

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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The Cost of Democracy

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As the holiday lights begin to fade and a new year comes into view, last November's elections are likely a distant memory for most of us. Attention now turns to tallying up the pile of holiday bills and year-end expenses. Far from the public eye is the bill for the 2010 midterm elections. At a cost of over \$4 billion, the 2010 elections were the most expensive ever. It stretches the imagination to even think about what we will see in the 2012 presidential election year.

Why should this matter to us? The reality is that campaign financing impacts all of us. No matter what issues we care about or where we find ourselves on the political spectrum, campaign financing has a fundamental influence on the public policy process. Polling by the Pew Research Center shows that less than one-third of the public agrees with the statement "most elected officials care what people like me think." The growing influence of money in campaigns only adds to the disillusionment of voters. At a time when we face enormous challenges as a nation and a global community, we cannot afford to opt out of the process. It is all the more imperative that we reclaim the political process for all the people, not just those with the power of money on their side.

January 2011 will mark the one-year anniversary of the Supreme Court decision in the Citizens United v. FEC case. The Court ruled that private businesses – including for-profit corporations – have a right to spend an unlimited amount of money to support or defeat candidates. As a result, candidates benefit when they cater to the desires of corporations, wealthy donors and special interests. Rather than pursuing public policy that serves the common good, candidates are forced to chase money.

Butler Derrick, a former member of Congress, has noted that the rush of money flowing into election campaigns is certain to affect the new Congress. "Having spent 20 years in the U.S. House of Representatives, I know that this much money from corporations and wealthy individuals will have an impact on the making of public policy, and it's not going to be in the public's interest."

In the spring of 2000, 90-year-old Doris Haddock, better known as "Granny D," completed a walk across the country in support of campaign finance reform. For Granny D and other advocates of campaign finance reform, this issue goes to the heart of all that we do and are as a civil society. When asked about why the issue of campaign finance reform matters to her, Granny D responded, "Is it not so that we are charged in this life with doing God's work where we might? ...If we allow the greedy and inhuman elements to steal away from us our self-government, because we did not have the energy or courage to fight for it and use it as a tool for our love and wisdom, how shall we answer for that? Is campaign finance reform a religious issue? It is one of the central religious issues of our times...."

Let us add to our list of New Year's resolutions: reclaim our democratic process in 2011.

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