

Money, persuasion and American values

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Most inquiry on the role of money and power in civic life is addressed to the question of whether money can buy influence.¹ This is an interesting question in its details. How, exactly, is influence purchased and with what effects? Yet the answer to the general question is obvious, at least to the moneyed interests whose representatives must suppose that their millions of dollars in contributions are buying something. In this article I take the reality of purchasing influence for granted and propose that the most interesting current trend in this arena is a ripening claim that buying influence is entirely proper within American cultural and social traditions of free political competition. That expensive mass advertising establishes money as a *condition of mass influence* is now accepted as both true and legitimate.

The role of money in American politics has been profoundly altered by the rise of what I call the 'New Public' (Mayhew, 1997), a form of organizing public communication that bestows great authority on professional communications experts. Modern money-based politics is a product of mass consumption, electronic media, polling opinions, marketing, and advertising. It is not surprising that many citizens often reduce political values to money, the common denominator of competing demands. Political leaders encourage a private, calculating attitude by repeating such slogans as, 'Is this how you want *your* tax dollars spent?' (Sorauf, 1992). How do citizens want *public* dollars to be spent?

Advocacy of claims that money is a legitimate arbiter of public values has increased over the last three decades. Proponents of such claims assert that public demand rules the market, and so it should, for it measures what people really want. Occasionally, when relatively legitimate political uses of money are at issue, politicians and officials are willing to state justifications

in frank terms. For example, speaking of buying access to officials, President Clinton said that big donors 'should get a respectful hearing'. Senator Mitch McConnell was willing to be even more outspoken about equating money and support: 'If you are able to raise a lot of money it means you have a lot of support, and I think that should be applauded not condemned' (Clawson et al., 1998: 30, 63). Nevertheless, most discussions of money and influence among participants in the political market shrink from frank admission that money is legitimate tender in this arena, for contributions express support for political positions. It is therefore necessary to infer the assumptions and implications of circumspect words and deeds.

Consider, for example, the implications of the fact that the public (and even some members of Congress) cannot learn who will benefit from a narrowly directed tax loophole, as if the citizenry has no right to know where support comes from as long as it is apparent that it exists. For that matter, campaign and lobbying laws that permit large undisclosed contributions imply that support is measured in monetary terms, but it is not necessary to know where, within the political community, such support is found. This notion undermines the very concepts of money and influence: money is a universal, neutral and *anonymous* means of exchange while influence is exercised by particular people and groups. Influence depends on *persuasive argument* by *trusted* leaders. Denying citizens' access to facts limits political community as much as denying access to speech. Few advocates go so far as to assert that sociopolitical demands can be justified exactly as economic wants are valued, by market-generated, monetary demand, but the ideology of professional campaign consultants and managers has much in common with market ideologies in the economic realm.

Speech and money

There has long been democratic agreement on the principle of one person, one vote, but there is no corresponding maxim demanding equal monetary support for competing campaigns. In the polity, voters exercise binding *power*, while in the arena of persuasion, *influence* is the way to success. Strong libertarians demand strict application of first amendment rights (of free speech and association) to attempts to regulate campaign rhetoric, on the grounds that limits on contributions fetter debate by withholding the means of persuasion. Without full freedom to seek financial support for the means of communication, messages cannot be transmitted to the public. As American columnist George Will put it on ABC's *This Week*, 'unregulated money is unregulated speech, and I'm for it' (29 November 1998).

Conflating *speech* and money ironically erodes the distinction between *influence* and money in political life. Equating speech with its economic

means leads to broader claims that the regulation of means is tantamount to the control of speech itself. Taken another step, the argument naturally leads to claims that capacity to attract money creates a prima facie case for the validity of financially well-supported causes.

Justifying money: diverse illustrations

The following illustrations introduce several of my contentions: (1) advocates claim that market considerations, unconstrained by normative obligations, provide measurements of economic consequences that are a definitive guide to public policy. (2) Groups can make common cause and magnify their influence and use their sway to undercut purely economic justifications. (3) Within the realm of influence, important players have begun to *equate* money and influence in the formula 'money talks'. (4) Defenders of money in politics claim that successful money-raising is an indicator of public support; therefore, the playing fields created by money need not be levelled.

Springering

A recent public dispute in California provides an example of both market-based justifications and the role of influence in rebutting them. In February of 1998, KRON-TV, a Sacramento affiliate of the CBS network, moved the *Jerry Springer Show* from a midnight placement to 4.00 p.m., allowing the show to capture the attention of children and teenagers arriving home from school. The station's strategy worked. By March the Springer show sometimes drew as many as 300,000 viewers. Springer's show features guests who display bizarre tastes and discuss their involvement in unusual situations, many of which include unconventional sex. The show displays a high level of conflict and Springer's guests often come to blows.

Dismayed parents began to flood the station with complaints. In March, the local media, including the *Sacramento Bee*, started to carry the story and the dispute became public. KRON defended the station. Under pressure, KRON's station manager justified his position in a televised interview. Yes, he had 'qualms' about it, but he is not a 'censor'. 'Yes, it is a matter of ratings and money, but that's the business.' In short, he expressed a market view that avoids questions of normative framework and personal responsibility. He also indicated he would consider moving back to a late-night slot, but not before new audience ratings set new advertising rates.

In April, the station manager reversed his position, saying he had reviewed studies showing that Springer did draw large audiences of minors. Clearly, however, he was influenced by the tumult around him. Hundreds of citizens wrote complaining letters to KRON. Members of the Sacramento City

Council, the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors, and the Sacramento City School Board took strong positions against Springer-in-the-afternoon.²

In this case, the power of monetary standards and business necessity could not match the sway of influence. Elected city and county officials and school board members were able to back persuasive messages with their official positions and the social statuses implied by their titles. Moreover, their influence was enhanced by the most important source of credible social influence: they were able to make a successful claim to *represent* solidary groups, to *speak on behalf* of groups with common interests, to *assert a common interest* with those whose interests they press.

What is discussion?

In February of 1997, I heard an opponent of current plans for American campaign reform issue a warning. 'Make no mistake about this. These people are trying to shut people up. They want to shut down the discussion. Where will we get discussion?' Since the principal cause of ever-rising expenditure in political campaigns is the high price of television advertising, I would deconstruct this speaker's statement as asserting, in effect, that American political discussion *consists in* television commercials. His approach ignores issues of quality. Does effectiveness in swaying audiences outweigh the value of clear, information-rich dialogue? How should civic discourse proceed?

This speaker's words may seem odd, even extreme, but they follow a mainstream line of argument codified by the US Supreme Court.³ In the course of invalidating congressional limits on expenditure in political campaigns (*Buckley v. Valeo*, 434 US 1, 1976), the Court held that restricting amounts spent on political communication

... 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 ... because virtually every means of communicating ideas in today's mass society requires the expenditure of money. The distribution of the humblest handbill or leaflet entails printing, paper, and circulation costs. Speeches and rallies generally necessitate hiring a hall and publicizing the event. The electorate's increasing dependence on television, radio, and other mass media for news and information has made these expensive modes of communication indispensable instruments of effective political speech. (424 US 19)⁴

The court also took a step towards frank approval of the notion that money is a measure of public support: 'the financial resources available to a candidate's campaign ... will normally vary with the size and intensity of the candidate's support' (424 US 56).

The Supreme Court's reasoning has been thoughtfully criticized, starting with Justice White's partial dissent in the original *Buckley* case. According to White, the Court proceeds

... from the notion that 'money talks', and that 'money is speech'. In consequence the Court takes the right to free speech, including unlimited expenditure to disseminate speech, as constitutionally protected. Hence the Court, with its 'narrow views of the values the limitations would serve', could ignore larger democratic purposes and strike down Congress' efforts to legislate reform. (424 US 463; see also Fiss, 1997)

Money grants an oil company its right to speak

Professional public relations experts sometimes take a giant step beyond the US Supreme Court. Instead of arguing that free speech merely allows advocates to spend adequate money in the *exercise* of their free speech, they claim that money bestows a legitimate *right* to speak. Herbert Schmertz of the Mobil Corporation once remarked that 'opposition groups' ability to raise money is ... indicative of whether they have a constituency to support them. Otherwise they are just self-appointed keepers of the public morals.' Schmertz claimed that, unlike self-appointed advocates, he represented a real constituency: the 200,000 shareholders of Mobil and their elected directors. He was responsible to this group, but opposition groups are 'responsible to no one, and therefore have no constituency' (Sethi, 1978: 19). In this conception of the political process, money is a signal that a constituency has authorized people to speak on their behalf.

The concept of influence

A few working definitions will clarify the terms of my argument. Let us refer to persons' or groups' capacities to secure the agreement and compliance of others as *sway*. Several forms of sway can be classified according to the types of leverage employed. One can, by offer of *inducement*, promise others valuable things in return for their compliance – pay-offs, so to speak. Money is a generalized medium for offers of inducement. Legitimate offers of inducement are called purchases, illegitimate offers, bribes. *Power* is a generalized medium for *threats*; capacity to punish allows people to gain this form of sway.⁵

Influence rests on generalized capacity to persuade. Among the modes of sway, influence lies squarely in the realm of persuasion – of words, argument, rhetoric and dialogue. By definition, influence cannot employ power or money, for influence requires giving reasons (Habermas, 1984 [1981]: xxx; Parsons, 1967: 366–8). Yet it is also a form of inducement, for people attempt to influence others by calling upon common interests, inducing them to join in an alliance (Parsons, 1967: 361–70).

Successful efforts to sway rest on confidence. Participants in economic markets must be confident of the value of money in future exchanges. Power depends either on terror or on confidence in the resources of law and civil defence that undergird the state. What, then, is the source of influence? Since influence depends on persuasive words of recommendation or advice, one who seeks to influence others must gain their confidence.

Confidence can be secured by several means, giving rise to varied forms of influence: *status-based influence* is founded on trust in others' high social status, especially within communities with strong, stable and accepted institutions of stratification and personal loyalty. *Pure influence*, untainted by the de facto power of high status, rests entirely on argument. The generalized capacities that support pure influence are rhetorical skill, personal charisma, cogency and a record of sincere truthfulness that supports future trust.⁶

Influence and solidarity

One crucial source of confidence in influential people is acceptance of their claims to speak on behalf of groups. This allows influential leaders to found their sway on the solidarity of the groups they represent. When people feel well represented by those who presume to speak for them, their spokespeople become trusted 'prolocutors'. As speakers for the interests of others, prolocutors base their influence on appeals to common cause with the audience: 'I ask you to support this movement because it embodies *our* interests.' If audiences accept this claim, then speakers achieve a generalized reputation for sincerity. Solidarity trumps suspicion.

Neither power nor money require the swayer and the swayed to share common ends or to supply any justification for their demands; reciprocal benefits suffice. Influence, on the other hand, resides in the realm of justification and persuasion, a world of values, reasons, words and creative efforts. When influence is effective, it builds, even creates, the solidary structures of society.

The role of solidarity in creating and sustaining influence sharpens the defining distinctions between money and influence. Influence depends on persuasive dialogue among people with common group memberships and common ends, while money provides a means of offering choices of goods to paying customers. The democratic tradition tends to view money as corrupting civic life and aspires instead to deliberative means that allow citizens to find or to forge their common civic interests. An ideology that takes the economic forces of the marketplace as *constituting* the public interest is anomalous, for it denies that public discussion is necessary for setting civic aims.

Responsibility and normative regulation

Sociological critique of money as the measure of value for both economic goods and social causes stems from an important strand of social theory. Social theorists have insisted that exchanges between willing, interested parties do not by themselves create stable social orders. Complementary individual interests can bind people in stable communities only within normative frameworks that define social responsibilities.

Emile Durkheim's path-breaking assertions on the proper normative framework for modern economic life were directed against equating modern solidarity and *individual* contracts (Durkheim, 1933 [1893]: 174–229). He insisted that there are social bonds between contracting parties that derive from their solidarity. Parties to contracts accept, as a part of their agreements, a complex of norms and regulations that precede and govern individual contracts (Durkheim, 1933 [1893]: 211–19). The parties agree to the entire law of contract – to the *institution* of contract, which represents their solidarity.

Even in the present decade, students of political economy may start from economic perspectives, and still arrive at conclusions parallel to Durkheim's. King (1993) argues that market transactions occur with a larger society. The integration of society is always problematic, and, in modern capitalist society, social disturbances are exacerbated by tensions between two sectors: (1) free-market economies that institutionalize the divisions between rich and poor, and (2) democratic institutions that promise equal political rights. Money is so potentially divisive as to require economic and political actors to seek a *modus vivendi* for avoiding social disruption and loss of legitimacy. In the USA, the gradual establishment of growth as a positive value has transformed fiscal politics from a zero-sum, win–lose game into a competition between parties with at least some shared ground to discuss their common future.

Taking his cues from Durkheim, Talcott Parsons created a systematic, analytical paradigm for specifying the norms and attitudes necessary to a stable modern society. His scheme distinguished self-orientation from 'orientations to the collectivity' (Parsons, 1951: 60–1, 96–114, 314–21). He conceded the rise of self-oriented roles in modern society, but insisted that such roles are also governed by norms that call out socially responsible conduct. The normative context of individual action always demands attention to the collectivity. For example, professional roles play a strategic part in stabilizing modern societies. Attorneys, physicians and accountants work for fees in profit-making professional firms, but they are obligated to work for the benefit of their clients within the boundaries of proper professional conduct. Other roles – indeed, any role with an element of fiduciary responsibility for others – lay personal obligations and social responsibilities on economic players.

According to Jürgen Habermas, not all communication regarding public issues constitutes discussion or ‘discourse’. We use other words to refer to public communication that falls short of honest two-sided, intelligible discourse: propaganda, promotion, advertising, spin. Habermas sought to define what fully ‘discursive’ discussion would be. Discussion counts as ‘discourse’ only if it is directed to the achievement of ‘communicative understanding’. Communication intended to further *strategic* ploys or to gain tactical advantages by using others as *instrumental means* for achieving one’s own ends cannot be reckoned as communicative. Communication implies speakers who employ discourse not to manipulate but to understand each other and to build their relations on achieved understandings (Habermas, 1987 [1981]: 179–85). Commitment to the ethic of discourse requires several affirmations by speakers: that their assertions are true, their normative and aesthetic evaluations rightly grounded on standards and, above all, that their speech is sincere, not strategic (Habermas, 1984 [1981]: 99–101). When a community of speakers is committed to rational persuasion, unconstrained discussion in the public rests on convincing argument, unhampered by money or power or status. He asks a utopian question: what would a discussion-based society be like were power and money fully excluded from the realm of public discourse. His answer represents the polar opposite of the economistic view that social values are well defined and aggregated by market-driven demands expressed in monetary terms. Habermas’ ideas require us to confront the paradox of ‘free’ but expensive speech. Money is prerequisite to influential speech; but if the principles of free speech forbid the regulation of political money, then influence will, by default, be regulated by moneyed interests.

In summary, the case for viewing commitments of money as self-sufficient indicators of social values ignores the multidimensional character of social norms and personal bonds – the multiple forms of sway that attach us to society.

Money in politics

The ‘New Public’ (Mayhew, 1997), which has developed rapidly over the last three decades, is commonly attributed to the rising sway of television. Although television has been a strong force in the formation of the new organization of public discussion, it is important to attend to the full range of emergent roles and institutions that constitute the New Public. New political techniques, some based on technological innovations that increase the speed and availability of communication, have been as important as television itself. Nevertheless, the importance of television is manifest in the proportion of expenditures allocated by electoral campaigns to broadcasting political commercials – 50–60 percent.⁷ Even this figure excludes

the cost of ancillary groups and related activities: outside firms to design media campaigns; political consultants to plan and oversee campaign strategies; polling organizations and focus group organizers to test ideas and assess messages. In short, political marketers can now purchase – for a price – the best persuasive means available to commercial promoters. The cost of campaigning for major office in the USA is apparent in the sums committed to American congressional election campaigns. In the general election of 1996, candidates paid an average of \$674,000 to win each seat in the US House of Representatives and \$4.7 million for each seat in the US Senate (Lewis and Center for Public Integrity, 1998: 6–7).

The cost of the ‘outside strategy’

Using money to influence the public has also magnified political pressures on legislators. The increasing scope and specialization of professional political operatives have been accelerated by the new ‘outside strategy’ of appealing to the public for support rather than merely lobbying legislators (Cigler and Loomis, 1995: 393–406; Faucheux, 1995; Mayhew, 1997: 222–7). Successful outside grassroots (or ‘astroturf’) lobbying requires communications specialists to study public opinion, estimate the likely appeal of alternative approaches and translate poll-based knowledge into designs for mobilizing constituencies in shows of support. It is an expensive process and is therefore linked to other problems of campaign reform.

Given the US Supreme Court’s insistence that freedom of speech implies complete freedom of expenditure for public debate, campaign law places both candidates and interest groups on a new footing. Candidates may be subject to limits on contributed funds they can accept, while private interest groups can spend without limits on *issues*, if not on *candidates*. This has led to advertising on behalf of issues to provide indirect support to candidates associated with these issues. In consequence, groups are empowered to affect candidates’ messages and candidates have monetary incentives to accept outside ideological pressures (Marcus, 1998; Marcus and Broder, 1997).

Lobbying the public reached a climax in 1998 in American legislative battles over legislation to regulate tobacco companies. In an attempt to affect and mobilize public opinion, the industry devoted \$43 million to advertising the alleged twin evils of regulation and the taxes required to pay for it.⁸ The cost of the outside strategy is apparent in the size of the industry’s bill for this campaign in relation to the cost of the traditional modes of influence: campaign contributions to congressional candidates and direct representation by lobbyists. The latter had been running about \$19 million a year before 1988 (McAllister, 1998).⁹ Four years earlier, before tobacco legislation attained high priority on the legislative agenda,

tobacco companies committed only \$2.6 million to candidates of their choice (Makinson, 1996: 1312).

The defeat of the proposed tobacco regulations of 1998 illustrates an operational principle of outside lobbying: it makes sense for a wealthy industry to shoulder the expense of mounting a campaign to mobilize public opinion, but critics of industry have less money at stake. The regulation of tobacco is of interest to many citizens, but few have so much at stake as to single out a particular cause for lavish spending (Olson, 1971). The industry faced a settlement with a large group of state attorneys general at a cost of \$368 billion, a sum that grew to about \$500 billion during negotiations for a unified, legislated settlement in the US Congress. After spending \$43 million to defeat the tobacco bill, the industry returned to the bargaining table with a stronger hand and established another settlement with several attorneys general, this time for \$206 billion. The industry saved \$300 billion and gained other concessions as well by spending a mere 0.03 percent of their projected savings.¹⁰ Some might say that such horse trading merely reveals the necessary inner economic workings of a successful democratic process, but the thriving market for purchased influence suggests that we cannot use market results to assess popular support for competitive causes.

The high cost of contemporary political persuasion drives current concerns about the state of public communication. Commentators worry that the realities of collecting political money force politicians to spend ever more of their time raising funds rather than attending to public policy and the affairs of state. Political campaigns and public relations efforts have become so dominant, and the need for expert professional management of political programs so strong, that politicians and their handlers must undertake 'permanent campaigns' (Blumenthal, 1980): ongoing promotional efforts based on *continuous, strategic* study of the public. Information gathered through such studies is used to design appeals that might prove effective, if not for a current campaign, then as a means of positioning 'permanent campaigners' for the next battle. Continuous public relations work promotes candidates' visibility and prestige in subsequent elections. With the emergence of the permanent campaign, public communication comes to be dominated by ongoing strategic battles between rival propaganda machines.¹¹

The emergence of economic justification of political goals derives from the rationalizing force of the New Public. Constant, calculating attention to money – working to collect large sums and to spend them in accord with proven techniques – encourages political leaders to think of monetary support as a valid measure of what people want. Money becomes a measure of social values as well as the symbolic guarantor of claims to speak in the public interest. Paraphrasing Schmerz: 'they pay me to say what I say and therefore my message is sincere'.

Professional culture and the politics of victory

The rationalization of electoral campaigns has had profound effects on American political culture. Although campaigns to influence public opinion display rationalized political techniques, the logic of elections, which can be stated in measurable units of money and power, lends itself to a particularly clear account of the rational mode.

The new culture of campaign management starts from the premise that campaigns should be designed and managed by trained, expert professionals who are capable of using rational systematic methods in a disciplined manner. Professional campaigns are managed by people who are well versed in knowledge of how to run effective and efficient projects. *Effective* campaigns are campaigns that win elections; there is no other measure. *Efficient* campaigns persuade voters at minimum cost per vote. These definitions call for rational allocation of funds according to calculations of the optimal combination of means for achieving the maximum number of votes possible within limits set by available funds. This style of thinking is manifest, for example, in consultants' common advice to candidates: work first to get your loyal supporters out to vote, for such a strategy is effective and relatively cheap (Beaudry and Schaeffer, 1986). On the other hand, do not work in precincts dominated by the other side, because if you succeed in creating a visible threat, your opponents' base voters will come to the polls to defeat you. Let them remain complacent and isolated in their own neighborhoods.

In this system, voting, not money, is the indisputable measure of value. To win power is the end, money the means. Money as a measure of value enters indirectly into calculations of political worth, because low cost per vote is the measure of political efficacy. Accordingly, means are selected so as to maximize efficient allocation of the resources for winning, with little attention to a larger range of civic values. The standards for rational campaigning allow political operatives to make arguments parallel to market-oriented justification of questionable practices in the business economy. Just as businessmen can argue that they must make a profit in order to survive and that in a market system the survivors are those who supply what people want, winning campaigns entails appealing to voters. Accordingly, advocates of this point of view claim that winning requires discovering what people want and promising to provide it.

Arguing backwards from these same premises, practitioners can claim that winners must have provided what people most wanted. Moreover, wants can be inferred by calculating which appeals produce the most votes per dollar spent. Winning proves one right!

In summary, in American electoral politics, the culture of the New Public calls for commitment to victory through rationally planned campaigns driven by research-based data and systematically calculated costs. This

leads professional operatives to define their means in strictly utilitarian terms. Will it work? Is it cost effective? In consequence, once a seasoned professional takes charge of a campaign, the doctrine of professional management and the force of practices based on systematic rational planning drive out alternative concepts and suppress broad definitions of the varied civic ends of the electoral process.¹² Strong focus on votes and victory devalues other aims such as disseminating ideas, placing serious issues on the public agenda and securing authentic public discourse.

The scheme is, of course, circular and tautologous but it is consistent within its own premises – assumptions and theories that allow professional consultants to engage in well-spun, if dubious, apologetics for the New Public. Richard Wirthlin, a prominent consultant, wrote

... the ultimate consequence of the rise of the campaign consulting industry is not found in the power of the candidate, but rather in the power of the voter. Through the medium of television a candidate now has more direct access to the voter's living room than ever before, and because of modern survey research the campaign and the candidate know more precisely what the hopes, fears and aspirations of the voters are. (Foreword to Luntz, 1988: x)

What is discussion?

Reference to the 'varied civic ends' of discussion implies a critique of current standards of public debate. What criteria for effective civic debate are implied by praising television as an ideal medium for public messages? What of claims that current political television, if not ideal, is at least adequate to its social ends? Advocates argue that the purpose of public discussion is to establish forums for persuasive communication, and any forum that provides advocates with capacity to persuade serves the ends of democratic decision-making. Are there no ends for public life that call for criteria of civic values beyond persuasion by any available means?

Habermas' philosophy of communication may suggest several criteria of effective, responsive discussion aimed at ends other than immediate victory. Indeed, for Habermas, formulas for winning are outside the boundaries of what he calls 'communicative action'. Rational techniques for victory, without regard for the normative regulation of means, fall into the realm of 'strategic' or 'instrumental action'. To value only rational means to acquire power at minimum cost is to ignore the civic implications of propaganda designed to persuade unwitting citizens.

Habermas' theory stresses the importance of tools of democratic discussion that derive from the logic of authentic rational communication. I suggest that civic discourse implies: (1) an effective voice for everyone, not just those with adequate resources to purchase media time; (2) unconstrained public discussion of competing views on civic policy; (3) presentation of two-

way, two-sided public conversations; (4) discourse based on normative assumptions about authentic communication. Unless public debate can be accepted as sincere, participants cannot know whether to believe what others say. Confidence in forums for civic discussion rests on the normative regulation of discourse – on confirming that lying, misrepresentation and concealing ulterior aims go beyond the proper limits of civic persuasion.

Discourse and the theory of signaling

Habermas' strict theory of communication is, of course, a utopian scheme. Discourse cannot be entirely free of constraint. There is too little time, too little interest in debate, too much temptation to overstate – even too little ready money for communication – to support continuous discursive debate in which every possible question can be brought to the table at any time. Formats short of discursive purity, but mindful of the ideals of honest face-to-face discussion, should supply our rules for democratic deliberation.

The problems posed by inadequate yet complex information have been examined in the context of modern signaling theory, which complicates, but also enlightens, our understanding of abbreviated debate. Contemporary signaling theory in political science is best understood within a framework for political analysis introduced by Downs (1957). In Downs' scheme, citizens do not maximize their information. In order to avoid excessive cost of time and effort, voters seek only enough information to become reasonably confident that their choices fit their interests, a process known as 'satisficing'.

Information received as 'signals' is partial. Signals stand for a larger body of information that would be difficult and costly to digest in full. Most signals refer not to *substantive* messages, but to information about the *sender* of the message. Audiences can then assess the credibility and social backing of speakers from information regarding their credentials: their statuses, affiliations, achievements and attitudes. Signals economize the search for information. For example, voters can evaluate a proposed initiative by using information provided in official voters' handbooks, which print arguments pro and con proposed measures. But some voters may elect not to read the actual arguments; it is enough to know what organizations the authors of the arguments represent. Recent studies show that this shorthand technique can duplicate the pattern of voting among similar voters who do read the arguments (Lupia, 1994).

Advocates of economic theories of political dialogue and voting take comfort in the theory of signals. If low-cost shortcuts allow people to make political decisions that effectively represent their underlying interests, attitudes and values, why should we try to make campaigns more deliberative? Why not rely on sorting people's values by appealing to signals which,

though they might consist in misleading claims and vacuous promises, can satisfy voters' desire to vote with confidence for the candidates they would have voted for anyway? I have heard colleagues affirm that a signal-dependent electoral system constitutes a 'democracy of sorts'. If so, we already have a democratic order based on imperfect but adequate communication. According to this view, appeals provided through managed television campaigns allow interests to be represented and voters to choose.

Those who would prefer more deliberative political discourse must re-evaluate discursive standards that demand perfect communication, for such standards are impossible to achieve. On the other hand, practitioners of the new public politics cannot plausibly claim that there is no standard of discourse beyond successfully connecting with citizens. Such a position leaves no platform for criticizing deliberate lying (which, after all, may send an effective signal of where a candidate stands), or willful obfuscation or refusal to answer questions. In such a system, there is little place for responsibility to the values implicit in the enterprise: no normative regulation to constrain absolute commitments to victory, no impetus to replace effectiveness and efficiency as the sole criteria for selecting campaign practices.

The New Public in the USA: model or exception?

The techniques of persuasion in the American New Public appear to be diffusing around the world. Polls, political consultants and a host of related roles are quite visible in the electoral processes of Western European nations and in several third-world states as well.

Functional adaptation to the requisites of television

The New Public bears the hallmarks of modernity: rational calculation, systematic planning, openness to new technology and addressing messages to individuals within a mass society. Some observers claim that what seems to be diffusion of American political techniques ('Americanization') is better interpreted as a world-wide, practical adaptation to the political possibilities and demands of television (Negrine, 1996: 146–66; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 1996). Ideas and models may, indeed, be influenced by foreign examples, but diffusion takes place only when innovations are adjusted and absorbed within a unified complex of functioning institutions.

The rise of television drives the modernization of communication and, in consequence, promotes international convergence of communicative practice. What accounts for the gravitational force of television and explains

the gathering of political institutions around it? Some would attribute the sway of television to the power of the image, but television may not be intrinsically more persuasive than other media. One or another medium has been a central force in public life for the last 150 years: party newspapers in the 19th century, radio from the 1920s to the 1950s and television since the election of Eisenhower. The rise of television in politics reflects its popular success and, therefore, its effective reach. Television is easy to watch, and its familiarity as entertainment sets the stage for its comfortable use as a forum for debate (Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 1996).

Effective use of television requires mastery of supporting bodies of technical knowledge and skills. Hence the institutions of the New Public proliferate when political consultants take over the management of campaigns and ground their efforts on the professional work of media consultants, opinion experts and campaign designers.

The USA is, to be sure, an international source of ideas and technology, but other nations adapt American practices to the political and institutional realities of their home ground. This is why students of comparative politics often refer to the international effects of American practices as 'cosmetic'. Such common European institutions as parliamentary government, proportional representation and strong political parties are said to dominate, absorb and soften the impact of American methods (Alexander and Shiratori, 1994; Butler and Ranney, 1992).

The American exception

American political habits may be effective adaptations to modern communication, but they also reflect distinctive features of the American ethos. The principal limitations to exporting American practice include both incompatibility with other nations' fundamental political procedures *and* the distinctive character of America's own political institutions.

The quasi-sacred status of individual and corporate rights in American libertarian values – rights to freedom of speech, association and assembly – undermines effective regulation of both electoral campaigns and pressure politics. Malbin and Gais (1998: 14) have tabulated the forms of campaign regulation adopted by the 50 American states as of 1996. The most widely used method (all 50 states) requires *disclosure* of at least some financial information; 35 states place limits on contributions from individuals and 32 limit contributions from *political action committees* (PACs). Only 19 states restrict contributions from political parties and only 12 provide for *public financing* in conjunction with *spending limits*. I take this pattern to reveal the ideological slant of American campaign reform. Libertarian values readily support the public's right to know but, for fear of impeding free speech, are less favorable to limits on private contributions. Limits on

party contributions raise further questions regarding the principle of free association. Finally, spending limits impose a yet heavier burden on free speech, even if speech is subsidized by public funds.

An exceptionally strong rights-oriented framework for political debate arose within the context of constitutional litigation. Limitations on regulation of debate reached a climax in the Buckley case (already remarked on), which equated speech and money, an equation that promoted and solidified the role of money in politics and gave yet stronger if still incomplete legitimacy to accepting money as a measure of political support and social value.

The distinguishing features of exceptional American ideas derive from distinctly American cultural premises. The polity of the USA honors strict observance of written constitutions. State and national constitutions lay out 'fundamental' rights, including rights to free speech and association. This constitutional tradition tends toward absolute conceptions of political rights, even among jurists steeped in the pragmatic American interpretive practice known as 'balancing interests'. *Buckley v. Valeo* could have come to a different outcome had the court seriously weighed the respective values of a fair electoral process involving meaningful forums for political discussion and the constitutionally enshrined values of free speech and association. European nations can impose stronger regulation of political practices in the name of achieving a valid civic process, but, with its exceptional approach to political rights, the USA holds to a cultural premise which is so permissive as to promote approaches that other nations attempt to restrain.

Measures to improve elections

European democracies regularly employ measures to improve debate, ensure equal competition and avoid electoral corruption. Western-style democracies on other continents also restrict campaign practices to achieve similar ends. Such measures include limiting the duration of campaigns, providing equal time and access to electronic media, publicly funding campaign costs and encouraging national forums for debate among major political leaders.¹³

Efforts to improve the democratic character of electoral processes are not, of course, always successful. Regulations may be too weak and riddled with loopholes to force substantial change. Indeed, the special sway of television in modern elections appears to have 'Americanizing' effects despite regulatory efforts. This trend is particularly strong when the persuasive techniques of television lead to emphasis on individual candidates rather than party slates. The rise of private, commercial television in place of state-sponsored programming also stimulates more unregulated funds and private candidates.¹⁴ Nevertheless, European democracies are not burdened

by the presumption that electoral regulation is an abuse of political freedom. Accordingly, efforts to reform politics are legitimate and continue to press forward, whereas in the USA opponents of serious reform enjoy the leverage provided by ideological commitments to the legitimacy of utterly 'free' processes.

American attitudes are at odds with the political cultures of those democratic nations that accord more weight to freedom of association (through political parties) than to absolute freedom of speech. A very different view of public finance sometimes prevails in European nations with strong political parties nourished by proportional representation and little emphasis on individual candidates. In such systems, political parties become links between the state and civil society. Citizen contributions to their parties form civic links that, in theory, should be as strong as the links between parties and the state. Monetary support from citizens constitutes a vital sign of the health of the state-party-society triad. This approach to free processes promotes collective institutional arrangements rather than simply protecting the importance of individual rights (Castillo, 1994; Gidlund, 1994).

National values do not determine political outcomes by any simple formula, but they leave their marks on the highest cards in the deck. These cards are particularly easy to play when opponents of campaign reform can fall back on ideological formulas that equate monetary measures of social support with evaluations of social worth.

Notes

1. For a classic account of the rise of the cost of politics, see Heard, 1960. For representative examples of contemporary literature on the corruption of politics by money, see Clawson et al. (1998) and Lewis and the Center for Public Integrity (1998). Unfortunately, this genre is marred by a strong political and ideological animus. Business money is said to corrupt politics and to ensure that social evils are allowed to escape regulation. There is little systematic recognition that both sides of political controversies have some measure of sincere commitment to the social order as they see it, varied ulterior motives and limited capacities fully to achieve their ends.

2. The foregoing narrative follows the reporting of the *Sacramento Bee* (3–4 April 1998).

3. For a useful review of legal issues and arguments regarding the regulation of campaign finance, see Lowenstein (1995: esp. 477–544).

4. The Court's opinion rests on a decisive distinction between *contributions* and *expenditures*. Limits on contributions were deemed constitutional but limiting expenditure would burden political speech beyond the constitutional authority of the state.

5. My skeleton outline of the 'concept of influence' is based in part on Parsons' (1967) classic paper by that name.

6. In so brief a statement, I have necessarily presented an idealized concept. In the ongoing arena of persuasion, influence is supported by everything that engenders confidence among an audience – social and economic status, the authority of position and bonds of personal loyalty.

7. Radio once played the part now centered in television. Some contemporary modes of campaigning were developed during the age of radio. For example, the use of tracking polls to choose and refine messages with a demonstrated capacity to attract voters. See Caro's (1990) account of Lyndon Johnson's 1948 campaign for the US Senate.

8. In the wake of the success of the tobacco industry's successful assault on regulation of their business, the burgeoning 'managed care' segment of the health care industry began to develop a similar 'grassroots', indirect strategy featuring public advertising designed to mobilize ideologically sympathetic constituencies (Neal, 1998).

9. The tobacco industry's willingness to contribute large sums of political money is the subject of a recent report by Public Citizen, an advocacy group that claims that the industry spent more than \$43 million on congressional lobbying during the first six months of 1998, employing 192 lobbyists and paying one politically connected lobbying firm alone more than \$7 million (Public Citizen, bulletin of 29 Oct. 1998). The industry also spent \$28.5 million just in California in unsuccessful opposition to a ballot proposition that would have substantially raised cigarette taxes (*Sacramento Bee*, 4 Nov. 1998).

10. It is instructive to look at corporate expenses for political activities in relation to their expenditures on commercial advertising. For example, the largest advertisers spend about \$1.5 billion a year on promoting products, while the largest gifts to political action committees are between \$2 and \$3 million (Clawson et al., 1998: 124).

11. The cost of employing political consultants is sometimes offset by a secondary connection. Large outlays for engaging consultants (and their retinues of other campaign specialists) raise the stakes required of political competitors, but one study suggests that simply hiring a consultant to manage campaigns increases candidates' ability to raise money. Donors apparently view such a move as a signal of serious potential (Thurber, 1998).

12. The foregoing analysis is largely based on interviews with a number of professional political managers in both Sacramento and Washington, DC and on participation in the 1998 Political Campaign Management Institute of the University of California at Davis. The instructional staff of the Davis Institute is comprised of active professional consultants and many of the participants are current or prospective political candidates.

13. For example, the British party broadcasts (Party Political Broadcasts and Party Election Broadcasts) qualify as 'forums for improving debate'. Though such broadcasts do not foster direct debate between the parties, they do provide purposes and settings to encourage serious discourse. See Negrine (1994: 170–2).

14. Italy (Gundel, 1992) and Japan (Curtis, 1992) provide especially noteworthy illustrations of the impact of both the individualization of candidacies and private commercial television.

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