

# Dumbing and Numbing of the American Electorate

Critical Sociology

2015, Vol. 41(7-8) 999–1002

© The Author(s) 2015

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0896920515609037

crs.sagepub.com



**David Fasenfest and Naida Simon**

Wayne State University, USA

The political commentator and comedian George Carlin famously ranted about how the educational system was designed to keep Americans in the dark, to create a population unaware of both how the country is being run and in whose interests, and to produce an electorate unable to critically understand the political process that makes it all possible (<http://yhoo.it/1EmpvTE>). A major theme of his routines was that politicians were in the pockets of the monied interests of the US (and for capitalist societies in general). This was funny in part because it was not news. The need for money to run campaigns, hold on to political dynasties, and maintain both electoral discipline and finance patronage systems has a well-rehearsed history. Corruption in local government was a prime example of this: witness New York City's Tammany Hall and Boss Tweed during the second half of the 19th Century, and a century later Richard J. Daley's 21-year reign (1955–1976) as boss supreme serving as Mayor of the City of Chicago. Patronage and wealth, serving the interests of investors, land developers and industrialists in these great cities, dominate local politics.

National politics is not immune from this sort of patronage and graft. Now synonymous with corruption at the highest levels of government, the Teapot Dome Scandal of 1922 and 1923 embroiled the administration of President Warren G. Harding; non-competitive bids below “fair prices” for drilling leases were awarded that enriched oil companies at the “public’s expense” (interestingly, or perhaps not so surprising, the only person to be convicted of wrong-doing was then Secretary of the Interior Fall while no one from the oil companies was prosecuted for bribery). National politicians have long benefited economically from their time in the highest offices of government, and for most of the last half of the 20th century those seeking the presidency have had significant family fortunes to back their electoral aspirations. Nevertheless, politicians spend a lot of time raising funds, and the fear of undue influence is never far from the surface. The very wealthy were ever behind those proverbial closed doors, dangling support and figuring out how to turn their desires into public policy.

Wealthy backers had already found a way to funnel massive amounts of support in order to influence politicians and legislation. Political Action Committees (PACs) were tools that allowed interested parties to pool resources in support of a candidate or issue. But, with the Supreme Court's January 2010 decision on the *Citizen's United* case overturning campaign contribution limits, the lid was off. Politicians could and did turn to well-healed sponsors who flagrantly (and most often anonymously) contributed massive amounts to super PACs promoting candidates sympathetic to corporate interests. Some super donors were not so shy (though anonymity kept specific amounts obscure). During the 2012 election cycle billionaire Sheldon Adelson and his wife contributed, by

some estimates (Meyer, 2012), almost \$100 million to various campaigns supporting or promoting their political agenda. A single donation of \$20 million to one super PAC kept the Newt Gingrich campaign for President in 2012 alive.

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), with its goals of limited government, free markets and federalism, is a network of organizations that have written legislative blueprints that end up appearing verbatim in laws passed across the country. Heavily financed by the billionaire Koch brothers, ALEC creates the backbone of local conservative initiatives nationally (Scola, 2012). Politics is transformed from a process of democratic input into a cynical exercise in political manipulation undertaken by politicians who are elected with the financial support of wealthy backers.

The 2016 Presidential campaign promises to take the influence of money one step further. The Koch brothers have pledged almost \$900 million in support of candidates promoting their agenda (Confessore, 2015). Much of that support has gone to Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin. At the same time, as of this writing, billionaire Donald Trump is a leading contender for the Republican nomination by financing his own campaign. Whereas Walker generally adheres to the ALEC line, Trump appears as somewhat of a demagogue whose main talking points are laced with xenophobia (mostly directed at Mexico) and right-wing populist attacks on China and the administration of President Obama. Trump's populist appeal also comes, in part, from his willingness to argue that the rich can pay more in taxes, though that does not lead to calls for an expanded government. Hillary Clinton's campaign relies on the deep pockets of liberal bankers and traditional supporters of the Democratic Party. Only Bernie Sanders appears to run a campaign financed by what *The New York Times* editors call "small-beer" donations averaging \$31.30 per contributor (<http://nyti.ms/1Uhj8mh>).

Why are we so willing to be "entertained" by this political spectacle, by politicians who represent corporate views of how the world does and should work? We have to go past traditional tropes of false consciousness or people acting against their own interests to understand what is going on, to begin to grapple with how a public can be so oblivious to how their lives are being run. Some might argue that what we see is the product of real self-interest, that most people are doing just fine and politicians are tapping into a groundswell of discontent. It is certainly true that there is much to be discontented about in our current society. But we must understand that the way this discontent is articulated is shaped by the way we frame both causes and solutions. As George Carlin's routine points out, much of that comes from the way our education system and the public messages we receive have formed us as thinking (or shall we suggest, non-thinking) members of society. That is, most people in society have accepted the basic argument that market solutions are best, governments are ineffective and get in the way of efficient markets, and most problems are best served by "small" government solutions—in other words, locally (Stevens, 2012). We have been robbed of our collective memories; big problems need big solutions, governments can serve a greater good that corporations will not address, and we seem to have forgotten that very recently unrestricted markets have wreaked havoc on society writ large.

Education is constantly at the forefront of public discussions. On one hand, we are told that education is essential, that the workforce of the future will need skills that can only be attained through a well-functioning education system. Knowledge is a commodity that can be acquired through higher education (Kauppinen, 2014; see also Means, 2015, for a discussion of education and work). At the same time public education is under assault, especially in conservative-controlled states where budget cutting of social programs hurts education along with a raft of social services in general. Is this, as Volscho (2015) argues, the revenge of capitalism after almost half a century of social programs curtailing its worst excesses and having to give ground to a range of social movements demanding political rights and a say in public policy?

The signs of this malaise are everywhere. Students increasingly are forced to carry major debt burdens if they wish to attend colleges or universities, unless they are among the very few whom can get scholarships (note: financial aid packages typically are in fact authorization to borrow!) or whose families have the resources to pay the full cost of a student's education. These loans typically are repaid over decades but end up preventing young people from saving for retirement. Those who don't graduate suffer the double ignominy of a large debt without the ability to get a reasonably paying job. And for those from communities where the primary education system has been decimated through budget cuts or a decline in local school revenues due to declining property values, there is little hope that they will qualify for, or remain in, secondary schools. Yet, where are the student demonstrations of the 1960s, where is the coordinated outrage against a system that burdens students with debt without providing them with employment opportunities? (The September 2014 issue of *Critical Sociology*, Vol 40 Issue 5, focused on student debt and the contemporary form of debt bondage that results.)

We read about the steadily improving economy, though this recovery is called a "jobless recovery" as a quarter century of productivity gains fail to reach workers. Corporate profits are at record levels but by most measures real wages have remained flat over that period. Union membership has been decimated, and with it the drastic decline of the middle-class. The recent assault on public sector unions along with a retrenchment of government employment at all levels has resulted in a decline in one of the last places urban residents and women of color can find work that can support a family. There is no national urban policy agenda, and as a result cities are either crumbling in on themselves, or are being transformed into islands of wealth as poor residents are pushed out to outlying areas or abandoned suburbs. Yet, where are the poor people's marches, the demonstrations of armies of the unemployed or underemployed, the outrage as more and more workers enter the ranks of the precariat?

Instead we witness crowds cheering on both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. The former connect with the pseudo-populism of social outrage as Trump vilifies immigrants, raises the specter of an ominous China, and fills his speeches with lots of emotion but no real substance. In short, Trump feeds off the fears of people who can't understand how and why the world is changing, but do not have the critical resources to understand who Trump represents, or how there is no substance to his presentation. Similarly, people flock to and cheer Sanders in one speech after another. They similarly channel their own frustrations with an unjust world, propelled by the pains inflicted by lost jobs, by the reflections of communities ravaged by economic change, by the lingering mantra of great income inequality. But they are equally unable to organize those sentiments into a serious social movement. Rather, they once again look to electoral politics in the hope that the right President can make it all go away.

We have been both places before. The recent campaigns of Barack Obama running up to the 2008 and 2012 elections built the support to propel him into office by channeling the same fears and anxieties into an agenda for change. As we saw, both the realities of politics and perhaps a misunderstanding of who Obama really was or could be as a change agent ended up in disappointments. That does not mean his presidency will not have had a profound impact. But signature legislation like the Affordable Care Act was as much, if not mostly, a boon to the insurance and medical industries as it drove customers to them. The more meaningful change, expanding a very successful Medicare program into a national single-payer system, was never seriously on the table.

Going back in history a bit more, the Weimer Republic of Germany was rocked by political and social unrest as the left-wing Social Democrats and right-wing National Democrats competed for votes, each pointing to the ravages caused by economic transformation, the former critical of an economic system that produced great inequities and harm, and the latter pointing to "foreign" elements that were undermining the basic fabric of society. The ravages of unchecked capitalism

remain the same. Instead of Jews, Slavs, and the unfair treatment of Germany after their defeat in World War I we now hear about Mexicans and China and an international legal system that tries to rob our country of what once made it great.

The jury is out. Will this country, as some fear, travel further down the road towards a Proto-Fascist Corporatist orientation, or will a Progressive Anti-Capitalist agenda prevail? Our fear is that so long as the assault on knowledge, science, and the principles of an informed and educated population continues unabated, the ability of this electorate to see through reactionary rhetoric and understand the forces that are responsible for the current state of our society will be seriously curtailed.

## References

- Confessore N (2015) Koch brothers' budget of \$889 million for 2016 is on par with both parties' spending. *The New York Times*, 26 January. Available (accessed 11 August 2015) at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/us/politics/kochs-plan-to-spend-900-million-on-2016-campaign.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/27/us/politics/kochs-plan-to-spend-900-million-on-2016-campaign.html?_r=0)
- Kauppinen I (2014) Different meanings of 'knowledge as commodity' in the context of higher education. *Critical Sociology* 40(3): 393–409. DOI: 10.1177/0896920512471218.
- Means AJ (2015) Generational precarity, education, and the crisis of capitalism: Conventional, neo-Keynesian, and Marxian perspectives. *Critical Sociology*. Epub ahead of print 8 January 2015. DOI: 10.1177/0896920514564088.
- Meyer T (2012) How much did Sheldon Adelson really spend on Campaign 2012? *ProPublica: Journalism in the Public Interest*, 20 December. Available (accessed 9 August 2015) at: <http://www.propublica.org/article/how-much-did-sheldon-adelson-really-spend-on-campaign-2012>
- Scola N (2012) Exposing ALEC: How conservative-backed state laws are all connected. *The Atlantic*, 14 April. Available (accessed 11 August 2015) at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/04/exposing-alec-how-conservative-backed-state-laws-are-all-connected/255869/>
- Stevens A (2012) Labor, governance, and ecological politics. *Critical Sociology* 38(6): 893–901. DOI: 10.1177/0896920512445398.
- Volscho T (2015) The revenge of the capitalist class: Crisis, the legitimacy of capitalism and the restoration of finance from the 1970s to present. Epub ahead of print 3 June 2015. *Critical Sociology*. DOI: 10.1177/0896920515589003.