

America's Shadow Class War and the 2010 Elections. The Rich are Getting Richer.

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Washington - The 2010 election is turning into a class war. The wealthy and the powerful started it.

This is a strange development. President Obama, after all, has been working overtime to save capitalism. Wall Street is doing just fine and the rich are getting richer again. The financial reform bill passed by Congress was moderate, not radical.

Nonetheless, corporations and affluent individuals are pouring tens of millions of dollars into attack ads aimed almost exclusively at Democrats. One of the biggest political players, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, accepts money from foreign sources.

The chamber piously insists that none of the cash from abroad is going into its ad campaigns. But without full disclosure, there's no way of knowing if that's true or simply an accounting trick. And the chamber is just one of many groups engaged in an election-year spending spree.

This extraordinary state of affairs was facilitated by the U.S. Supreme Court's scandalous Citizens United decision, which swept away decades of restrictions on corporate spending to influence elections. The Republicans' success in blocking legislation that would at least have required the big spenders to disclose the sources of their money means voters have to operate in the dark.

The "logic" behind Citizens United is that third-party spending can't possibly be corrupting. The five-justice majority declared that "this court now concludes that independent expenditures, including those made by corporations, do not give rise to corruption or the appearance of corruption. That speakers may have influence over or access to elected officials does not mean that those officials are corrupt. And the appearance of influence or access will not cause the electorate to lose faith in this democracy."

You can decide what's more stunning about this statement, its naivete or its arrogance.

If one side in the debate can overwhelm the political system with clandestine cash, which is what's now happening, is there any doubt that the side in question will buy itself a lot of influence? If that's not corruption, what exactly is it?

And how can five justices, who purport not to be political, sweep aside what elected officials themselves long ago concluded on the subject and claim to know what will or will not "cause the electorate to lose faith in this democracy"? Could anything undermine trust in the

system more than secret contributions to shadowy groups spending the money on nasty ads?

The good news is that the class war is bringing a certain clarity to politics. It is also another piece of evidence for the radicalism of the current brand of conservatism. This, in turn, is forcing Democrats to defend a proposition they have been committed to since the days of Franklin Roosevelt but are often too timid to proclaim: that government has a legitimate and necessary role in making economic rules to protect individuals from abuse.

It has thus been both entertaining and educational to watch Republican Senate candidates in Connecticut, West Virginia, Alaska and Kentucky grapple with the impact of their bad-mouthing of minimum wage laws.

Conservative academics have warred against the minimum wage ever since FDR declared the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 perhaps “the most far-reaching program, the most far-sighted program for the benefit of workers that has ever been adopted here or in any other country.”

These critics have never gained traction because most people think it’s simple justice that those who work for a living be treated with a modicum of respect. Many voters who express skepticism about government in the abstract nonetheless favor laws that give a fighting chance to individuals with weaker bargaining positions in the marketplace.

The minimum wage battle underscores the difference between 2010-style conservatism and the conservatism of Dwight Eisenhower or even Ronald Reagan. The 2010 right actually imagines a return to the times prior to the New Deal and Teddy Roosevelt’s Square Deal, the heady days before there were laws on wages and hours, environmental concerns and undue economic concentration.

The country doesn’t need this class war, and it is irrational in any case. Practically no one, least of all Obama, is questioning the basics of the market system or proposing anything more than somewhat tighter economic regulations — after the biggest financial collapse since the Great Depression — and rather modest tax increases on the wealthy.

But even these steps are apparently too much for those financing all the television ads, which should lead voters to ask themselves: Who is paying for this? What do they really want? And who gave them the right to buy an election?

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