Does Corporate Money Lead to Political Corruption?

by David D. Kirkpatrick

WASHINGTON — "There are two things that are important in politics," Mark Hanna, the great Republican kingmaker of the late 19th century, once said. "The first thing is money, and I can't remember what the second one is."

What was true in Hanna's century remained true in the next, and since the Watergate scandal of the 1970s, Congress has imposed stricter regulations on money in politics. Advocates of those rules argue that they rein in corruption and increase public trust in government.

But after more than three decades, has the system made a difference?

The question took on new urgency last week as the Supreme Court threw out regulations that prohibited corporations from buying campaign commercials that explicitly advocate the election or defeat of candidates. Democrats called the ruling a threat to democracy; Republicans cheered it as a victory for free speech.

Legal scholars and social scientists say the evidence is meager, at best, that the post-Watergate campaign finance system has accomplished the broad goals its supporters asserted.

Justice Anthony M. Kennedy noted in his opinion that no evidence was marshaled in 100,000 pages of legal briefs to show that unrestricted campaign money ever bought a lawmaker's vote. And even after Congress further tightened the rules with the landmark McCain-Feingold law in 2002, banning hundreds of millions of dollars in unlimited contributions to the political parties, public trust in government fell to new lows, according to polls.

And what about the corporations that contributed so much of that money? A review of the biggest corporate donors found that their stock prices were unaffected after they stopped giving to the parties. The results suggest that those companies did not lose their influence and may have been giving "because they were shaken down by politicians," said Nathaniel Persily, a professor at Columbia Law School who has studied the law's impact.
"There is no evidence that stricter campaign finance rules reduce corruption or raise positive assessments of government," said Kenneth Mayer, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "It seems like such an obvious relationship but it has proven impossible to prove."

It is not merely an academic question. The Supreme Court has consistently said that only fighting corruption or the appearance of corruption justifies laws that restrict political spending. Other rationales — like leveling the playing field between the haves and have-nots — are not enough.

Defenders of the rules say their case for tighter restrictions on campaign money is obvious to anyone who knows Washington. Private influence-seekers shower big contributions on politicians because they want to gain access and shape policy; they would not spend the money if they got nothing in return.

But even supporters of the rules acknowledge that the benefits can be hard to measure. "I happen to think the campaign finance laws have done some modest good," said Richard L. Hasen, an expert on political law at the Loyola Law School in Los Angeles. "How much good? We may soon find out," he added, in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's ruling on Thursday in Citizens United v. the Federal Election Commission.

Supporters of the restrictions point to Britain to show that governments can police corruption without imperiling free speech. Britain started regulating political spending as far back as 1883 and has tightened the rules steadily ever since.

Those British restrictions would violate the Supreme Court's view of the First Amendment, yet Britain's political debates are as robust as they are in the United States.

Opponents of restrictions, on the other hand, point out that Australia barely regulates political money. Individuals and corporations can give without limit. Parties can spend freely. And there is not much disclosure about who gives what to whom. But political corruption has not threatened a vibrant democracy there.

In the United States, studies comparing states like Virginia with scant regulation against those like Wisconsin with strict rules have not found much difference in levels of corruption or public trust, several scholars said. Jeff Milyo, an economist at the University of Missouri, has compared states with strict bans on corporate contributions to political parties against those with no limits at all. "There is just no good evidence that campaign finance laws have any effect on actual corruption," he said.

The most insistent advocates of the campaign finance laws argue that the benefits are real even if academics can't measure them. Fred Wertheimer, the dean of campaign finance "reformers," pointed to the presidential campaign finance system as the best example of success. For five elections beginning in 1976, the presidential candidates of both major parties took public financing and did not receive private campaign contributions. "You can't prove a negative,"
Mr. Wertheimer said, “but in the Carter and Reagan presidencies there were no news stories about campaign contributions influencing presidential decisions.”

By the 2008 election, however, that system had grown obsolete. Candidates could raise far more from private donors, and President Obama became the first major candidate since Richard M. Nixon to win election without public money.

Polls have shown that relatively few people understand or are even aware of the campaign finance rules. Those who are aware of them usually assume that smart donors will be able to steer around the rules. But Mr. Wertheimer said that a cat-and-mouse game of election rule-makers forever trying to catch up with the latest evasions by big money donors was only natural, “part of the ongoing battle to prevent government corruption.”

But some politicians say reformers like Mr. Wertheimer are unrealistic about how money and politicians mix. They cite an old political maxim, attributed in a more vulgar form to the onetime California kingpin Jesse Unruh: If you can’t take their money and vote against them, you don’t belong in politics.
Latest Apple product creates anticipation in newspaper industry

By Bryan Richardson
January 25, 2010 | 12:01 a.m. CST

COLUMBIA—What Apple will unveil Wednesday could shift the future of e-reading and be a tool to increase the viability of newspapers.

Consumers and publishers will keep a close eye on Apple when it reveals its newest product, unofficially called the Apple Tablet or the iSlate by those speculating on the release. Apple has kept quiet other than announcing the presentation.

“All the talk about an Apple tablet or e-reader is pure speculation right now,” said Roger Fidler, program director for digital publishing at the Reynolds Journalism Institute. “We won’t know what the new device is until Wednesday.”

This hasn’t stopped the speculation on the potential the tablet computer holds. Sean Reilly, a fellow at the journalism institute this year, said Apple’s previous success has given the product a lot of attention.

Apple, whose Macbooks are strongly recommended for journalism students by the Missouri School of Journalism, has built its reputation with products such as the iPod and the iPhone, devices viewed as revolutionary at the time of their respective releases.

While some consumers are anticipating the product, another interested party is newspaper publishers, who in recent years have been struggling with declining subscription rates, declining advertising revenue and sometimes bankruptcy.

Reilly, who is studying business models that newspapers can implement for e-readers, said the tablet holds potential for an effective way of producing the news.
“E-readers bring the editor's decision on what to read just like a newspaper,” Reilly said. “Someone curates the content and provides it to you. It is very different than the dot-com experience where you choose your content.”

The Amazon Kindle, the leader in e-reader device sales, currently sells subscriptions for its Kindle edition of newspapers and magazines worldwide, including The New York Times, USA Today, Time, Newsweek and The Economist.

Although only the major market newspapers currently have e-reader editions, Fidler said smaller newspapers are likely to develop e-reader editions when it becomes “economical and profitable for these papers to produce them.”

The Kindle edition of these publications consists of a single column of text and a few photos. The Apple Tablet is rumored to be a full-color touch screen device with the ability to deliver bigger files through Wi-Fi, allowing for a richer display.

The heart of the business model for newspapers — revenue from subscriptions and advertising — would be the same in the transition from print to e-readers.

“With e-readers and tablets, newspaper publishers are assuming that people will be willing to pay for the convenience of having a more print-like package of news and advertising automatically delivered to the devices,” Fidler said.

The economic health of newspapers in the future appears to be tied to charging for its digital content, which most newspapers currently place online for free.

The fee could be resisted by customers at first. Reilly said this is a comparable situation to a time when watching TV was free for everyone.

“If you would have told my dad when I was a kid you would have to pay for TV content, he would have thought you were crazy,” Reilly said.

Over time, however, paying for cable and satellite TV became commonplace. Reilly is among those who think that eventually, paying for online news content will be the standard.

Reilly described the current situation as critical, saying companies need to develop a new way for selling newspapers other than by paper copies.
"We know print is shrinking fast," Reilly said. "We don't make enough money back on ads online, where the content is free. Companies are going out of business if they don't find new ways to monetize the cost of creating their content. The company I work for is in bankruptcy."

The Los Angeles Times, for whom Reilly works, is owned by The Tribune Company, which filed for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy in December 2008. Newspapers big and small are struggling and need a change in fortune.

Even with the anticipated positive effects the tablet and similar future products, there is also a fear of failure that lurks underneath it all.

"If you can't bring revenue for the e-readers, the people who created the content will go out of business," Reilly said.

Another fear, Fidler said, is that newspaper publishers could suffer the same fate that music companies experienced when the rise of digital sales through iTunes and other online music stores led to a decline in profit.
Decision tabled on MU in the Evening

Friday, January 22, 2010

The University of Missouri Faculty Council tabled a vote that would affect the fate of the MU in the Evening program.

The council was expected to decide yesterday whether members think the university should eliminate the separate degree-granting program. However, Professor J. Wilson Watt, who chaired the committee that studied the program, was absent, and the council did not want to proceed without him.

MU in the Evening began about 10 years ago as a way to give working adults a way to earn a general studies degree.

Council Chairwoman Leona Rubin said a recommendation that administrators do away with the program would allow other departments to offer more night courses, giving non-traditional students other degree options.

The council is expected to vote on the recommendation at its Feb. 4 meeting.
MU professor in Haiti during quake reflects on the experience

By Katelyn Amen
January 22, 2010 | 10:49 p.m. CST

COLUMBIA — As MU French professor Valerie Kaussen spoke on the situation in Haiti, the room reflected the sense of community she remembered from her experiences in the country.

Kaussen was in Haiti during the Jan. 12 earthquake that leveled much of the country’s capital. She returned to Columbia four days later, and on Friday, about 30 people gathered on couches and folding chairs at the Peace Nook to hear her speak about Haiti’s history and relief efforts in the aftermath of the earthquake.

Audience members asked questions and donated $825 to support disaster relief in the country.

Kaussen said that much of Haiti’s past contributed to the disaster situation now. She said early French colonial rule and U.S. military occupancy shaped Haiti as a country without a means to sustain itself economically, even before the earthquake hit.

Mark Haim, director of Mid-Missouri Peaceworks, who coordinated Kaussen’s talk at the Peace Nook, said he hoped the information would give people a better context for understanding the situation.

"So little attention is being focused on the underlying reasons for the tragedy," Haim said. "I’m hoping this talk will help people to understand why an earthquake of this magnitude would have so much impact on a place like Haiti versus the Bay Area in California."

Kaussen also spoke about her own hopes for the future of the country.
"I hope they get the country they deserve," she said as she discussed the feelings of togetherness and resiliency she's experienced while in Haiti. "I saw nothing but respect and solidarity."

Audience members expressed similar feelings as they listened to Kaussen detail the conditions in Haiti and expressed gratitude to her as an educator.

"Here she is, out educating the rest of us," said Carolyn Sullivan, a local business owner and friend of Kaussen's. "I learned a tremendous amount."

Kaussen said it's important for aid organizations to listen to what Haitians want in the aid and rebuilding process. She works with Friends of SODA, a network of groups in Haiti that particularly support education.

She recommended people give to reputable organizations with a strong presence in Haiti, including the Lambi Fund of Haiti and the Honor and Respect Foundation.
Students want to give cash but need worthy takers

By Janese Heavin

Friday, January 22, 2010

They know they could give it to large charities or send it to Haiti, but first, a group of occupational therapy students wants to know if there is anyone in the community who could use financial help to offset a disability.

Every year, the Student Occupational Therapy Association at the University of Missouri gives two $1,000 donations. The group’s 36 members raise the money by selling concessions at MU football games.

Until now, they’ve given that money to people and groups in the community who have used it to overcome physical or mental disabilities. They’d like to keep up that trend but have run out of potential recipients, said Giuli Krug, group adviser and a clinical assistant professor in the occupational therapy department.

“We don’t just want to donate to the under-served, we want to get to the under-under-served,” she said.

By doing so, the group is able to raise awareness of lesser-known causes that tie into the occupational therapy field, Krug said. Two years ago, for instance, the group gave a $1,000 gift to Kathleen Weinschenk, a Columbia woman born with cerebral palsy who needed a new wheelchair-accessible van. The donation prompted others to give as well, and Weinschenk has since been able to buy the van.

Last year, the group gave the money to the Columbia Driving Force Power Soccer team, a wheelchair soccer team affiliated with the Services for Independent Living.

Students like to see their money allow disabled individuals to enjoy more freedoms, said Christy Pierce, president of the group.

“We like to keep it really related to occupational therapy,” she said. “We want to help people who are limited.”

Getting students in the habit of donating likely will stay with them for life, benefiting their future communities as well, Pierce said.
In addition to donating funds, members of the student association volunteer when needed. Krug said the spirit of giving and helping out can be contagious.

“This generation is known as the ‘me’ generation,” she said. “But that’s not the case with the majority of our students.”
Faculty wish for hangout

Departments are ready to mingle.

By Janese Heavin
Friday, January 22, 2010

Some University of Missouri faculty members say they want a gathering place where they can mingle with professors from other departments and share ideas in an informal setting.

One idea pitched at yesterday's Faculty Council meeting is to reserve weekly space at the University Club's Tiger Bistro in the Reynolds Alumni Center, although council Chairwoman Leona Rubin said that's just one option.

"The idea is to have a weekly gathering of faculty, a place where faculty from different colleges and departments could interact and share ideas," Rubin said.

Doing so, she said, coincides with Mizzou Advantage, an initiative aimed to promote interdisciplinary collaboration among MU's strongest areas of study.

"Promoting interdisciplinary collaboration means you have to get people from arts and sciences together with people from life sciences and the veterinary school in a common place," Rubin said this morning. "Interdisciplinary research is a difficult thing to facilitate if we're all just staying around in our own buildings."

Rubin suggested requesting money from Mizzou Advantage's $4 million budget to pay for the room and, possibly, a cash bar and refreshments.

Administrators are on board with the idea, MU spokeswoman Mary Jo Banken said, but details need to be hashed out.

"We want faculty to come up with something concrete, but we're glad and encouraged they've come forward with this idea," she said. "Everyone's excited about Mizzou Advantage right now."

MU used to have a faculty lounge on the third floor of Memorial Union South, Banken said. That space has since become a general meeting room that groups must reserve ahead of time.
But simply having a faculty lounge wouldn’t necessarily accomplish anything, Rubin said. “I’m not likely to go” to a faculty lounge “and sit there and hang out and wait to see who comes in,” she said. “If there’s a set time for people to gather, it’s more likely people will do that.”

MU’s chapter of the American Association of University Professors also has discussed the idea, according to minutes from two meetings last fall. Members agreed it’s not uncommon for administrators to meet regularly over drinks and hors d’oeuvres, but faculty members have no such venue.

“Our feeling has been there’s not much opportunity for faculty to get together,” said Eddie Adelstein, president of MU’s AAUP Chapter.

He said the university prides itself on having experts in a number of fields, but there’s no opportunity for those people to come together to informally collaborate and talk about common interests.

“I don’t think it would be money wasted for many reasons,” Adelstein said. “It would start traditions that would make us stronger and improve collegiality.”
January 24, 2010

More health care workers in Missouri essential

We’re giving up some of the space we reserve for Our Voice Sunday to provide a platform to two important, intelligent community leaders.

You’ll see opinion pieces below from the presidents of Missouri State University and Ozarks Technical Community College regarding the need for additional funding to allow more education for health care jobs.

As we noted in this space last week, we view this issue so significant we want to ensure the presidents’ voices are heard.

Previously, the dean of the University of Missouri School of Health Professions spoke with similar concern and urgency on this issue.

Also, yesterday Drury’s President Todd Parnell used the Voices soapbox to chide us a bit for not recognizing the importance of private institutions in educating students seeking health care jobs. He also stressed the state must continue providing tuition assistance to those students through Access Missouri.

We do not dispute his view and we call on legislators to weigh the role of private institutions in the complex higher-ed funding picture.

How we get to the goal of educating more people for high-paying and in-demand health care jobs is not as important as realizing we must get there.

No one seems to disagree with the priorities of funding more classes, building more facilities and reducing waiting lines for health care students.

It also cannot be understated that more Missourians will need more health care in coming years, as baby boomers age.

Please read these pieces carefully and let us know what you think. Also, if you have a story to tell as a student trying to enter the health care fields, send a note to diseman@news-leader.com.

We’re committed to this issue and will continue to follow it. Hopefully, our state officials will aggressively do the same.