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## Book Review: Dollarocracy: How the Money and Media Election Complex is Destroying America. By John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney with a foreword by Senator Bernie Sanders.

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*Dollarocracy: How the Money and Media Election Complex is Destroying America.* By John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney with a foreword by Senator Bernie Sanders. New York: Nation Books, 2013, 339p. (hardback) ISBN 978-1-56858-707-3. US List \$26.99/\$30 CAN.

Democracy lives on information. How citizens acquire the knowledge they need to make informed decisions is a critical measure of the efficacy of any democracy. In *Dollarocracy*, John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney measure the health of American democracy, and their diagnosis suggests a corpus in need of emergency medical care. They tell us how we protracted this plutocratic cancer of moneyed power in the body politic, and they point the way to possible cures. It may be true that those with the gold make the rules, but these authors give the rest of us a goldmine of information to wage the perennial battle for democratic communication. In nine chapters, the authors lay out the decline of democracy. They make the case that developments which have weakened participation, voting power, and civic action, while smoothing the ascendancy of the power of the dollar, have resulted from deliberate steps taken by those who do not wish their power or wealth to be undermined by public participation. Sen. Sanders, in his introduction, gives readers an insider's perspective on the power of money in politics and how that combines with the decline of serious journalism to shape a government easily dominated by elites.

Of course, the role of mass media in filtering information to voters about candidates is nothing new. As the authors note, 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S. newspapers were known for their affiliation with political parties and candidates. Readers expected partisanship. A number of scholars have compared that period to our current landscape of segmented television narrowcasting based on political orientation. One reason our current mediated reality is perhaps more dangerous than the earlier partisan press period is that the consuming public has not fully caught on to it. That is, the public expects objective reporting from the personalities sitting behind those anchor desks. This disconnect allows propaganda to pose as journalism with profound implications.

Journalists have always played a gatekeeper role in either providing or denying candidates' access to the public. Besides what has been called the "money primary," which reporters use to determine the likelihood of a candidate emerging from the pack, there is the "media primary" in which journalists make their own determination about electability and then give truth to the prophecy through their own filters. The "money primary" mentioned above is the assessment early in the campaign season of the ability of a candidate to raise money. This was an indication not only of a candidate's ability to get their message out through political ads, hire staff and consultants, travel, etc., but it was also seen as an early indication of popular support. But times have changed, as the authors document. Newt Gingrich was about to disappear from the 2012 GOP primaries before he got a life-support donation from Sheldon Adelson, allowing him to stay alive through the South Carolina primary. Emblematic of the new order described by the authors, the "money primary" now might just indicate the ability to make a phone call to a single donor.

The Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United v. FEC* decision, which opened up the floodgates of corporate money in campaigns, has made it possible for one of the top 1% of multi-millionaires to field candidates for the rest of us to choose from. Money has traditionally played a major role in politics. But the authors make a strong case that we are in a qualitatively different

moment now. They document in Chapter 2 that the total spent on the 2012 election season was not just the \$2.5 billion spent by the Obama and Romney campaigns, but an additional \$7.5 billion spent by third-party organizations. Adding up the totals estimated from those groups and the amounts spent on primaries, state and local races, and referendum campaigns, the authors conclude that 2012 was a \$10 billion election extravaganza.

The bulk of that money, they note, was spent on TV advertising, some 84% of it negative, according to one study. The ubiquitous snowstorm of political advertising, combined with dramatic cuts and layoffs of journalists, meant that the voting public was now trading information for propaganda. By the time the elections rolled around, many had been turned off by the constant noise, particularly the attack ads. Voter turnout in 2012 was 52%, down from 58% in 2008. Those at the top of the Dollarocracy would like to see it lower. They would subscribe, the authors note, to the claim by one of the nation's founders, John Jay, who said, "Those who own the country ought to govern it."

Jay, a federalist, was the first chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, but he was far from the last justice who held this elitist, anti-democratic view. The authors devote a significant portion of one chapter to the role of the Supreme Court in writing the rulebook for the Dollarocracy. They cite a number of cases that set precedent for the *Citizens United v. FEC* decision, permitting unlimited campaign spending by organizations not officially affiliated with campaigns. In 1976, *Buckley v. Valeo* reversed a number of controls on money in federal elections which had been passed by Congress only three years earlier in the wake of Watergate. Then came *First National Bank of Boston v. Bellotti* in 1978, which overturned a Massachusetts law prohibiting corporations from financing campaigns on referendum issues that did not directly affect them. Justice Lewis Powell, in writing the majority opinion, used the Bellotti case to assert an inherent First Amendment protection for corporations. A number of cases since the early 1970s, beginning with *Bigelow v. Virginia*, overturning Virginia's law against advertising abortion services, had opened the Pandora's box of viewing some commercial speech as First Amendment-protected speech (a notion that had been rejected for the prior 200 years of jurisprudence).

In chapter 3, "The Architects of Dollarocracy," the authors discuss the judicial history of corporate political speech, but with an eye toward the evolving political strategy of the business moguls who were increasingly concerned about the widening franchise and the political activism of the 1960s. Just months before Richard Nixon nominated Lewis Powell for the Supreme Court, Powell had emerged as one of the chief architects in the corporate attempt to maintain unchallenged power. In a memo circulated to business leaders and delivered in part to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in late 1971, Powell laid out a blueprint for reasserting corporate control of the American political system. The memo did not become public until a year after his confirmation. The document spelled out a plan that included the creation of conservative think tanks, monitoring of the media, and the use of the courts to protect and expand the free market system and defend business against its adversaries.

The court's complicity in permitting what the authors call the "money and media election complex" is one part of the story. Add to it, as the authors do, the demise of journalism in an increasingly oligopolistic media industry, the gerrymandering of districts to assure incumbent success, the defeated attempts at publicly financed elections or free airtime for candidates, and

the outrageous attempts to suppress the votes of all except the privileged, and you end up with a pretty depressing and hopeless array of obstacles to democratic reforms.

Yet, our eternally optimistic authors, who, it should be noted, are also committed activists, refuse to yield to despair. They suggest a number of reforms to rescue democracy, and they take heart in the growing sentiment for what they see as the fundamental core of a reform movement. That is the battle for the right to vote, including a constitutional amendment asserting that right. That may seem a tough path since it requires overcoming a media and money system that the authors just spent the prior 254 pages describing as a powerful behemoth that writes its own rules. The authors, however, make a forceful argument that the vote is a critical source of power available to the 99%—one we can wield effectively for the public good, should we choose to do so.

Why read this book? Well, you have two authors who bring readers a virtually unmatched mastery of media scholarship and progressive political journalism. They are not just scholars and journalists; they launched Free Press, which developed into a powerful movement, crossing political lines to push back against media monopolization. They connect with the labor movement, Occupy, media reformers, and many more groups who seek to revitalize democracy. And they have put together a detailed, readable account that we might think of as the antidote to the Powell memo—a rich source of information and a clarion call to win back from the corporate elite a government of, by, and for the people.

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