

“Wealth Primary”

Before you read:

1. Discuss the role of a primary. What is its function? (If you're not sure what a primary is, see the box on this page.)
2. What do you think “Wealth Primary” means?
3. Can you think of people, groups, or companies that give money to political campaigns?
4. Write captions for the cartoons.



“Getting money out of politics is the unfinished business of the Voting Rights Movement.”

– Dr. Gwen Patton, Civil Rights Leader



U.S. elections are now subject to a *de facto* “wealth primary” that effectively excludes nonwealthy voters and candidates from meaningful participation in the political process. The wealth

primary is the process by which the person who raises the most money almost always goes on to get his or her party’s nomination. He or she is the “winner of the wealth primary.” It also means that

What is a primary?

The purpose of the primary is to “narrow the field.” Let’s say you have six Democrats and six Republicans who want to run for president. Each party has to choose *one* candidate to run in the final election. The primaries are the process that each Party uses to pick a candidate to represent their party in the final election. **Note:** Some states use a caucus instead of a primary. See page 65.

those campaign contributors with the most money choose the candidate who almost invariably goes on to win. While all U.S. citizens have the right to run for elective office, huge increases in the cost of running for office now ensure that low-income citizens cannot afford the cost of the campaigns. Those who cannot compete in the wealth primary cannot find representation in government.

Fully three quarters (76%) of the 2006 congressional primary races featured only one candidate seeking his or her party’s nomination, providing voters with no real choice on primary election day. One reason for this is that incumbents usually have a large financial advantage. In 2006, the average incumbent Senator started his or her reelection campaign with \$1.43 million already on hand.

The Facts: Our Money-Driven Elections

- According to the Federal Election Commission, major party congressional candidates who raised the most money won 92% of their primary races in 2006. Candidates who spent the most won 91% of the time.
- Only one-ninth of 1% of the voting-age population – nearly 232,000 people – gave \$1000 or more to federal candidates in 1999-2000.



Politicians and the Wealthy

Ryan-Scott Hilsman



I choose not to vote because of the way I believe things are run in this country. Most politicians these days are corrupt people. When it comes time for elections, they parade around making promises that they do not intend to keep. Once in office, they do the opposite of what they said they would

do so that they can help the rich people who gave them money to run. Look at the way the wealthy live—they can do pretty much as they like but if I did some of the same things, I'd be in trouble.

Unfortunately, the time of politicians who help the rest of us has left, hopefully not forever. We need people to run for office who know what it is like to work for a living. Then maybe the hard-working people of this country can actually get a break, and not be used just to provide money that goes into the pockets of the corrupt politicians.

Why should I vote for people that do not really care for the well-being of our country and its people? Why should I vote for people who make promises that they do not intend to keep? These types of people do not deserve my vote. I would consider voting only if someone kept their promises to the middle and lower classes.

Ryan-Scott Hilsman is a student at Bristol Community College in Attleboro, MA.

- Only 0.27 % of voting age Americans gave over \$200 contributions to candidates.
- A 1997 survey of major congressional campaign contributors (those who give \$200 or more) revealed that 95% of such donors are white, and that 81% have annual incomes of \$100,000 or more.

Our Campaign Finance System Discriminates

At one point in our history, only White male property owners had the right to vote. But disenfranchised people have organized and struggled for an America that lives up to its legal and moral promise of political equality. Over time, grassroots movements eliminated numerous barriers to voting rights, including property, race, gender, and age qualifications.

Today, we must face up to the newest voting-rights barrier: the "wealth primary." Those who do not raise enough money rarely appear on the ballot, much less win office. The rest of us, the vast majority of American people, are shut out of a critical part of our election process.

This piece was excerpted and adapted from the National Voting Rights Institute <www.nvri.org>. Updated figures are from <www.uspirg.org>. Reprinted here with permission.