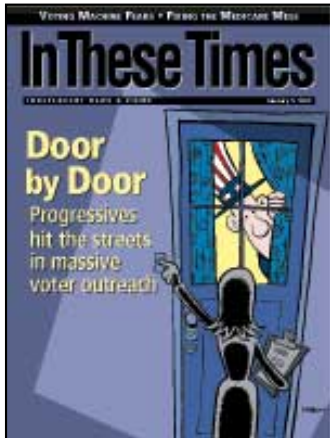


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## Editorial

# Corporate Medicare

By [Joel Bleifuss](#) | 12.9.03

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The Medicare “reform” bill recently passed by Congress manipulates the cost and quality of health care provided to older Americans in order to maximize the profit margins of HMOs, insurance corporations and drug companies—the very same entities that poured money into congressional election campaigns. Such political contributions are of course legal—a legislatively sanctioned form of bribery that corrupts the democratic process.

**Corporations not only buy Congress, they buy a political climate of voter self-disenfranchisement.**

In the case of the Medicare bill and its much hyped prescription drug benefit, this institutional corruption will prove lethal, literally, to seniors forced to choose between buying life-saving drugs and other of life’s necessities—food, shelter, heat.

The role that the current campaign finance system played in the Medicare bill battle was the story behind the headlines. Consider the following information compiled by the Center for Responsive Politics, the non-profit organization that tracks campaign contributions.

In the House of Representatives, pharmaceutical manufacturers, health insurance corporations and HMOs gave, on average, \$59,366 to the 204 Republicans and \$50,336 to the 16 Democrats who supported the Medicare bill. Conversely, the 25 Republicans who opposed the bill got \$27,226 and the 189 Democrats who voted “no” received \$28,323. In the Senate the 54 senators that voted “yes” received \$111,266 on average, while the 44 who voted “no” received \$76,019.

In total, the drug companies, the health insurance industry and HMOs spent \$18,799,678 buying yes votes in the House and Senate, a figure that more than offset the \$9,296,419 they “lost” investing in those elected officials who voted “no.” Considering that the Medicare bill provides these same business interests with \$125 billion in direct subsidies, it was a small price to pay.

Corporate America knows that money buys votes in Congress, an awareness borne out by the fact that corporate-related donations to candidates for federal office and the two political parties increased from \$275 million in the 1990 election cycle to more than \$1 billion in the 2002 election cycle, an increase of 366 percent.

And Americans realize that, at some level, money counts more than their vote, as reflected in increasing voter alienation and decreasing voter turnout. In essence, corporations, through their donations, not only buy legislation, they buy a political climate of voter self-disenfranchisement that is equally valuable.

Complicit in this erosion of democratic society is a mainstream media that rarely connects the voting record of members of Congress and the amount they are “paid” by the corporations in whose interests they vote. According to a search of the Lexis-Nexis news data base, not one mainstream publication or broadcaster in its coverage of Medicare vote examined the connection between corporate contributions and the bill’s passage, even though that information was readily available from the Center for Responsive Politics

And let’s not let the American Civil Liberties Union off the hook. It continues to regard monetary contributions to candidates as a free speech issue, thereby undermining efforts to counter the corrupting influence money has on the democratic process.

McCain-Feingold was supposed to fix the excesses of the campaign finance system, but the cure has been illusory, proving that those campaign finance reformers pursuing a strategy of

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publicly funded campaigns, as championed by the group Public Campaign in a number of states, were correct in their critique of half measures like McCain-Feingold.

Lacking true reform, the one bright spot is that the McCain-Feingold limits on funding political parties have, in the case of the Democratic Party, shifted financial power away from the Democratic National Committee (and by extension the Democratic Leadership Council) and into the grassroots. Progressives are now investing in organizing not just to throw the rascals out of office but to build enduring political communities that sustain themselves by bringing people together in the realization that in the end it is the voter, not money, that counts—and that the promise of democracy is one thing that cannot be bought. ■

**Joel Bleifuss** is the editor of *In These Times*, where he has worked as a investigative reporter, columnist and editor since 1986. Bleifuss has had more stories on Project Censored's annual list of the "10 Most Censored Stories" than any other journalist.

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