

It's Not the System, It's the Voters

by Barney Frank

The premise of this lecture series, “Politics Then and Now,” is that there has been a deterioration in the nation’s politics. I subscribe to that, with a couple of qualifications. Where I disagree is the often explicit assumption that there are deep, systemic failures that have produced this state of affairs. In fact, this breakdown, this deterioration, this inability to get things done is only about two-and-a-half years old. Bipartisanship was alive and well in September 2008. There was great collaboration between the Democratic Congress and the Republican president, culminating in passage of the TARP (Troubled Asset Relief Fund) legislation—money lent to the banks—which I am convinced will go down in history as the most wildly unpopular and highly successful program the federal government ever had. We did that with George W. Bush. When President Barak Obama won in November 2008 and we had a Democratic House and Senate, we had one of the most productive legislative years since 1965, the first full year of Lyndon Johnson’s presidency.

It’s as simple as this: the system broke down as a result of right-wing Republicans taking over the House of Representatives in 2010, and that’s the end of it. What I’m saying is that the cause of the breakdown—and it is very severe—is electoral. When you start looking for the causes of the problem, begin with the voters, and the voters include the non-voters—the people on the Republican side, in particular, who sit out the primaries, so that the most rabid and extreme people can dominate the primaries.

We have two systems. We have a private sector where inequality is important. If you don’t have inequality, if people who have better ideas, don’t make more money, if people who are better able to figure out what the consumers want, don’t make money, the system doesn’t work. So, inequality is important to the health of the capitalist system. Meanwhile, equality is the core principle of the public system.

The problem with an approach that allows unlimited spending in campaigns is that it allows the inequality principle of the private sector to overcome and suppress the equality principle of the public sector—when they ought to be held and kept both vital. There should be

inequality in the private sector, with some limits at the extremes, and one-person, one-vote in the public sector. What the Supreme Court has done [in the *Citizens United* case] is to allow the unequal wealth of the private sector to moot the equality of the public sector.

Money does not influence people as much as you might think. I don’t believe it changes how people vote. What it does is have too much influence on who the people are who get to vote. That is, people don’t get elected and then change their position because of the money; it influences the kind of people who run and get elected. It determines who the politicians are who win. It doesn’t so much affect you once you’re there. 🐟

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