

# Gutting of campaign finance laws enhances influence of corporations and wealthy Americans

April 10 2014

---

Affluent individuals and business corporations already have vastly more influence on federal government policy than average citizens, according to recently released research by Princeton University and Northwestern University. This research suggests that the Supreme Court's continuing attack on campaign finance laws is further increasing the political clout of business firms and the wealthy.

Martin Gilens, professor of politics at Princeton, and Benjamin I. Page, Gordon Scott Fulcher Professor of Decision Making, of Northwestern University used a unique data set comprised of 1,779 policy issues over a thirty-year period to estimate how much influence affluent [citizens](#), organized [interest groups](#) and ordinary citizens each have on policy outcomes – while taking into account (statistically "controlling for") the influence of the other actors. Affluent citizens, those at the 90th income percentile, turn out to have the most influence. Organized interest groups also have a great deal of impact, but the preferences of average citizens have no discernable, independent effect on policy making at all.

"This does not mean that the average American always loses out," said Gilens, "because the affluent and ordinary citizens frequently want the same thing. But when they disagree – and they do disagree on many important matters – the affluent generally get their way. If democracy means that all citizens should have a say in shaping government policy, our findings cast doubt upon just how democratic U.S. policy making

actually is."

Gilens and Page note that ever since the time of James Madison, observers of American politics have hoped that organized interest groups might represent the diverse wants and interests of the citizenry as a whole so that democracy might work well even if individual citizens among the general public exert little or no direct influence.

"This study dashes hopes for this democratic kind of interest-group influence,' said Gilens. "We found that corporations and business-oriented interest groups, which often seek policies that the public opposes, have much more impact on policy making than mass-based groups. Moreover, even mass-based groups (taken together) do not actually line up very well with the policies that ordinary citizens want."

"The Supreme Court's recent decisions, which have removed most legal limits on big financial contributions to politics, are likely to increase the political clout of wealthy individuals and leave average citizens with even less influence than they have now," said Page. "I find this very troubling. The Court's view that political donations constitute 'speech' protected by the First Amendment opens the door to money-driven politics and a distortion of democracy."

**More information:** Gilens' and Page's research findings are forthcoming in *Perspectives on Politics* and are available at Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens or [scholar.princeton.edu/mgilens/pages/research](https://scholar.princeton.edu/mgilens/pages/research).

Provided by Princeton University

Citation: Gutting of campaign finance laws enhances influence of corporations and wealthy

Americans (2014, April 10) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-04-gutting-campaign-laws-corporations-wealthy.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.