notion that capital is actually not as instrumental in politics as some analysts and scholars claim. However, Baumgartner et al. did discover a slight tendency for policy outcomes to favor the side that possessed greater resources—and these outcomes are disproportionately secured by businesses (Baumgartner et al., 2009, p. 203; Gilens & Page, 2014, p. 10).

One thing seems somewhat puzzling about Baumgartner’s study. If there is a status-quo bias in American legislatures, and if this bias tends to favor the preferences of the affluent over the less well-off, then citizens on the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder have little if any chance of achieving policy changes that will benefit them—unless those policy preferences are also favored by the wealthy or corporate elite (Gilens and Page,
In other words, if there is a status-quo bias toward the wealthy, then this would suggest that the affluent control government through direct influence.

**Economic Elites, Money, and Policy Outcomes**

As discussed previously, Martin Gilens (2005) showed that policy decisions made by legislatures are often congruent with the preferences of affluent citizens when compared with less well-off Americans. This point was discussed by Gilens and Page (2014) and Bartels in the last part of Chapter three. Gilens’ data set consisted of 1,935 survey questions asking respondents between 1981 through 2002 to comment on whether they opposed or supported various U.S. government policy issues, such as raising the minimum wage or requiring employers to provide health insurance. Several interesting findings were discovered in his study. First, he found that policy issues that receive overwhelming support among the public have a less than even chance of being enacted. This finding, Gilens argued, was not surprising given the status quo bias created by various government structures, such as the separation of powers and multiple veto points within the U.S. Congress (Gilens, 2005, p. 786).

His second group of findings is somewhat more troubling. Gilens reported that “higher-income respondents’ views were more strongly related to government policy” than those of lower income levels—including middle-income citizens (Gilens, 2005, p. 786, 788). Interestingly and disturbingly, Gilens explained that there appears to be a lack of government responsiveness when the preferences differed between low- and middle-
income citizens and that of well-off citizens (Gilens, 2005, p. 789). Overall, Gilens argued that government policy seems to be uniquely responsive to the preferences of affluent U.S. citizens. While his study did not address the specific mechanisms affluent Americans use to exert their influence, Gilens hypothesized that the “most obvious source of influence over policy that distinguishes high-income Americans from the less well-off is money and the willingness to donate to parties, candidates, and interest groups” (Gilens, 2005, p. 793). Baumgartner rejected this argument by saying that money might not be as important as some scholars believe because the policy process is very difficult to control, especially considering that most politicians do not have enough authority to produce policy changes. Green and his colleagues (1998) discovered that donations to congressional candidates in 1996 demonstrated that four-fifths of all of people making campaign contributions in amounts of $200 or more had incomes in the top 10 percent of all Americans (Green et al., 1998 in Gilens, 2005, pp. 793-794). Gilens was correct to point out that money is not the only source of power or valued commodity in elected politics, especially when one accounts for the fact that large numbers of volunteers can be mobilized and thus exert great influence to enact public policy. However, he was quick to mention that while money has always had an impact on democratic government, it is also true that government that is typically responsive to the preferences of those with vast sums of capital “is a democracy in name only” (Gilens, 2005, p. 794). It is difficult to say what is more important in influencing the overall policy-making process—direct contributions to politicians or the status-quo bias. Both
positions could have a big impact on helping the affluent secure their preferences over the poor and middle-class. A significant contribution can help secure access and privileged representation via the obligation that is incurred by this type of transaction. The status-quo position means that powerful interests are nearly impossible to extricate from government decision making. It is perhaps closer to reality that both positions operate simultaneously. This is the worst possible combination; that is, an intractable or rigged political system that caters to an established method of interaction (i.e., money to subsidize and perpetuate political careers) between one, small segment of the population (i.e., the wealthy) and government (i.e., policy makers). This leaves 90 percent of the population out of the pressure system (Schattschneider, 1960).

Gilens and Page (2014) examined four theoretical traditions (Majoritarian Electoral Democracy, Economic Elite Domination, Majoritarian Interest Group Pluralism, and Biased Pluralism) in order to assess which actors are critical in determining U.S. policy outcomes. A large data set of 1,779 cases collected over an eleven-year period was used in order to ask respondents whether they favored or opposed a proposed policy change. What did they discover? First, they found that the predictions of pure theories of Majoritarian Electoral Democracy were not valid with respect to their study. This theory “attributes U.S. government policies chiefly to the collective will of average citizens, who are seen as empowered by democratic elections” (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 4). Gilens and his colleague reported that not only do ordinary citizens not have uniquely substantial power over policy decisions, they also have little or no independent
influence on policy at all (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 15). They found that economic elites have a great deal of influence in “the making of U.S. public policy” (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 16). Economic Elite Domination asserts that “U.S. policy making is dominated by individuals who have substantial economic resources, i.e., high levels of income and/or wealth—including, but not limited to, ownership of business firms” (Gilens, 2014, p. 6). They also discovered that organized interest groups exhibit substantial independent influence on public-policy decisions.

The third and fourth theoretical traditions mentioned above postulate that public policy “generally reflects the outcome of the struggle among organized interest groups and business firms” (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 7). For example, biased pluralism posits that the public policies that result from interest group conflict tend to favor the wishes of firms and business associations (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 8). The results from Gilens and Page’s study confirm that a mix of economic elites and organized interest groups (including corporations, largely owned and controlled by wealthy elites) are highly influential in affecting public policy, “but the general public has little or no independent influence” (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 16). Therefore, what else can we glean from this study? Two issues seem to be most prominent with respect to their study and this investigation.

First, Gilens and his colleague discovered that even when a large majority of average citizens desire a particular proposed policy change, it makes little difference what the general public thinks if it differs from the preferences of affluent Americans
(Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 17). In fact, Gilens and Page reported that proposed policies that received low support by economic elites were adopted 18 percent of the time, whereas public policies that achieved support by the same group were adopted 45 percent of the time. When special interest groups and affluent Americans oppose a policy (e.g., primarily tax increases), it has an even lower chance of being enacted (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 17).

Second, Gilen’s study found that the responsiveness of American political institutions to take some action when it is an issue that the general public wants is quite low. They mentioned, like Baumgartner and his associates—that the system has a substantial status-quo bias. In other words, when popular majorities favor the status quo—one that opposes a given policy change—said majorities typically prevail. However, when a majority—even a large majority—of the general public wants to change a policy, it does not typically get its way (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 18). In fact, Gilens and his colleague discovered that large pro-change majorities, that include 80 percent of the general public favoring the policy, secure their desired outcome approximately 43 percent of the time.

Where does Gilens and Page’s findings leave us? First, their study places a great deal of doubt as to the efficacy of majoritarian theory and practice when compared with economic elite theory and practice. They argued that “it is simply not the case that a host of diverse, broadly based interest groups take policy stands that reflect what the general public wants” (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 21). Second, mass-based interest groups are not
very active, they do not typically represent the public very well, they have less impact on policy issues than business-oriented groups do, and tend to have positions that are in opposition to the preferences of average citizens (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 21). By contrast, business groups are far more active, more numerous in the Washington DC area, spend a great deal of money, and usually get their way (Gilens and Page, 2014). Clearly, the American public enjoys a great many important features central to a democracy, including regular elections, freedom of speech and association, and the vote (Gilens and Page, 2014, p. 24). However, Gilens and Page provide some disturbing information as to the well-being of America’s democratic system. It appears that America’s political system is skewed in favor of powerful corporations and a small number of affluent Americans. Let us take a brief look at the impact of capital on the U.S. Congress. The upcoming section on capital and the Congress demonstrates the clear connection between the use of money and how it is used to influence legislators. All of this happens in a cultural system that places a priority on a private market ethos that helps justify the use of money to purchase unequal political access and influence.

**Capital and the U.S. Congress**

Lessig (2011) pointed out two issues that support the notion that money does pose a threat to our representative form of democracy. The first has to do with what Lessig referred to as interactions of reciprocity. Lobbyists, Lessig argued, provide assistance in helping to alleviate the amount of pressure members of Congress feel about remaining electorally competitive. Any help given to a representative can create an obligation—
even on a subconscious level—that may indeed be incompatible with one’s public duty (Lessig, 2011, p. 132). Our DNA drives us to bend to those whom we feel an obligation, “even when we believe, honestly, that we are not” (Lessig, 2011, p. 132). Many members of Congress emphatically state that their legislative decisions are independent of the campaign contributions they receive (Lessig, 2011). Some, however, are all too frank in discussing what many Americans believe. For example, both Congressional Republicans and Democrats—from Joe Scarborough to Mel Levine—have stated clearly that cash is a significant factor in the legislative outcomes in the House of Representatives (Lessig, 2011, p. 133). Former U.S. Representative Eric Fingerhut stated that the current method of campaign funding has a “profound impact on not only the issues that are considered in Congress, but also on the outcome of those issues” (in Lessig, 2011, p. 133).

The second point relevant to the thesis also centers on lobbying and the influence of money in Congress. Lessig argued that lobbying is best understood as a legislative subsidy. Lobbyists attempt to subsidize the work of Congress by helping their base. In other words, these advocates subsidize the agendas of members of Congress by assisting them in doing the things they already want to do (Lessig, 2011, p. 144). How would a lobbyist’s aid to a member of Congress hurt the integrity of the political system when such assistance is consistent with what said member already wants to do? Lessig’s question can be explained in three ways.

First, representation can be compromised even though the individual member is not compromised (Lessig, 2011). How so? Lessig reported that not every issue a member
wants to support has the same level of subsidy. It may very well be the case that a member of Congress campaigned on two primary issues, but after two years working as a legislator she discovers that the time and energy she gave to one of the two issues was mostly driven by “the weight of the subsidy” in the form of campaign contributions (Lessig, 2011, p. 145).

Second, subsidies may also increase the amount of representative access donors receive (Lessig, 2011). Former Senator Paul Simon explained that if he had twenty messages waiting for him at his hotel at midnight—nineteen of which were names he did not recognize and the twentieth he recognized as a $1,000 contributor—the $1,000 donor would be the one person he would call (Lessig, 2011, p. 145). The essential point about subsidies is that corporate campaign contributions are used to help executives gain access to key members of Congress—and this access is power (Lessig, 2011, p. 146).

Third, and finally, a legislative subsidy can bring about what Lessig referred to as shape-shifting. This type of behavior occurs when a legislator takes a “position on a particular issue in anticipation of the need to secure” a campaign contribution from a connected lobbyist (Lessig, 2011, p. 149). Former Congressman Eric Fingerhut noted that legislators subconsciously or consciously alter their views in order to match the positions of campaign donors—and thus induce shape-shifting “away from the position the representative otherwise would have taken” (Lessig, 2011, p. 149). This type of issue tailoring—especially when issues are obscure—focuses on the subtleties of anticipation and are thus difficult to detect (Lessig, 2011, p. 150). Lessig mentioned that many in the
academy comment that the body of knowledge in the field of political science makes it difficult to acknowledge that campaign donations influence a legislator’s decisions, but “what we don’t see is not the same as there’s nothing to see” (Lessig, 2011, p. 137). The preponderance of the evidence suggests that there is indeed a problem with our current political system—especially when so many former members of Congress acknowledge that money buys access and votes. A study conducted in 2008 also concluded that money is a significant factor in determining legislative behavior.

Bartels (2008) focused on the representation of U.S. senators during the late 1980s and early 1990s. We will look at some of his general findings before moving to a few specifics. Bartels discovered that the views of constituents in the upper third income distribution received approximately 50% more attention than constituents in the middle third, “with even larger disparities on specific salient roll call votes” (Bartels, 2008, p. 254). Those constituents located in the bottom third of income distribution received no attention at all when it came to the legislative decisions of their respective senators (Bartels, 2008, p. 254). Bartels suggested that this speaks volumes about the political inequality that exists in the policy-making process in the U.S. Congress.

Based on Bartels overall findings—and coupled with the work of Gilens and Verba et al.—one could argue that the “disproportional influence of affluent constituents reflects their disproportional propensity to contribute money to political campaigns” (Bartels, 2008, p. 280). For example, Verba and his colleagues discovered that three-fourths of the total amount of campaign money reported by their respondents came from
people in the top 25 percent of the income distribution, while most people in the middle of the income distribution accounted for the rest of the donations—with people from the bottom quintile providing only 2 percent of the total amount of the campaign donations (Verba et al., 1995 as cited in Bartels, 2008, p. 280). Bartels estimated that the aforementioned figures suggest that if senators only responded to campaign donations, then they would give approximately six times as much significance to the viewpoints of affluent constituents as compared to the viewpoints of the middle-income constituents—and essentially “no importance to the views of low-income constituents” (Bartels, 2008, p. 280). He pointed out that his study uncovered disparities in representation between affluent and middle-income constituents that either match or exceed the disparities in campaign donations reported by Verba and his colleagues (Bartels, 2008, p. 280).

One might suggest that there are other explanations than the one given in this investigation, as was argued by Baumgartner and his colleagues. However, Bartels found that there was no support for the argument that the rich are more influential than the poor because they (i.e., the rich) are more likely to vote. In addition, the notion that the rich are more influential than the poor because they (i.e., the rich) are better informed than the poor did not find significant support in his study. Bartels did find some support in his study that suggests that the rich are more influential than the poor because they are “more likely to contact government officials” (Bartels, 2008, p. 281). Finally, his study found even stronger though indirect support that the rich are more influential than the poor
because they provide campaign donations that drive political campaigns and lobbying activities (Bartels, 2008).

The aforementioned studies do not paint a happy picture for our representative form of democracy, nor do they give much hope to millions of Americans who simply cannot compete with the vast sums of money given to politicians and political candidates by corporations and wealthy private citizens. Dahl wrote, “A key characteristic of a democracy is the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals” (Dahl, 1971, p. 1). How can our present system be considered equal? Bartel’s study provided evidence that senators were unresponsive to the views of constituents in the bottom third of the income distribution—at least during the late 1980s through the early 1990s. The collective evidence points to an unequal situation. Bartels asserted that the apparent disparities in political representation suggest the potential for a vicious cycle linking the economic and political realms. That is, increased economic inequality may very well produce increasing inequality in political responsiveness for less well-off constituents, and this in turn may produce governmental policies that do not serve the interests of the poor thus creating greater economic inequality (Bartels, 2008, p. 286). This situation, without significant intervention, will become an entrenched and immutable condition for millions of Americans (Bartels, 2008, p. 286). Scholars and analysts have provided various recommendations to remedy this problem, but what is often missing is the will and tenacity to take unprecedented and bold steps to regain the legitimacy of our political system.
We have seen that America is comprised of two different cultural constructs—individualistic and communal. However, we are primarily driven by our private market ethos, libertarian propensities, and individualism. This cultural mindset shapes our belief structure regarding what we should be able to do with our own money—and this seems apparent when one looks at recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions. This thesis has called attention to the notion that America’s individualism shapes and constrains its people and their institutions—economic and state. The writings of Sumner, Thoreau, and Emerson helped us understand America’s powerful liberal inclinations, whereas Walzer, Tocqueville, Sunstein, and Smith helped us understand that America has a communal heritage that, at times, counters its individualistic propensities. In fact, the civil-rights movement and the Vietnam War demonstrations prove that America has a communitarian tradition that has been employed to solve sociopolitical problems. This issue we address next.
CONCLUDING REMARKS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This author argued that the capitalist system in its present form harms democracy and thus impedes political equality. The author examined the dual nature of the liberal and communitarian traditions of American political culture, and their impact on its sociopolitical landscape and mindset. We determined that American individualism helps capitalists and government officials justify a private market ethos that accepts the use of private capital to purchase what one can afford, including the buying of unequal political access and representation. This cultural mindset permeates the sociopolitical system, which includes the citizens, private industry, the state, and enables both state and business to conjoin. The paper also discussed various empirical studies to substantiate the argument that political institutions such as the U.S. Congress are indeed affected by the infiltration of capital. The preponderance of the evidence suggests that private capital from firms and wealthy individuals does corrupt the political process, buys access to decision makers, constructs the perception that the political system is rigged in favor of powerful interests, and creates a system of political inequality whereby cash begets access and representation. It would appear that we have now reached the point in our democratic development where an “imperfectly legitimate” coercive response is necessary (Mansbridge, 2012). Exactly what does this mean?
Dahl (1996) argued that one of the major impediments to democracy is the state’s limited interference with corporate capitalism (Mansbridge, 2012). There has been a trend with respect to more involvement by private industry in government affairs, but little has been done via collective action to counteract this trend. As a result, we have seen a drift (i.e., an unimpeded trajectory caused by external forces) towards a point of political and economic inequality that is now severe and cuts across national borders. Mansbridge argued that the external forces of increasing corporate organization and lobbying produce a condition that allows “the forces that created the problem to make it worse” (Mansbridge, 2012, p. 3). Without “imperfectly legitimate” coercion, the status quo simply keeps outside change from occurring and we are thus left with a market society rather than a market economy (Mansbridge, 2012; Sandel, 2012). As we discussed in the first chapter, an imperfectly legitimate coercive response means that government is used in a way that demands (i.e., a power over method) political equality even if such an enacted law cannot meet a high standard of democratic legitimacy. The way this is accomplished is by citizens engaging in powerful, mass demonstrations that cause government to react in a way that terminates gross political inequality. We saw this type of citizen engagement during the Vietnam War and the civil-rights movement. This demonstrates that the individualistic nature of the American psyche can be countered by its communal tendencies.

Mansbridge asserted that the primary reason for government is to use coercion to solve collective action problems. Her argument is theoretical, but its simplicity and
directness is exactly the kind of policy recommendation that is needed to rectify the current system. Mansbridge stated that coercive power means “power over” rather than the friendlier “power to” approach. Her recommendation asks for a fundamental change in democratic theory, one that takes us from a core component of resistance (i.e., “power to”) that simply “block[s] the exercise of power” to a policy of coercion that “is far less democratically legitimate than the coercion we accept at the level of the nation-state” (Mansbridge, 2012, pp. 5-6). Mansbridge’s notion of coercion might be best exemplified by Christiano’s proposal that the wealthy’s freedom of expression should be occasionally regulated. He suggested that some temporary limitations might be placed on the speech of the affluent. The justification for this proposal is based on the assumption that this segment of the population typically share common points of view and thus exerts a great deal of dominance over the agenda-setting apparatus to the virtual exclusion of other political interests (Christiano, 2012, p. 12). The financial forces that now exist throughout the international system require this type of bold action, mostly because the “markets set the agenda and fiscal constraints of public policies” (Offe, 2012, p. 4). What mechanism can we put into place in order to apply Mansbridge’s notion of imperfectly legitimate coercion?

Timothy K. Kuhner (2007) argued that money distorts democracy, and that we lack a framework for “conceptualizing limits on the ability of financial power to translate into political power” (Kuhner, 2007, p. 2354). He suggested that we constitutionally enact a separation of business and state. Kuhner claimed that the absence of a separation
of business and state allows an individual’s wealth and corporate association to be relevant to her standing in the political community (Kuhner, 2007, p. 2375). Madison, argued Kuhner, understood the vices of human nature, especially narrow self-interest (Kuhner, 2007, p. 2370). Kuhner suggested that corporate nature should be conceptualized as a new form of human nature, albeit a more sophisticated type (Kuhner, 2007, 2371). He noted that unlike human nature, “corporate nature is not tempered by pity or interfactional accommodation” (Kuhner, 2007, p. 2372).

The aforementioned seems to be true enough. However, what is often missing from this discussion is that American individualism shapes and constrains the economic and political systems, as we discussed in some detail earlier in this study. The need for the separation of church and state derives from certain aspects of human nature, including exclusiveness and the divisive nature of humans and their potential to marginalize and subjugate others who are different from themselves (Kuhner, 2007, p. 2386). Kuhner argued that the excessive entanglement between government and private industry is a new form of the same problem. Unlike the separation of church and state, via the Establishment Clause, government does give preferential treatment to private interests over the interests of many Americans, especially when it gives economic elites the legal right to use vast sums of money as political speech. What Kuhner’s plan does is to separate business from government so that human nature can be improved (Kuhner, 2007, p. 2386). What would this policy look like?
Kuhner argued that the separation of business and state is the unfinished legacy of the U.S. Constitution. Key to his policy is that “popular sovereignty and political equality shall not be denied or abridged by allowing monetary power to translate into political power” (Kuhner, 2007, p. 2387). This policy would be created by a constitutional amendment. It would ban all financial contributions to political candidates at the local, state, and federal level (Kuhner, 2007, p. 2378). All political campaigns would be paid for by public financing, and all points of access (e.g., advocacy groups, parties) would be prohibited from making campaign donations. Tax dollars would be the only source of monetary support candidates would receive to finance their campaigns. Finally, all media outlets would be required to allot an equal amount of time and number of free political advertisements for all the candidate’s campaign messages. Candidates would be limited in how many ads they could use during the course of an election—both primary and general. Using the government to employ a coercive response via constitutional amendment makes up only one-half of the proposed plan.

The unequal nature of our representative form of democracy is a disconcerting issue for the low- and middle-class. Why should the majority of the American electorate help sustain such an unequal political system? This vast number of Americans need to use their overwhelmingly numerical superiority to compel the federal government to amend the U.S. Constitution in order to separate business from state (Kuhner, 2007). The civil-rights movement—and the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations—could be thought of as versions of what is being advocated in this essay. An imperfectly legitimate
coercive response would also entail undermining the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision by government via a constitutional amendment. This would be accomplished by using mass demonstrations and marches, with the intensity and possible violence exhibited during the civil-rights movement and the Vietnam War. The movement would be considered a success with the disassociation of money as a First Amendment right vis-à-vis political speech. Ultimately, this event, or series of events, would bring about a constitutional amendment terminating the use of private capital in the political arena. No longer would individuals or corporations be able to use money in this way. The individualistic tendencies of the American psyche are a dominant force, but the American people have a well-established tradition of communal inclinations that use collective action to create a more equal society.

The proposed plan is communitarian in nature in that it attempts to use a large community-based approach to combat the effects of a liberal, individualistic society on the American political system. By using large masses of citizens—and strong government coercion—Kuhner’s separation policy would employ a communal approach to rectify the problem of unequal political access and representation. Public financing would be the sole method for financing political campaigns rather than by self-interested individuals pursuing monetary accumulation at the expense of the majority. The liberal mindset of American culture tends to be the dominant force—and it is therefore necessary to check this side of culture and human nature via a constitutional amendment (Kuhner, 2007). This means that the majority of the American population would dictate the way their
government works. Policy decisions would be made by legislators who represent large constituencies. Equal access would be available through the vote and normal channels of communication with one’s representative. Communities of citizens would have a strong voice in what issues are discussed and enacted in legislatures, rather than by a few individuals who use their private capital to purchase political outcomes. This “power over” method uses a constitutional amendment to force a universal common good on a broken system. The new system is communal, inclusive, and helps the individual do what is simultaneously best for herself and for society in that it impedes the use of money to secure unequal political access so that all citizens can realize fairer representation.

The objections voiced by many in the public and private realms regarding the implementation of the aforementioned separation policy would no doubt shake the very foundation of our sociopolitical system. The vast sums of money at stake would most certainly cause a response by private firms that may very well initially affect the financial well-being of many Americans. However, the failure to enact such a policy simply abandons many more millions of average citizens to political inequality, no voice, and the obliteration of a solid middle class—with future generations incapable of realizing any level of the American Dream, nor a seat at the table of true representative democracy.
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