Dear Friend,

One of the things I like to do is go out and talk to students, and I had two occasions to do this recently.

On Sept. 12, I went to Mt. Horeb High School. I was invited by the excellent teacher Beth Maglio to speak to her senior students on the problem of money and politics in Wisconsin.

I told them that the problem had gotten much worse since the legislature and the governor drastically rewrote our campaign finance law in 2015. The Republicans doubled the amount of money that people can give to candidates, and they tore down the ceiling on donations to political parties. (Now rich and poor alike in Wisconsin can give $20,000 to their favorite candidate for governor and a million dollars or more to the political party of their choice.)

I fielded a few questions from the students, which was fun. Here was the last question, which had nothing to do with the topic at hand: “I saw on your website that you’re a birdwatcher. What’s your favorite bird?” (Answer: Blackburnian warbler.)

Then on Sept. 25, I had the opportunity to speak to a senior history class at UW-Stevens Point, which is studying the Third Reich. Professor Brian Hale invited me to give a talk on “Trump and the Road to Fascism.” I stipulated, at the outset, that the United States is not a fascist country yet, and Donald Trump is not Adolph Hitler. But I warned that Trump is the closest thing we’ve ever had to a fascist in the Oval Office, especially since he traffics in racism and ultranationalism. I also warned that things could go from bad to worse in a hurry, for instance, if we’re ever attacked again.

I got a lot of good questions from the students. I was struck by one thing, though. Only guys asked questions. None of the women did, though there was an equal number of each in the class.

Along with a lot of other things in this state and country, that needs to change.
A Win in Court

For the moment, at least, the names of contributors to certain political nonprofit groups that sponsor negative ads and mailings during federal election campaigns must now be disclosed.

U.S. District Judge Beryl Howell threw out a 40-year-old Federal Election Commission rule that allowed “social welfare” and “business league” nonprofits to keep their contributors secret.

While his decision is on appeal, groups that say who to vote for or against will now have to publicly report the names of donors who contribute more than $200. The case was brought by Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) against Crossroads GPS, a conservative group, and the FEC.

Unfortunately, Howell’s decision doesn’t have an impact on campaign finance reporting here in Wisconsin, but it sets a great precedent.

Two Great Stories in Wis Press

Every day, we communicate with some of the state’s most influential reporters and editors, and, over the last several weeks, two of them wrote terrific articles that relied on our work.

The first was by J.R. Ross, the editor of WisPolitics. “A WisPolitics.com check of donations found 29 donors since Jan. 1, 2015, who contributed a combined $3.3 million to the state GOP after maxing out to Walker,” wrote Ross, using figures provided to him by the Democracy Campaign. “More than half of the $3.3 million came from just three donors: Beloit businesswoman Diane Hendricks and Illinois business couple Dick and Elizabeth Uihlein.”

The other article was by Bruce Murphy, the editor of Urban Milwaukee. In his story, “The Best Governor Money Can Buy,” Murphy noted that the Koch Brothers and Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce -- along with Big Ag, the NRA, the school voucher lobby, and the Wisconsin Realtors Association -- all have gotten a lot in return for their expenditures on behalf of Gov. Walker.

Influence Peddlers of the Month

Our prestigious “Influence Peddler of the Month” award this September went to the
Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. This Milwaukee-based conservative foundation with about $900 million in assets has become one of the nation’s largest funders of rightwing think tanks, political groups, and social and economic policies.

Bradley’s money has fueled about a dozen groups and activities in Wisconsin in the last eight years, including American Majority, Americans for Prosperity, the Badger Institute, the Center for Union Facts, the MacIver Institute for Public Policy, Media Trackers, Wisconsin Club for Growth, and the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty.

The foundation’s 11-member board includes Patrick English, chief executive officer of Fiduciary Management in Milwaukee, and Diane Hendricks, the billionaire owner of ABC Supply in Beloit who is Walker’s biggest donor.

In October, our “Influence Peddler” award went to the
Democratic Governors Association (DGA), which plans to spend $3.8 million in Wisconsin to help defeat Scott Walker.

Between January 2010 and June 2018, more than 200 Wisconsin individuals and businesses contributed nearly $862,000 to the DGA through its 527 group, including about $69,700 during the first six months of this year. The top Wisconsin contributors to the group since January 2010 are:

- Johnson Controls, of Milwaukee, $480,710
- American Transmission Co., of Waukesha, $100,350
- EMM Holdings LLC, of Milwaukee, $50,000
- Laura Peracchio, a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor, $30,000
- Petro Energy LLC, of Onalaska, $25,000
- Cynthia Torhorst, of Milwaukee, a former aide to Milwaukee County Executive Chris Abele, $25,000
- Renaissance Learning, of Madison, $20,000
Badger Meter Gets WEDC Help

Top executives of a company that was awarded $250,000 in state welfare have contributed nearly $26,000 to Republican Gov. Scott Walker’s campaigns.

Badger Meter, which makes flow measurement tools for water utilities and commercial and industrial businesses, plans to expand its Mount Pleasant operations in Racine County and create up to 40 jobs in the next three years. Walker’s economic development agency, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp., said it will provide up to $250,000 in tax credits to train the new employees.

Overall, Badger Meter employees contributed $36,850 to legislative and statewide candidates between January 2010 and December 2017. All but $300 went to Republican candidates.

The top recipients of the contributions were Walker, $25,900, followed by Republican Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, $6,000, and GOP Rep. Dale Kooyenga, of Brookfield, $2,000.

The company’s top contributor to legislative and statewide candidates between January 2010 and December 2017 was its chief executive officer, Richard Meeusen, of Pewaukee, and his wife, Maribeth, $34,750. That’s 94 percent of the contributions from all employees of Badger Meter. Walker received $24,500 of those contributions from the Meeusens.

Realtors Back Roth

The Wisconsin Realtors Association is spending $208,850 on behalf of GOP Senate President Roger Roth, of Appleton, against Democrat Lee Snodgrass, of Appleton. That’s the most outside spending on any legislative race so far.

Outside groups spending on behalf of Snodgrass include High Ground Political Fund, For Our Future, and Progressive Takeover. They are spending about $11,520 – about 5.5 percent of what the Realtors are spending.

Business Group Applauds Their Justices

A business group calling itself the Wisconsin Civil Justice Council recently issued a report giving good grades to Wisconsin Supreme Court justices that the business community supported.

The Civil Justice Council is made up of 15 trade organizations representing business, insurance, construction, agricultural, transportation, energy, health care, and tourism interests that support policies to make it more difficult to sue businesses.

The group reviewed how the justices voted on cases between 2012 and 2018 dealing with business.

Surprise, surprise: The court’s conservative majority received the highest scores. Justices Annette Ziegler and Rebecca Bradley each scored 81 percent, followed by Chief Justice Pat Roggensack at 79 percent and Justice Dan Kelly at 77 percent.

Here’s how much the special interests represented by the coalition’s trade groups contributed to those four justices in their most recent court campaigns:

Rebecca Bradley, who was first elected in 2016, about $405,900;
Ziegler, who was elected in 2007 and reelected in 2017, about $334,400;
Roggensack, who was elected in 2003 and reelected in 2013, about $307,100;
Kelly, $0. Kelly has not raised campaign funds because he was appointed to fill a vacancy on the high court in 2016 by GOP Gov. Scott Walker and will not have to run for election until 2020.
Make sure to vote!!

Please vote on Nov. 6. Find out how to register, where to vote whether early or on Election Day, and what’s on your ballot (including local referenda). Just go to the state official website at myvote.wi.gov or via the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin at my.lwv.org/Wisconsin.

Also, please encourage others to vote. As Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez puts it, we need to “reach out to a disaffected electorate and inspire and motivate them to vote.”

By the way, I don’t try to guilt-trip people into voting.

I tell people, instead, that Election Day is the only day of the year when you have as much power as Charles Koch or Diane Hendricks or Richard Uihlein or Sheldon Adelson, or George Soros, or Tom Steyer.

Please Support Our Work

We depend on tax-deductible gifts from people like you so we can keep tracking the money that is distorting our politics and keep championing urgent reforms so that everyone’s voice is heard and everyone’s vote is counted.

Please send us a gift today. It’s easy. Just go to our website at wisdc.org, or you can mail it in the old-fashioned way to 203 S Paterson St, Madison WI 53703 using the reply card and envelope enclosed for your convenience.

Thanks!