
Taking the Money Out of Politics

Summary

It's no secret that money controls the American political process. Nor is it surprising that the results are frequently detrimental to our health, our environment, and even our economy. The question is: *What can we do about it?* Fortunately, there is an answer. This article shows how we can use the Web to make money *irrelevant* to the political process, and why it is critical that we do so. [26 pages]

by **Eric Armstrong**

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Introduction

The first section of this article surveys many of the problems faced by American society today—problems that either fundamentally stem from, or are held in place by, the impact of money in the political process. This information comes as no surprise to many. There may be argument over the details, but there is little question that money—especially corporate money—plays too large a role in the American political system.

Note:

This article summarizes information that will be available in my forthcoming book: *Your Health, Your Democracy: A Guide for Taking Charge*. (For more information, see the [Resources](#) section.)

Facing Our Problems with Courage and Optimism

The problems we face are fairly well known. But while it's possible to confront a problem with courage and optimism when we know of a solution, it's extraordinarily difficult to do so when we know of none. In such circumstances, we generally we try not to think about it. While it's not a very successful strategy for dealing with a problem, it's a psychological strategy that lets us cope.

However, the really serious sense of despair sets in when we start thinking that maybe the system is so fundamentally broken that it's *impossible* to fix. That's when we really want to stick our head into the proverbial sand. The sections that follow could easily induce a sense of despair, because they identify so *many* of the problems we face.

In an effort to prevent that emotional nosedive, let me try to create a feeling of optimism right at the outset, by way of a question:

If: you could easily get the information you need to vote wisely, all from people you *trust*, and you could get it all in one place—and *if you knew that you were making democracy stronger in the process*—would you do it, and would you vote?

If you answered "Yes" to that question, then we *can* take the money out of politics. You only need to access a voting information system, get the recommendations and other information you need to make an informed decision, and then cast your vote. As a voter you not only gain convenience, you gain confidence as well—and in the process you empower a whole new breed of politics based on votes, rather than money.

The right kind of system will make it easy for you to get advice from people you trust. It will be easy to find advisors, so you have recommendations for every race and ballot measure. You won't need to take those recommendations blindly, either. You'll be able to examine the reasons your advisors give, and decide whether or not you want to take their recommendations. In many cases, you'll be able to view short video segments that explain your advisor's position, as well.

That system, which I've called the Citizens' Advisory, can produce a *thoughtful democracy*. That's the kind of democracy we need to solve the problems we face. After all, non-profit organizations and analysts spend most of their time examining issues, evaluating proposals, and thinking through their implications. So they're pretty knowledgeable.

Voters, on the other hand, are generally much less knowledgeable. If you're an average voter, you spend a few minutes at a time making a decision, here and there, over the course of an election when

you hear political advertising. Then you spend an hour or two the night before trying to figure out what to about issues and candidates you've never heard of.

You *want* to make a good decision. But how do you know if you made the right one? Most of the information you get comes from the politicians—people who are trying to sell you on their qualifications and their ideas. You'd like to trust them. But taking them at their word sometimes feels like trusting a used car salesman—they're *telling* you that the car is in great shape, but how do you *know*, unless you have your mechanic check it out?

Putting More Thought into the System

A voting information system can make it easier to get expert advice, so it can definitely make the process of voting more thoughtful—for the people who actually use it. But what if only a handful of people use it? Until there are enough people using the system to determine the outcome of election, money will continue to dominate the political process. The question is: Will *enough* people use the system to remove money from the political equation and establish a thoughtful democracy?

If you can see yourself answering "Yes" to my earlier question, then we can use the *induction hypothesis* (also known as *faith in human nature*) to show that the Citizens' Advisory system will be widely used. That result can then be used to show that the system will achieve its goals. The argument goes like this:

- **Induction:**
 - The Citizens' Advisory would be helpful to me. I would use it.
 - Others are like me (I'm human, after all).
 - Therefore others would use it, too.

- **Synthesis:**
 - Knowledgeable organizations and experts who spend their time examining issues and their implications will give *thoughtful* advice.
 - A system that brings expert advisors and voters together (at the discretion of the voters) produces a *thoughtful democracy*—provided there is widespread participation.

- **Conclusion:**
 - By the induction hypothesis, we know that participation *will* be widespread.
 - Therefore, a system that brings advisors and voters together, making participation convenient and effortless, will be widely used and will produce a thoughtful democracy.

In other words, when we build that system, we *can* take the money out of politics. Besides, even if we achieve only partial success, we will improve the political process to some degree—and the process can *certainly* use improvement!

With that thought in mind, let's explore the subject of money and politics and see why it's a bad mix.

We *Must* Get the Money Out of Politics

This section points out why it is imperative that we succeed in our quest. It's a matter of survival, and a matter of global responsibility. But perhaps the most critical reason of all is that there are viable solutions to the problems we face that are currently not being pursued in any serious way.

There are many reasons for this situation, but the *root* of the problem is the money in politics. Money by itself may not be the root of all evil, but money in politics often is.

It's a Matter of Survival

Corporations have done a lot of good. They're also doing a lot of harm. A corporation is like a chainsaw. It's a powerful tool, and you can get a lot done with it. But if you don't have it under control, it can rip your leg off. Right now, *corporate influence has no counter-balance*. Because that system is running out of control, our very survival is threatened:

- **Deteriorating health.** America faces epidemic levels of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer—largely as a result of the partially hydrogenated oils and high fructose corn syrup that are virtually ubiquitous in the American diet. They're in nearly everything that Americans consume. In effect, these ingredients are metabolic poisons. The science is well known. Yet the food industries continue using them, along with other harmful ingredients, because they are more profitable than traditional ingredients. Meanwhile, drug companies reap windfall profits from drug sales, even when natural remedies work just as well—or better—with no side effects.
- **Environmental destruction.** Species are going extinct at an alarming rate. Millions of acres of habitat are lost every year. Coral reefs are being destroyed. Fishing nets no longer bring up big fish, as a result of water pollution and over fishing. Mercury poisoning affects most of the remaining fish. Meats are loaded with pesticides, herbicides, growth hormones, and antibiotics. Soils are eroded, depleted, and left for dead. Oil spills kill entire ecologies. The ozone layer is being destroyed. Global warming produces increasingly violent hurricanes, droughts, and storms. The problem is that *corporations don't know when to stop*. There is never *enough* profit for a corporation.
- **Deteriorating working conditions.** With all the marvelous machinery, tools, and computer technologies we've invented, American productivity is now at the highest levels they have ever been in a long and prestigious history of productivity. But if productivity has increased so much, why are we working so hard? The average American now works 160 more hours per year often at multiple jobs, while making *less* in inflation-adjusted wages. ^[Hill, 205. Schwartz, 18-20] The proposal for a 30-hour week, so close to being achieved in the 1930's and 1940s, has virtually disappeared, and neither unions nor government are powerful enough to reinstate it.
- **Destruction of the economy.** In their quest for profits, corporations are laying off employees, exacting additional hours, engaging in highly questionable tax evasion schemes, and sending jobs offshore at an accelerating pace. Each corporation sees a small improvement in its bottom line as short term profits increase. But each such action *also* reduces the number of workers and the amount of wages they have to buy goods, which creates serious downward pressure on the economy in the long term. Step by step, as each corporation acts in its own best short-term interests, the economy lurches downhill towards long-term economic oblivion.

And those are just our *national* concerns. For those with a more global outlook, there are also serious international repercussions.

It's a Matter of Global Responsibility

America is at the forefront of economic power and military might. We love to export our democratic ideals and humanitarian concerns, and much of the globe could benefit from more of each. But at the same time, our system is far from perfect. Our democracy has devolved from a government run by

citizens into one that is increasingly run by corporations. Economies, environments, and even democracies are being destroyed in the process.

America's claim to moral leadership is called into question by the resulting destruction. Belief in that leadership is *necessary* to win the hearts and minds of people around the globe. Without a justifiable foundation for that belief, America will only be able to coerce, never lead, our enemies will never stop attacking, and our critics will never be silenced. Here are the problems we face:

- **Global economic degradation.** Globalization threatens economies around the world. To achieve maximum profits, money shifts from one market to another in a matter of minutes. There are no long term investments. As money shifts, jobs shift. That threat is making slaves out of third world citizens, who either work for subsistence wages and like it, or watch their jobs go to a neighboring country. There are horrific stories of child labor and concentration-camp working conditions—not only abroad, but in American inner cities. In the end, corporate America bears responsibility for much of those conditions, but pleads both ignorance and necessity—at the same time.
- **Destruction of democracy.** Then there are the so-called “international” trade agreements. Calling them “international” or “global” agreements makes them sound good, as though politicians around the world were hard at work hammering out their differences. But as we’ll see, the reality is otherwise. In fact, those agreements sometimes display blatant disregard for truly international resolutions that were drafted to ensure liberty and prosperity for everyone, everywhere around the globe. The courts that enforce those agreements are closed to public scrutiny, and *they have power to overturn local environmental legislation*. Indeed, they have already done so on numerous occasions. Local governments and even national governments as large as Canada and the United States have already weakened their environmental laws as a result of decisions made by those courts.
- **Devastating pollution.** Pollution knows no boundaries. Pollution *anywhere* affects people *everywhere*. Yet pollution is on the increase as a result of those court decisions, and the environmental cost is incalculable. Canada was told it had to remove warning labels that say cigarettes are harmful to your health. Mexico was forced to allow a company to start dumping toxic waste before the existing, cancer-inducing waste was cleaned up. The United States had to roll back environmental laws that protected turtles and dolphins because they were “anti-competitive”. In each case, either the government pays restitution and rescinds its laws, or else it pays millions of dollars in damages *every single day* for as long as the law remains in effect. At a single stroke, such decisions trample both on the environment and the rights of people to govern themselves.
- **Unchecked corporate power.** Because the enforcement comes from “independent”, “international” bodies that govern trade, giant corporations can point to them and say, “See. It's not us. It's them.” But in fact it's the corporations who are pulling the strings. It was corporations who created those agreements, and it is corporations who fund and control the international tribunals who make the decisions. There are no checks and balances on the exercise of corporate power in that forum. There is no legislative or executive branch, no elections, no right of review, and right to access, much less a free press. Corporations rule the roost—and most of the corporations are American corporations.
- **Corporations without a country.** At least, the most powerful of the giant conglomerates used *to be* American corporations. It's not entirely clear what they are anymore. They've found so many offshore tax havens for their profits and pay so little in taxes that they've all but abdicated any claim to being American. They love to take advantage of our roads, our educational

systems, and the political freedom to advertise and lobby our politicians, but their loyalty appears to stop short of actually paying for the privileges they enjoy.

The root causes of these problems can ultimately be traced back to the influence of money in politics. To solve these problems, we must eliminate money from the political equation. We owe it not only to ourselves, but to the world.

Potential Solutions *Do Exist*

We face serious problems, but we also have incredible opportunities. As serious as the problems are, there are also potentially viable solutions that promise tremendous benefits. The problem, of course, is that the prospective solutions aren't being seriously pursued. Here are some potential solutions that are receiving far too little attention:

- **Herbal and nutritional remedies.** Such remedies have the capacity to cure disease at low cost, with no side effects. More importantly, a "moon walk" project aimed at cleaning up the nutritional environment could prevent disease, add years of quality living to the normal lifespan, and reduce the amount of money we spend on health insurance and medical taxes. Removing harmful ingredients would be a first step. Investigating and promoting the advantages of traditionally preserved, fermented foods is another important step—because there is some evidence that our refrigerators may be killing us!
- **Renewable energy.** Renewable energy systems could be encouraged and nurtured. A slowly rising tax on gasoline over the last few decades would have funded much-needed research. It would also have made alternatives economically viable and desired by consumers, as happened during the oil embargo in the 1970's and the California energy crisis in 2003—both of which were all too short-lived. But to exercise such long-term vision requires a government that acts on behalf of society's interests, rather than vested interests—one that refuses to sacrifice our grandchildren's environment for a larger economy.
- **Sustainable agriculture.** Systems of sustainable agriculture like three-dimensional farming hold the promise to reforest the globe, preserve the soil, reduce water and energy use, and raise our quality of life, while being *more* productive than conventional farming that depends on tilling, fertilizing, and weeding. Genetic engineering could focus on creating self-reproducing crops based on wild seeds, rather than creating self-terminating seeds for crops that can withstand stronger pesticides and herbicides, which further poison the soil.
- **Sustainable lifestyles.** There are even alternative *lifestyles* that are more in harmony with nature. They tend to be less in harmony with a grand political economy, but perhaps it is time we investigated them more thoroughly. They represent a *different* way of living, but perhaps it is a *better* way of living. Perhaps our education system could be preparing people to engage in those lifestyles.
- **Financial reforms.** The trend towards financial deregulation that helped to produce the 1990 dot com explosion needs to be reversed. Those regulations were put in place after the stock market crash that led to the Great Depression of the 1930's, and they were successful until corporate pressure got them repealed. Offshore employment and offshore tax havens need strict regulations, as well. We must rescind the recently introduced "limited liability" partnerships for accounting and legal firms that allow partners to look the other way—and even *encourage* them to do so to keep from becoming liable. We need to rescind recent changes to patent laws that double the time in which a corporation enjoys a legal monopoly, keeping innovations out of the public domain and depriving society of the benefits of widespread use. We need to change our

laws so that corporations no longer keep two sets of books—one for the IRS and one for investors—like Chicago gangsters during Prohibition.

- **Tax reforms.** There are proposals for alternative taxation systems that hold great promise. Systems based on estate taxes, flat taxes, and resource utilization taxes could eliminate income taxes and the sales tax. They could eliminate tax evasion and motivate corporations to care for the environment. They could give government the funding it needs to monitor corporations effectively and to invest in Social Security and universal health care, along with research that benefits humanity rather than corporations. Perhaps most importantly, they could restore social equality, bridge the yawning gulf between rich and poor, and halt the disintegration of the middle class, which is sliding downward ever more quickly into the ranks of the poor.
- **Economic systems.** There are economic proposals that promise full employment, and which encourage altruistic behavior by corporations, rather than locking them into a cycle of environmental consumption and destruction based on the need to "produce or perish". Those proposals can form the basis of a *Progressive Capitalism* that lies on the mid-point between Communism (which failed because there was no incentive for individual endeavor) and Corporate Capitalism (which is headed toward catastrophic failure because it rewards corporations without limit, despite the cost to society). A system of Progressive Capitalism can achieve a true *balance*, rewarding individuals in ways that foster initiative, while limiting the harm that results from excessively rewarding exploitation. More than 130 years ago, those systems found their clearest and most compelling explanations in the writings of economist Henry George, although the basic principles were established centuries earlier.
- **Constitutional amendments.** Corporations have won rights in our courts that were originally intended for people. Corporate abuse of those rights is rampant. Chief among them is the "right of free speech", which allows advertising that is less than fully truthful, advertising that manipulates children, and excessive political influence. Currently, we can't curtail those rights without *also* curtailing personal liberties because, for now, corporations are considered *the same* as people. Clearly, corporations need *some* rights. Without them, business is impossible. Corporations also need a way to present their case to legislators, so their concerns are heard and considered. But we need constitutional amendments that clearly distinguish corporate rights from individual rights in order to prevent the abuses that are so clearly evident in today's society. And unlike human rights, which are deemed to be inalienable, we need to make it clear that corporate rights are in reality *privileges* granted by the government—privileges that can be revoked or suspended to redress corporate malfeasance, in the same way that serious criminal offenses by people receive a jail sentence, rather than a mere fine. (For a corporation, "jail" is a suspension of the right to do business for some period of time, and the corporate equivalent of capital punishment is a revoked charter.)
- **Voting systems.** Systems like *Instant Runoff** elections and proportional allocation of Electoral Votes would guarantee that the candidate who is eventually elected is the one that the majority of voters prefer. Systems like *Ranked Choice*** voting would provide substantially better representation for citizens who are concerned about the environment and human rights. Those systems were developed in the 20th century, long after our current system of Democracy was created. Those systems are being used successfully in other parts of the world in a sort of "Democracy, version 2.0". Many are being used locally in America. They're not theoretical ideas. They're practical, working realities. With such systems, an "alternative energy minority", for example, could become a small but important voice in Congress. Today, those voices are effectively silenced. They are frozen out of the political process, and are left crying out in the wilderness.

* **Instant Runoff** elections let you indicate your order of preference for the candidates. If a candidate you chose doesn't have enough votes to win, your vote goes to the *next* candidate on your list—so you never throw away your vote. You pick the candidates you like best first, even if they have no real chance of winning. You put acceptable candidates with a decent chance of winning at the end of your list. With that system, a vote for Nader in 2000 wouldn't have cost Al Gore the election.

** **Ranked Choice** voting is similar to Instant Runoff voting, except that you're electing multiple candidates instead of just one. You indicate your order of preference, and the way the votes are counted ensures that the winners are an exact reflection of the electorate's desires. You never waste your vote on a losing candidate; and when a candidate already has enough votes to get elected, your vote counts towards the *next* candidate on your list. The representative body that results is a truly proportional reflection to the population, the way John Adams suggested it *should* be in 1776.^[Adams, 66]

The Solutions Aren't Being Pursued

As it has been throughout history, society is faced with enormous problems. At the same time, many creative minds have identified solutions that promise a better future for ourselves, our children, and future generations. Those solutions aren't being pursued in any vigorous fashion, however. There do exist individuals and organizations who are working hard in areas. But neither of the truly powerful social mechanisms we have constructed—corporations and government—are actively pursuing the solutions. Here are some of the reasons for the neglect:

- **Corporations aren't interested.** There is *no incentive* for profit-seeking corporations to investigate such solutions. For example, our immediate health problems could largely be resolved with quality ingredients and nutritional remedies. But quality ingredients lower profits, and nutritional prevention pays nothing. (Except in China, where doctors are only paid when the patient *doesn't* visit.) Nutritional and herbal remedies, meanwhile, can't be patented, so they're not profitable. And corporations, naturally, are only interested in solving problems that make money.
- **Corporations have no choice.** Corporations aren't necessarily *evil*—although tobacco companies and food producers have evidenced a capacity to suppress the truth that seems to imply malicious intent—but the fact of the matter is that corporations have no *choice* but to focus on profit-generating activities. To do otherwise is to perish, because our winner-take-all economic system means that *only* corporations who continually keep growing can survive. But the drive to grow without restraint has been likened to cancer. The analogy is apt, because the unrestrained growth of corporations is, in very real ways, eating away at the environmental fabric that sustains our lives.
- **We have unknowingly created much of the problem ourselves.** Without recognizing it, we have been collaborating in the corporate focus on short term self interest. At the time, of course, we thought that corporations were providing a useful and valuable service by creating retirement accounts we could invest in. But as a result, billions of dollars are now in the hands of only five financial corporations. The money managers in those corporations watch their investments like a hawk. If any of them doesn't like what they see, they'll sell off the investment, which lowers the stock price. The drop in price then triggers an automated sell-off by the computerized portfolio-management programs that every other financial corporation employs. As the bottom falls out of the stock, it shuts off the corporation's lifeblood—the

capital it needs to expand and grow. As far as corporations are concerned, no one is investing in them for the long term, so they are *forced* to focus on short term profits.

- **Government restraint and government mandates are necessary.** The only choice corporations have is to focus on short term profit. So they're not going to engage in long term thinking that sacrifices immediate profits. In other words, corporations are *never* going to restrain themselves in the current economic climate. They'll never invest in unprofitable research, no matter how much benefit it may have for humanity. Clearly, they *need* external restraints and external mandates—the kind we depend on government to provide. When government sets rules that benefit its citizens, and makes *all* of the corporations follow those rules, then a corporation that *wants* to be a good corporate citizen is no longer at a competitive disadvantage.
- **Government doesn't have the money.** But government's capacity to act on citizen's behalf is severely limited, even when the need is obvious. Government agencies like the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and the IRS are so underfunded and understaffed that tax evasion schemes are rampant, costing the government *billions* of dollars. In addition to a lack of funding, political pressure prevents the IRS and SEC from pursuing such complicated schemes. Instead, more than half of IRS audits are directed at the little guy who "cheated" the government out of a few bucks—most often because he or she made a mistake. ^[Johnston, 130-138] Generally, after the mistakes are corrected, it turns out that they don't owe anything after all. Two thirds of the time, they get a refund. ^[Johnston, 136] The agencies *know* they could be more effective, but they're powerless to do anything about it.
- **Government's real constituents are corporations.** More and more, government is serving corporations rather than citizens. Money that the government spends on research primarily benefits corporations rather than society. Corporate lobbyists write much of the legislation that gets introduced, so they include little clauses like the one in the drug reform act that denies the government the right to negotiate prices. Legislators can't risk offending the corporations that finance their campaigns, so they can't toughen regulations or finance regulatory agencies. Organizations like Greenpeace fight to stem the tide but, as well-meaning and hard working as they are, they can't match the campaign contributions of a hundred corporations that profit by polluting and pillaging the environment.
- **Congress isn't listening.** Congress has all but closed its ears—even *when citizens express their concerns in record numbers*. On a long list of issues—including health care, social security, the minimum wage, and tax cuts—Congress has frequently acted in direct opposition to wishes expressed by a vast majority of the electorate. Our political system makes it possible, because politicians aren't truly accountable—they get away with saying one thing and doing another. They *say* what their constituents want to hear. They *do* what campaign-contributing corporations want done. (Fortunately, that is a problem that can be addressed with the Web-based system described in the next section.)
- **Citizens have no voice.** Citizens have virtually zero impact on corporations. Corporate decision-making systems are closed to citizen involvement. Ostensibly, citizens have the power to "vote with their pocketbook" by not buying a corporation's goods—but it can take decades before the general population becomes aware enough and outraged enough to take action, and too much harm is done in the meantime. Citizens have a similar lack of impact on politics, because corporate influence is so strong and because there is simply no good way for the average citizen to assess the *quality* of their politicians. The only measure they *have* is popularity—so all too frequently, sound bites, political organization, and professional perception management determine the outcome of elections, rather than substantive policies.

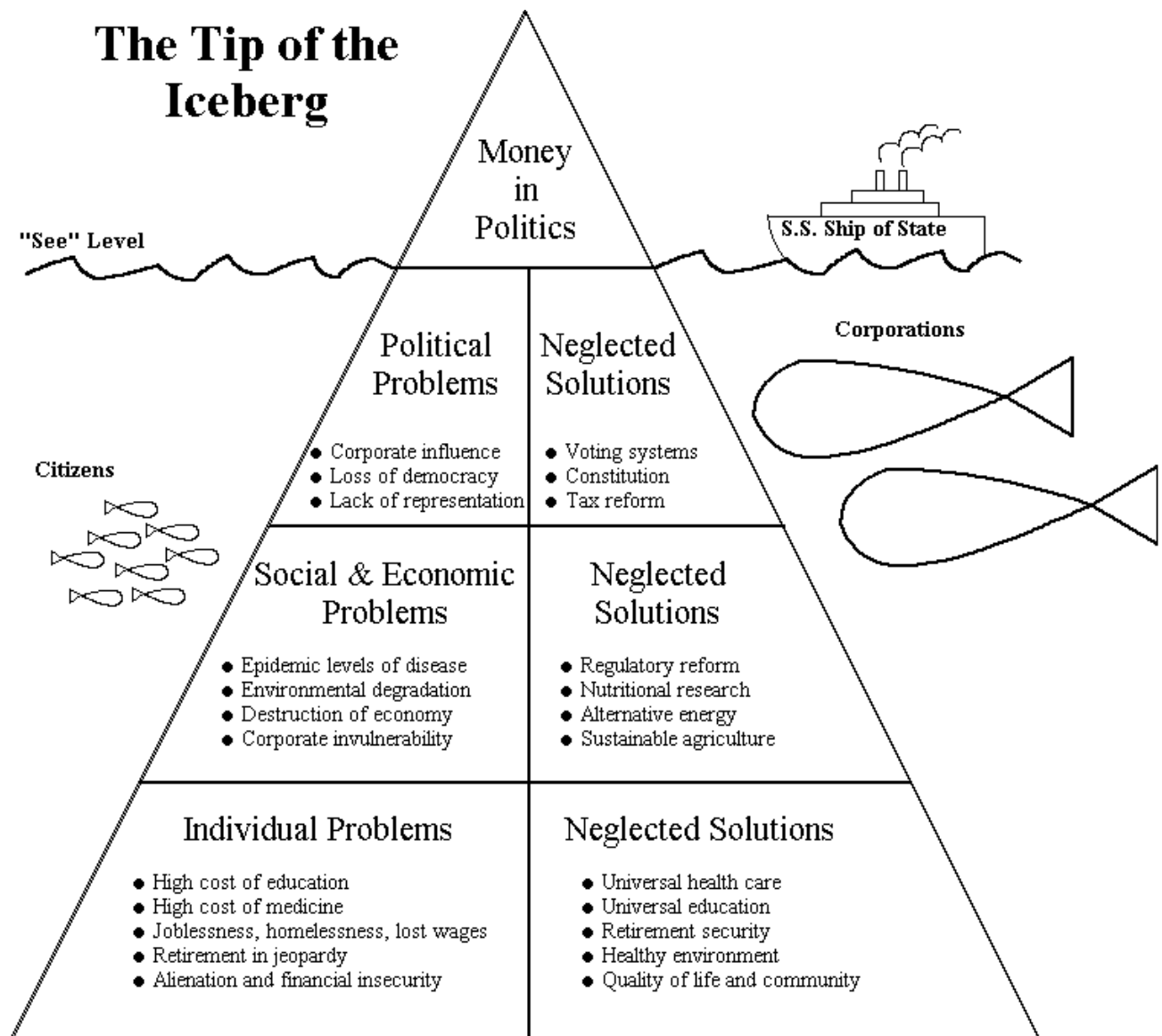
- **Citizens aren't represented.** Congress doesn't have to be composed *entirely* of Green party candidates. But we certainly need a *few* members of Congress who represent environmental concerns. That's the *essence* of representation—having someone in office who will stand up for your concerns. But the nature of our electoral system—based on single-winner geographic districts—makes it *impossible* to elect even one or two such representatives, because there is no single geographic district in which the Green party makes up a dominant percentage of the electorate. Because of that voting system, other "minority" voices go unrepresented, as well.

Note:

In *Newsweek* magazine, George T. Will argued that minority representation is unnecessary, and that the lack of minority representation is, in reality, a *good* thing. Here's my [Rebuttal](#) to his arguments.

Money in Politics Is the Tip of the Iceberg

This diagram collects the issues into a single, hopefully memorable picture:



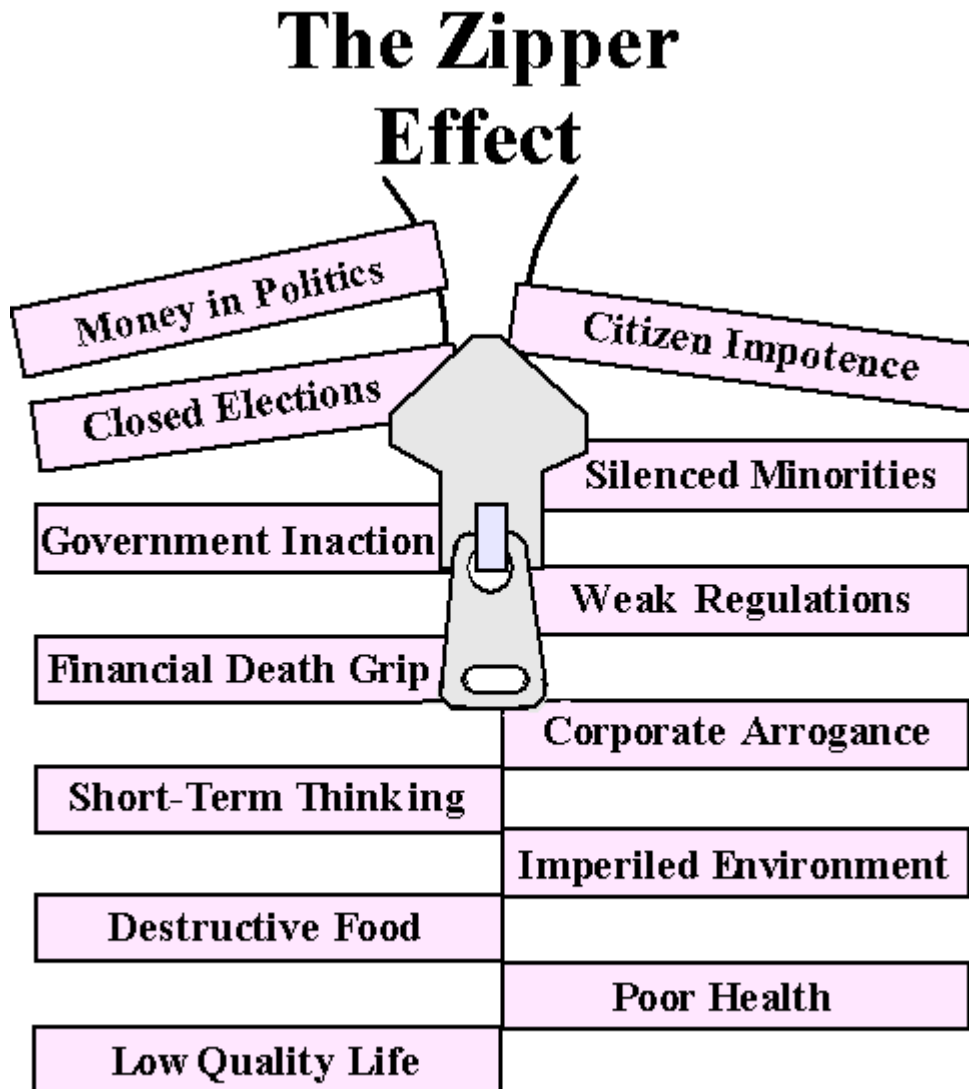
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The iceberg is a floating pyramid. As with the Titanic, this iceberg imperils the ship of state. The issue of money in politics is shown at the tip of the iceberg, floating above the "see" level—because the problems we citizens (the minnows) normally see are those that surround us in our environment. The corporations (whales), meanwhile, roam the seas at will, engulfing the minnows in their travels.

Taking the Money Out of Politics: The “Zipper” Effect

There is much to be proud of in America. But the problems we've discussed so far aren't going to go away. They're getting worse, and they'll keep on getting worse, *unless and until* we take action. But the problems can't be solved independently of one another, because they result from *interlocking* systems.

Like a zipper, each link in the chain holds the previous link in place. The good news is that the interactions aren't *circular*, with the last link in the chain held in place by the first. If they *were*, we wouldn't know where to begin. But the reality is that the links interlock in a single chain, like a zipper. If we tug at that zipper, and tug hard, we can begin to unravel the chain of interlocking connections.



Here are the major links in the chain:

- **Money in politics.** Neither people nor government is acting as a constraint on corporations. Instead, corporations are in the driver's seat. The requirement for massive amounts of money to win an election is an impediment to third-party candidates. It produces a Congress that only truly represents the rich. In fact, corporate money so totally controls the political process that even the "party of the people" (the Democratic Party) has been promoting corporate welfare for the past two decades.
- **Citizen impotence.** Public education, valuable as it is, isn't effective as a restraint on corporations, because of the enormous time lag from the time the science is known until the public becomes informed. In elections, the public lacks choices. Once elected, legislators are pretty much free to do as they like—except on rare occasions when citizens demand government action, *en masse*. Even then, citizens may be treated to extensive lip service rather than real action. At best, an informed citizenry gets government action only when there is "a clear and present danger", rather than whenever it is in the public's long-term interests.
- **Closed elections.** Single-winner elections without runoffs effectively preclude third-party candidates. The election process even makes it impossible to determine how much support the candidates *would* have, if it weren't for the fact that no one wants to throw away their vote. Single-winner geographic districts ensure that no third-party, minority candidate of any kind is ever elected anywhere there is a sizable population (Vermont excepted).
- **Silenced minorities.** The environmentally concerned, workers, and the globally conscious—along with other minorities—are frozen out of the political process. Lacking even minimal representation, there is no presence in government to initiate action on their concerns.
- **Government inaction.** The government is not an effective counter-balance to major corporations. In addition to weak regulations—often written by the corporations themselves—government lacks the resources to staff its agencies, largely because corporations have become so adept at evading taxes. Nor can government compete with corporate salaries. Legislators, meanwhile, are too dependent on corporate largesse to risk offending them, so there are few serious debates in the Halls of Congress.
- **Weak, ineffective, yet simultaneously excessive regulations.** Because those financial pressures are so severe, corporations will never restrain *themselves*. We therefore need an external counter-balance. But the regulations don't seem to apply to the major corporations, who frequently act in ways that are unconscionable. Small companies, meanwhile, suffer under the burden of excessive regulation that they can't escape, lacking the legal and financial resources necessary to find and exploit the loopholes.
- **Financial death grip.** Our financial systems not only *encourage* short-term thinking, they *require* it, because finance corporations have a death grip on the corporate throat, and can choke off its air supply at any given moment. Corporations, meanwhile, keep a death grip on their money, and starve government in the process. Government, corporations, and money mangers are therefore locked in a "deadly embrace" that presages a downward economic spiral—a death spiral, unless we act to intervene.
- **Corporate arrogance.** Corporations are driven to pursue selfish, short-term goals, to the exclusion of long-term impacts or the greater good, by their intense drive to achieve their quarterly profit goals. They even deem it admirable to avoid paying taxes, because it increases profitability—despite the harm it does to the communities that give it the workforce,

transportation systems, communications systems, and consumers that are responsible for its profits. That sense of entitlement, coupled with a selfish drive for self-aggrandizement and the belief that the consumer will swallow anything (as evidenced, for example, by advertisements that legally-mandated safety devices were installed because the corporation "cares") can only be described as corporate arrogance.

- **Short-term thinking.** Major corporations, at times *knowingly*, harm society in their quest for profit. Virtually *all* long-term goals are sacrificed to the need to make substantial profits *now*, including the potential for even greater profits that would accrue over time, were they to invest in more human-friendly, alternative technologies.
- **Imperiled environment.** The planet we live on is being taken apart, piece by piece, imperiling our very survival. We stand by, feeling helpless. Since we can't do anything about it, we try not to think about it. But while putting our collective heads in the sand is comforting, it does nothing to prevent the sands from shifting beneath our feet.
- **Destructive food.** Metabolic poisons have been introduced into the food supply because they're profitable. Along with other insults to the environment, these destructive foods are largely responsible for the recent epidemic of diseases.
- **Poor health.** As a result of their food and their environment, Americans face epidemic levels of disease, including obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.
- **Low quality of life.** Health care costs and insurance costs continue to rise. As jobs migrate overseas and as unnecessary layoffs reduce the workforce, the economy is decimated and the middle class further is squeezed for longer hours and lower pay with fewer benefits. Quality of life suffers.

We need to address *each* of the issues, of course. They're all important. But the most important issue of all is the one at the top of the chain—*because the issue of money in politics is the one that holds all of the others in place*. When we solve that problem, solutions to all of the other problems become possible. *Until* we solve that problem, our efforts have minimal effect. There is just nowhere to grasp the beast. It's too big, and too slippery.

Making that change not only enables solutions to our immediate problems, it also provides for the future, making it harder for corporations to escape the governance necessary to ensure that they don't harm society in their quest for profit.

It is apparent, then, that *solving the problem of money in politics is job number one*. It can be done. And working together, we will do it. That's the subject of the next section.

We Can Get the Money Out of Politics

The fundamental rule of gamesmanship is that if you're not winning the game you're playing, you change the game. In this case, corporations are running the government, citizens have virtually no voice, and third party candidates are frozen out of the political process. That's a process we need to change.

We *can* change that process—not by radically changing the current voting system, but by creating a new, Web-based system that makes citizens more powerful. The argument that such a system will be successful rests on a tripod:

- We can create a system that will be so convenient for voters to use that participation will be widespread.
- Individual and organizational advisors will emerge to guide voting choices, and gain steadily increasing influence in the process.
- The system is a practical possibility that is well within our current technological capabilities.

We Need an *Athenian* Democracy

Athens was the cradle for democracy. It was the original template from which all other democracies sprang. At the outset, Athenian democracy was characterized by extensive citizen involvement and lively debate—the kind of vigorous atmosphere that de Tocqueville observed when he visited America in 1835.^[Hill, xvi]

Today, however, voter turnout in America has dropped to astonishingly low levels. In local elections—those elections that affect citizens most directly—voter turnout of 8 or 9 percent is common. In national elections, only half of eligible voters make the effort, and sometimes less. In fact, more people watch the Super Bowl.^[Hill, vii]

We can restore voter participation, however, *if we make it convenient for citizens to vote wisely*. Both halves of that equation are important. The system must be convenient, but voters must also know that they are voting wisely.

We can create maximum convenience for voters by giving them the information they need to vote with confidence—and by making it so convenient and so effortless that it's a "no-brainer". (You don't even think about it. You just do it.) But the goal of the system isn't just to provide voters with information. The goal is to provide them with *recommendations*:

- Recommendations from advisors they *trust* backed by thoughtful and factual assessments, which can be accessed and reviewed by the voter, as desired.
- Recommendations for *every* candidate and issue, in the same order that they'll appear on the ballot.

The recommendations will come from *experts*—organizations and analysts who spend their professional lives investigating and understanding the issues they care about. After all, we rely on experts for everything else—to fix our computers and our cars, and to recommend investments—why shouldn't we rely on experts to make potentially the most portentous decisions we'll *ever* make, when we're voting?

In survival studies, the groups that fare the best are those that are most adept at identifying the members of the group who have the most expertise on any given subject, and who then *listen* to those members. In this case, the "group" is pretty much all of mankind and the survival situation we're facing is our continued existence on this planet in the face of shrinking ecosystems. So it only makes sense to identify and listen to the experts among us.

We Need to Eliminate Demagoguery

In one of Plato's dialogues, Socrates talks about how citizens in the Athenian forum used to base their decisions on the advice obtained from local experts. When they wanted to grow their navy, so-and-so the boat builder was the person they listened to. But then the demagogues arrived on the scene. They were eloquent orators, skilled at inflaming the crowd's emotions. Democracy, as

Socrates lamented, then devolved from a system of thoughtful government based on reason into one ruled by base passions and emotional appeals.

That manipulation of political processes to achieve the desired outcome regardless of sense or reason came to be known as *demagoguery*. In a very real way, American politics has become a haven for demagogues, based as it is on sound bite politics, advertising, and spin. In national elections, millions of dollars are spent to figure out what it is you want to *hear*. The policies don't change as a result of those surveys—only the way in which they're presented. The real effect of the policies may be quite different from what you're hearing, but you are guaranteed that what you hear will *sound* good.

Take the policy called “tax relief”, for example. It certainly sounds good. But its real effect is to save the average American a couple of dollars, while saving millions for the ultra-wealthy. You get a dollar. The billionaire gets a hundred million. Some relief! The net effect is to leave the government short of money, so services are reduced—until eventually the average American is forced to pay even *more* in taxes. That's just one example of a policy most people don't want that's been made to sound like one they do.

We Need In-Depth Analysis and Accountability

We need to get past surface appearances. When shopping for food, we need to base our decisions on what's in the box, not the pretty picture on the package. When buying a car, we need to inspect the engine and other moving parts. Similarly, when making political decisions, we need to know the real meaning of the policies that are being presented to us. We need to know if what we think we're buying is what we're actually getting.

To do that, we need to restore the kind of thoughtful deliberation that examines those policies from every angle before reaching a conclusion. But that is a time-consuming process. Most people don't have the time, inclination, or intestinal fortitude for it.

So what we need is a system in which *expert advisors* play a more significant role in the decision-making processes—a system in which *anyone* can be an expert advisor, but one which at the same time makes it easy for people to find the best and most suitable advisors. Those advisors can make a major contribution to the democratic process by sharing their assessment of policy proposals and their observations on our legislators, the legislative process, and government waste. In short, they can hold legislators *accountable* for their actions.

When we achieve that goal, we will have restored the best feature of the original template from which all other have democracies descended—the Athenian democracy that America's founders used as their role model.

We Can Create Such a *Thoughtful* Democracy

Today, American politics are very far from reasoned deliberation and thoughtful reflection. We face the same problem the Athenians did, more than 2000 years ago. But we have something they didn't have. We have a tool we can use to address the problem, and address it effectively. We have the Web.

The Web Can Help

The only way for the average voter to distinguish hype from reality is to rely on experts. We can use the Web to put voters in touch with those experts and get their recommendations. We can rank advisors by popularity, so that the best advisors rise to the top. And we can help a voter find

trustworthy advisors, by finding advisors that match strongly held views, and who provide thoughtful, well-reasoned recommendations for questions they haven't yet decided.

Creating that system puts a "wrapper" around the voting system that changes the way things work. It makes the current voting system as obsolete as the Electoral College. Like the Electoral College, the current voting system will still exist—but it becomes a system that *carries out* the wishes of the electorate, rather than the system that makes the decisions.

In some ways, the system will act as an Electoral College in reverse. The original goal of the Electoral College was to create a *thoughtful* selection process for legislators.^[Hill, 133] The idea was that the delegates to the Electoral College would spend time discussing the issues and debating candidate's merits, and then make a selection.

The advent of modern communication and transportation systems made the Electoral College obsolete. In some ways, we have been impoverished by the change. When it was working as intended, voting for a candidate you liked produced delegates who shared your values—delegates who then went to the Electoral College, evaluated the options carefully, and made a thoughtful decision.

Rather than having to convince hundreds of thousands of voters with short speeches and sound bites, a candidate with careful reasoning and nuanced positions could win the day by convincing a few hundred delegates. Those delegates might then go back to their constituents and say, "We liked candidate X a lot, but candidate Y was an even better choice."

It's a Numbers Game

In many ways, it's a numbers game. When you're trying to convince a hundred thousand people, you can't afford to spend a lot of time in careful explanations—especially when most of the people don't have the time or inclination to digest it all. You have to deliver your message quickly and get on to the next person. So you're forced to simplify your message, and subtle reasoning is lost in the shuffle. For example, you have to be either "for taxes", or "against taxes", even when the complex truth may be that you are for a particular *kind* of tax on particular *kinds* of things in a particular *kind* of way—none of which you have time to explain.

But when you only need to convince a few hundred people and those people are ready to listen and evaluate your ideas, you can take the time to express your positions accurately. Those people, in turn, can digest your proposals, understand them, and make a well-informed decision.

In the original Electoral College, those few hundred critical people were the *delegates*. They're gone now, in all but name. But with the Citizens' Advisory, we can get them back—because a few hundred influential advisors could be all it takes to decide an election.

We Can Create a System of Voting Advisors

The system keeps track of the recommendations that advisors make on each race and ballot measure. Anyone can use the system to find out what recommendations an advisor has made, or examine all recommendations for a particular race or ballot measure.

Each recommendation links to a summary page that explains the advisor's reasons, with links for further information and even short video segments that explain the advisor's reasoning. (Each candidate in a race automatically becomes an advisor, at no charge, so candidates can take advantage of the video feature to present their positions to the public in a very personal way.)

When you supply your address, the system knows which issues and ballot measures you can vote on, in the same way that www.smartVoter.org, sponsored by the League of Women Voters, does so now. But when you register with the system as a user, you get additional benefits:

- You can identify advisors you *trust* and, on a single page, see the recommendations they have made for every issue and candidate you are eligible to vote for, in order the choices appear on your ballot.
- For any issue on which your trusted advisors have made a recommendation, you can set things up so that only their recommendations are shown. That simplifies your view.
- For *open issues*, on which your advisors are silent, you have a number of options:
 - You list the advisors who have a recommendation on that issue, with the advisors shown in order of their popularity.
 - You list advisors who have made recommendations that agree with your other advisors.
 - You can list advisors who have been selected by *your* advisors.
- You can create a voting sheet to take to the polls that summarizes the recommendations your advisors have made.
- Your selections *empower* your advisors with political influence. (More on that in a moment.)

In short, you have a variety ways to identify people and organizations you trust to give you good advice.

As simple as it is, this system can have a potentially huge impact on the election process. In some ways, it's similar to the voting pamphlet you get in the mail that summarizes the issues and gives you the names of organizations that recommend for or against a candidate or issue. (The online version of the pamphlet is www.smartVoter.org). There are some crucial differences, however, between the Citizens' Advisory and the pamphlet:

- **The pamphlet doesn't give you context.** The bond measure will cost X thousands of dollars. Is that a lot? Is it a little? Can we afford it? Can we afford not to? What things *won't* we be able to do, if we do that? Most importantly, who do you *trust* to give you that information?
- **The pamphlet may not list advisors you trust.** Sure, Greenpeace likes the idea. But what about that little employment agency for lumberjacks that advocates for the environment on the side? Maybe you know the owners, and trust them. What do *they* think? The system can keep track of *every* potential advisor—individuals, as well as organizations.
- **The pamphlet doesn't help good advisors to emerge.** Only large, well-funded organizations are represented in the pamphlet. There is no way for a small organization or individual to participate and gather a following over time.
- **The pamphlet doesn't say much about local candidates.** The candidates can speak for themselves, but only few can claim endorsements from large organizations. In media-dominated politics, only recommendations from large organizations make a difference, so the only endorsements come from them. But with the Citizens' Advisory, a local pundit can make a recommendation as easily as a large organization—and you can find out what it is.
- **The pamphlet doesn't tell you how many people are listening to those advisors.** As you'll see shortly, that's a huge difference. In fact, that feature may be the single most important aspect of the system from the standpoint of taking the money out of politics.

Voters Get Convenience and Confidence

Individual voters will participate in Citizens' Advisory both because it makes voting easy and because they know they're improving democracy:

- **The system makes voting *easy*.** You don't have to go digging for information, or keep track of the advice you get (was that "No on 68" and "Yes on 67", or was it the other way around?). When a broadcast gives you a strong desire to vote for candidate X, you never have to wonder whether candidate X actually appears on your ballot. All the recommendations you need are in one place. For an open issue, the system can recommend advisors who share your views on other issues, and rank them in order of popularity. The system can also provide maps and directions to the nearest polling place, and even assist with registration.
- **The system appeals to swing voters.** Some swing voters are thoughtful individuals who simply don't have enough information to decide until late in the election process. Others are mostly disinterested in politics, and don't pay much attention until the last minute. The Citizens' Advisory appeals to both groups because it's convenient and informative. The system may therefore appeal to swing voters more than to any other segment of society. And that is a *very* good thing because, in close elections, swing voters tend to decide the outcome.

Note:

There are also swing voters who feel so strongly about a particular issue—say guns or the environment—that they will vote for anyone who promises results on that issue. And there may be some who may have already decided, but who simply aren't telling pollsters so that politicians won't take them for granted. So the system won't necessarily appeal to *all* swing voters, but it will appeal to the substantial majority of them.

- **The system also appeals to the politically conscientious.** The fact that the system makes voting easy will attract people who are less than totally enthralled by politics. But the system will also be attractive to "policy wonks" because of the ease with which issues can be explored and arguments examined. Between elections, the system could conceivably grow to become a discussion-space for political and philosophical views—an online Athenian forum in which the topics of the day are debated. Based on those discussions, participants may well make recommendations—in effect, becoming advisors.

Note:

The connection between online discussions and advisor-ranking systems has not yet been fully thought out. It is presented here to illustrate one of ways that the system may grow.

- **Voters gain confidence in themselves.** It's hard to go to the polls when you're not sure how to vote. There may be one or two issues you really care about, but what about the other issues? All those choices for city council, county supervisor, dogcatcher. All those ballot measures. How do you vote? No one likes to feel stupid, and having so many decisions to make sure makes you feel that way, unless you are *exceptionally* diligent about doing your homework. The Citizens' Advisory, on the other hand, makes it possible to get a reasonable recommendation for *every* race, so you can get away with being lazy without feeling like an idiot.
- **Voters gain confidence in government.** Most citizens wouldn't mind a small increase in gasoline taxes if they could be *certain* that the money would be spent on alternative energy research. But how would they know? The Citizens' Advisory empowers watchdog organizations in a way they have never been empowered before—with the capacity to *do* something about the irregularities they observe. The more effective those agencies become, the

harder politicians will work to maintain a straight-A average on their report cards. As watchdog agencies begin issuing better report cards, and as more people become aware of them, confidence in government will increase.

- **Voters gain confidence in democracy.** Third party candidates suddenly become viable election prospects because they only have to convince a few hundred influential advisors, instead of a few hundred thousand voters. The advisors, in turn, will be able to identify candidates who *can* win, and form coalitions to make it happen (those capacities are discussed in the next section). More viable choices improve the quality of political dialog because attack strategies are less likely to succeed. (If there are two other candidates and you attack one, people tend to vote for the third. If you attack both, no one votes for you.) More importantly, when voters go to the polls they can be confident that they're not throwing away their vote on a candidate who has no chance to win or, worse, throwing the election to the *least* desirable candidate, as Nader supporters did in 2000, when votes cast for Ralph Nader effectively cost Al Gore the election and put George Bush in the White House.

Advisors Get Influence and a Megaphone

As convenient as the system can be for voters, however, it will only attract those voters if advisors are using the system to deliver their advice. But the system delivers so *many* benefits to advisors that attracting them should not be a problem:

- **Individual advisors get a forum.** The Citizens' Advisory is attractive to individual advisors because it gives them a platform from which to speak and influence voters. The advice they give also helps to attract readership for their publications and visitors to their sites.
- **Organizational advisors extend their reach.** The system makes it possible for an organization to reach *everyone* who trusts their advice, in *every* election. They can be certain that *everyone trusted them in the past* will get their current recommendations, instead of worrying that their broadcasts won't reach everyone they should.
- **Organizations become more effective.** An organization may still decide to engage in broadcast advertising, for a variety of reasons. But they won't be *forced* to do so. The organization can therefore spend less money to influence politics, and spend more on attracting members and educating the public. They can deliver their recommendations directly to voters, rather than broadcasting over the airwaves to the general population. As more users discover them, their memberships will increase even without advertising.
- **Advisors gain political influence.** Perhaps the major strength of the Citizens' Advisory is the ability to find out how many people have decided to trust a particular advisor. Those numbers can give an organization greater influence in Washington. For example, if a million registered voters in the state have selected Greenpeace as an advisor, the state's legislative representatives are going to be quite attentive when a lobbyist from Greenpeace makes a call. If they don't have the numbers, on the other hand, the politicians won't be compelled to listen—and the politicians can find out the numbers, the same as everyone else.

Note:

The Citizens' Advisory must do several things properly to make this part of the system work. It must ensure security and preserve anonymity. (For example, the smallest number shown should never be less than 100.) Users may need to enter social security numbers to ensure that there is only one registered user per person. The system should also calculate a person's age. While anyone can use the system, only people who are of voting age are counted (ideally, only

registered voters). People older than some advanced age must be discounted, as well, where the cutoff age is such that the number of voters who aren't counted is statistically offset by the number of recently deceased. Ideally, a registration database would be used to make those determinations—both in the interests of general accuracy and to guard against the many graveyard residents who at one time used to mysteriously rise to vote in Chicago's notoriously corrupt Prohibition-era elections.

Proponents for Change can build Strong Coalitions

Not all advisors will want to be contacted by the general public. At some point, readership grows too large to allow such personal correspondence. But it should always be possible for an advisor with sufficient readership to contact other advisors, and the Citizens' Advisory can make it easy to do so. An advisor may want to do so when a review of the numbers suggests that a coordinated voting bloc could effectively determine the outcome of an election. The advisors can then negotiate with each other to agree on a candidate.

Note:

To provide accurate numbers, the system must be able to determine the combined listenership of Greenpeace and the League of Women Voters, for example, after subtracting any overlap in their listenership (not particularly hard, but necessary).

Because the system gives national organizations a way to participate in local elections without spending a lot of time and money, national organizations may decide to back the recommendations of local members. At the same time, local organizations like the Chamber of Commerce can join forces to endorse the recommendations of a national organization. In effect, such interactions create an *advice network*—in short, the potential for coalitions.

The capability to build effective coalitions stands in stark contrast to the current political situation, in which it is impossible for third party candidates to demonstrate their true level of support. Lacking runoff elections, voters are forced to choose a candidate who has a reasonable expectation of winning. Otherwise, they risk, at best, throwing away their vote or, at worst, throwing the election to the least desirable candidate, as Nader supporters did in the 2000 Presidential election.

Instant Runoff elections and Ranked Choice voting systems would solve that problem, of course. They would improve political representation and increase satisfaction with government. But the prospects for enacting such extensive political reform are dim, since they are naturally opposed by the strong incumbent parties who would inevitably be weakened. The Citizens' Advisory acts as an antidote for that problem. With the Citizens' Advisory, "a thousand points of light" (the more than 1,000 organizations who are actively trying to produce a better world) can overcome the Balkanization that cuts them off from one another. They can begin to speak with a coherent political voice.

Such coalitions won't be formed immediately, of course. The tendency to build them will grow over time. At its inception, the system will undoubtedly be populated by politically active members of existing organizations. Their political inclinations are likely to be well established. But as advertising causes the system to penetrate into the public consciousness, and as looming elections motivate voters to seek information, the system will be populated by an increasing number of swing voters. When that number grows large enough, it will become possible to predict the outcome of an election—although it may require fairly sophisticated analysis to distinguish true swing voters from the politically committed. (It's possible that the system could provide tools to expedite such analyses, while preserving the anonymity of subscribers, of course.)

At that point, an interesting feedback loop comes into play. As organizations make more successful recommendations, subscribers gain the confidence that comes from being on the "winning side". Word of mouth then changes from describing the system as "nice and convenient" to "a necessity to know what you're doing", and participation numbers are driven upwards.

As voter participation becomes a larger percentage of the electorate, potential voting blocs become easier to identify with less sophisticated analysis. As the potential effect of coalitions become easier to predict, they will be more heavily utilized. At this point, politics begins to shift away from the emotional appeals necessary to convince hundreds of thousands of voters to the rational appeals and nuanced explanations necessary to convince a few hundred advisors.

Remarkably, all those changes can occur *without* changing the existing political system

Society Gets a Thoughtful Democracy

The influence the Citizen's Advisory gives advisors, coupled with the convenience that attracts voters, ensures the widespread participation that makes a truly *thoughtful* democracy possible. Candidates don't have to spend millions of dollars on 30-second ads, and they're not at the mercy of news organizations that won't give them one second of coverage *until* they buy advertising.

The result is a true *marketplace* of ideas, where the best and most thoughtful advisors gain influence by virtue of their well-reasoned and thoughtfully explained opinions.

Those who explain their positions most clearly and succinctly will have an advantage, so the system will tend to favor rational, yet easily digested opinions. (Simple opinions are easy to digest, but don't sway anyone who doesn't already agree. Rational opinions are frequently complex and are often difficult to follow. The middle ground is a rational opinion that is expressed so clearly and simply that it *persuades*. Advisors who deliver such opinions consistently will gain in popularity.)

Prospects for Change

Clearly, the Citizens' Advisory would have a resounding effect on democracy that would reverberate through the corridors of government. But is such a thing possible? Can we build it? And if we do, will people use it? The answer is, "Yes!" One organization is already moving in that direction, fact. And two others are making progress on initiatives that bode well for the future:

- A similar effort is already underway that promises to implement many features of the voting advisory. That effort is being taken under the auspices of the Wisconsin Clean Elections campaign (<http://www.wicleanelections.org/>). It doesn't do everything that the voting advisory wants to do, but it may well deliver 80% of the benefits for half the work. (The Wisconsin system will provide a place for non-profit watchdog agencies to post report cards on legislators' voting records. The system will work for any state, and it gives voters "one-stop shopping" to evaluate legislators. It may not be helpful for evaluating newcomers, and it won't provide the kind of statistics that make coalition-building possible, but it nevertheless represents an important development in the information-systems we need to make our democracy work.)
- "Clean Money" initiatives are making progress in several states. The goal is to limit the amount of money candidates spend, so they focus on message rather than relying on slick production and repetition. Such efforts don't entirely eliminate money from politics, but they overcome its most egregious effects, since it limits corporate donations.

- “Instant Runoff” voting initiatives are making rapid headway throughout the nation. They appear to be spreading like wildfire, in fact. That’s good news for fans of real democracy.

We Can Make the System Useful Year-Round

At first, the Citizens’ Advisory will need to focus on assisting voters during elections. That’s more than enough to take on at first. But as the system meets its goals in that area, it can begin to expand in ways that make it useful every day. That keeps it in the public mind so that participation grows throughout the year:

- **Tools for analysts.** Eventually, the system can provide tools that make it easier for an advisor to justify their recommendations. The system can provide a report card tool that makes it easier for an analyst to rate candidates. By joining forces with organizations like, [Project Vote Smart](#) and [Public Citizen](#), it can provide a fine-grained, easily-accessible copy of the public record, including congressional votes, sponsored legislation, interviews, and position papers.

(Making the material “fine-grained” means that analysts will be able to link into the middle of the documents to point to quotes or other material that supports their analysis. With such tools, analysts will be able to adjust their ratings throughout the year. Reporters, like everyone else, will have access to that record—and they’ll be able to find thoughtful analysts to interview.)

- **Discussion forums.** Discussion forums could allow voters, advisors, and potential candidates to discuss ideas and gather support, spreading the insightful thinking that is the basis of a thoughtful democracy.
- **Collaboration spaces.** Distributed authoring and decision-support tools could allow advisors to collaborate on ideas, platforms, and plans in order to maximize their impact.
- **News feeds.** The Citizens’ Advisory could become a broadcast channel for news and events that keeps voters tuned in throughout the year.
- **Advisor alerts.** At their discretion, voters could opt to receive ongoing report cards from watchdog agencies and other information from advisors, without having to make their address available.

We Have the Technology

The technologies we need to build the Citizens’ Advisory, as well as the technologies for the possible extensions, already exist:

- Its ranking system will work like Amazon, so that the best advisors gain more visibility.
- Providers offer information, and many others access it, something like eBay or www.smartVoter.org, sponsored by the League of Women Voters.
- Its search engine will work like Google, to find good advisors quickly.
- Its advisor recommendations will work like a match-making service, to find compatible advisors.
- The ability to connect an address to a political district is a map-making capability like that found in MapQuest.
- Revising the lists of ballot measures and issues in each district is an undertaking on a par with the tax code revisions that Quicken makes each year.

In other words, what we need is nothing less than the Amazon / eBay / Google / MapQuest / MatchMaker / Quicken of voting-information and assistance systems. It's hard, but it's nothing new. The technologies exist. We can begin building it today. What we need is funding and organization.

We Can Build the Organization

The Citizens' Advisory will require sophisticated software that will take a year or more to develop. But while there are no serious technical impediments to developing the system, it will eventually require leaders with the organizational skills necessary to run a major enterprise. So it makes sense to join forces with organizations like the League of Women Voters, Public Citizen, and Project Vote Smart.

Operation of the system can be funded by the people and organizations who register as advisors—for as little as \$100 per year for an individual advisor, about the cost of hosting a web site through an Internet service provider (ISP). Organizations would be charged more, and would be allowed to have multiple people acting as advisors. That way, the system can be self-sustaining, yet free to the public.

The required software is complex, but can be built within the Open Source community. The major challenge is to list the candidates and ballot measures for each precinct, and to compile the addresses that belong in each precinct, adjusting them at the beginning of each decade when redistricting occurs. Fortunately, the League of Women Voters already captures that information as part of the database that powers www.smartvoter.org. So a partnership with them can reduce this otherwise imposing organizational obstacle down to an anthill.

Even when the system is fully developed and operational, the job won't be done. It will take extensive marketing, public relations efforts, and word of mouth advertising to make people aware of the system, as well as a support staff to maintain it. And it will require a system that can scale up to handle a massive level of traffic when an election draws near.

Once completed, the Citizen's Advisory should also move *offline* to expand its reach. It can start online, because that's the most cost-effective way to begin. But until 100 percent of the nation has convenient Web access, the system must use U.S. mail in addition to the Web. The cost of doing so will be much greater, but that is the only way to ensure that universal participation can be achieved.

There are a number of reasons, then, to make sure that the Citizens' Advisory is run by a non-profit agency:

- To ensure that universal participation is achieved using U.S. mail, even if that part of the system isn't profitable. (While capacity or survivability may be acceptable reasons for delay, profitability isn't.)
- To ensure subscriber anonymity.
- To ensure that fees are the minimum necessary to make sure that the system achieves its goals.
- So there is never any *question* of keeping excess money, but to deliver it instead to one or more philanthropic foundations or used to further the cause of a fully functioning democracy.

The process will take time, and it will take a lot of work. But it's not rocket science. It can be done, and we can do it.

We Can Make Money Increasingly Irrelevant

The Citizens' Advisory represents a potential sea change in American politics, but it won't happen overnight. The effect of money in politics won't disappear immediately, but it *will* dwindle over time as participation grows.

At the outset, with zero members, the situation will be exactly as it is right now—money controls the political process, and the Citizens' Advisory has no impact. But suppose for a moment that 100 percent of the electorate were participating in the Citizens' Advisory. At that point, money would be *irrelevant* to the political process. A lobbyist for an organizational advisor or coalition that represented 100,000 votes would be received warmly by a Congressional representative. A corporate lobbyist could well be left waiting—in the lobby.

Of course, it could take quite a while to achieve 100 percent participation. But the dwindling impact of money will be discernable long before then. Even with 30 percent participation, the impact of money in politics will be much less than it is now. Even at that level, we will be much better off than where we are now.

I suspect that a participation level of 60 to 70 percent is realistically achievable. That's a worthwhile target. But the system could make a noticeable difference with as few as *10 percent* of voters participating—because the system has such great appeal for swing voters, and much of campaign financing is devoted to reaching those voters.

What You Can Do

There is much that needs to be done to remove the money from politics. Here are some things that you can do to hasten the day:

- **Review my upcoming book.** Reading the book and contributing your feedback is an enormous help. Publishing a review (or getting it in front of someone who does such things) is even more valuable. For information on the book, see the [Resources](#) section.
- **Write an endorsement or foreword for my book.** Glowing endorsements are wonderful things. They put a halo around a book and make it stand out. So if you're impressed by what you read, by all means send a short endorsement! Or, if you have established a name that people recognize, a foreword would be invaluable to help promote the ideas.
- **Support a grant.** Grant possibilities are currently being explored. If you know of possible sources for funding, please suggest them. And if you are in a position to help support such an endeavor, then by all means please do!
- **Help build the system.** We need graphics, web pages, software. Eventually, we'll need a database of addresses, precincts, and election choices. And we'll need people with serious organizational skills to make it all work.
- **Help spread the word.** Everyone you tell about these issues is one more person who becomes aware of the problem, who can then become part of the solution. Publishing a link to this page is a great way to start. (Please don't publish an email address though. Spammers scour pages to find addresses they can send to.)
- **Make a donation.** By all means, send money! There is a lot to do, and not all of it can be done by volunteers. See the [Resources](#) section for details.

Summary

The Citizens' Advisory has the capacity to *eliminate money from politics*, breaking the log jam that currently makes it virtually impossible to solve the pressing problems that confront our civilization. It can make our current voting system as obsolete as the Electoral College—a vehicle that remains in existence to carry out the wishes of the electorate, but which is no longer used to make decisions. In a way, the Citizens' Advisory achieves the original goal of the Electoral College by creating a thoughtful deliberative body that exercises wisdom in the choice of leaders and legislators.

Right now, money dominates in politics. With 100 percent voter participation in the Citizens' Advisory, money would be irrelevant. Somewhere between those two poles, a balance will be found. Although we cannot know for certain where the scales will finally come to rest, we can be certain of one thing: The influence of money will be less than it is now, and that can only be good.

Resources & References

This write up is the shortest possible summary of the detailed information contained in my forthcoming book: *Your Health, Your Democracy: A Guide for Taking Charge.*

- Register to find out when the book becomes available:
www.citizensadvisory.org/Registration.html
- Proceeds from the book, along with donations, will be used to develop and roll out the Citizens' Advisory. To make a donation: www.citizensadvisory.org/Donations.html
- For more information on the Citizens' Advisory: <http://www.citizensadvisory.org/>
- To set up a speaking engagement, contact: folks -at- CitizensAdvisory -dot- org.
- To view the Citizens' Advisory Hall of Fame: www.citizensadvisory.org/HallOfFame.html
- For T-shirts, coffee mugs, and other goodies that advertise your role as a true-blue model citizen and forward-thinking, generally lovable person:
www.cafeexpress.com/citizensadvisory
- For a list of books that have figured prominently in the development of these ideas:
www.citizensadvisory.org/Books.html

Online References

- John Adams. *Thoughts on Government*.
press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch4s5.html
- Eric Armstrong. "Rebuttal to George Will's Assertion that Minority Representation isn't Necessary": www.citizensadvisory.org/Rebuttal.html
- Ballot oriented voting information sponsored by the League of Women Voters:
www.smartvoter.org
- Services provided by Public Citizen, including access to the congressional record:
www.citizen.org
- Information provided by Project Vote Smart, including access to the congressional record:
www.vote-smart.org

Books

- Steven Hill. *Fixing Elections*. Routledge. New York. 2002

- David Cay Johnston. [Perfectly Legal](#). Portfolio, New York. 2003.
- Elaine Schwarz and Suzanne Stoddard. [Taking Back Our Lives in the Age of Corporate Dominance](#). Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco. 2000