

Beating Back the Counterrevolution in Wisconsin

Written by Matt Rothschild, Wisconsin Democracy Campaign
Monday, 29 February 2016 14:46 -



Speech originally presented before Lake Mills Progressives Informed and Engaged on February 26, 2016.

LAKE MILLS, WI - Thanks, Leslie, and Progressives Informed and Engaged, for inviting me. I would have come anyway, but the **lure of homemade pies** made it absolutely irresistible since pies are my favorite things to eat.

I've been baking my own fruit pies for 30 years now, and if you need to know, I use a blend of Organic Valley butter and that old standby, white coagulated Crisco, for my shortening, and it works every time.

You know, I could talk about pie all day, or about birds, since I've been a birdwatcher for 50 years, and it'd be a lot more diverting than the topic at hand, which is the plight of democracy in Wisconsin.

But that's why we're here, and that's why we all do the political work that we do:

because we believe in democracy,

and we cherish Wisconsin's historic reputation for clean government,

and we're appalled at the destruction that the Scott Walker Wrecking Crew has wreaked on our beloved state in the span of just five years.

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The fact is, we're in the midst of a counterrevolution right now.

Our state has been taken over by people who **don't give a damn about democracy.**

They don't give a damn about clean and open government.

They have no respect whatsoever for the public good.

There's a wholesale assault on democracy in Madison right now, waged not only by Gov. Scott Walker but also by Speaker Robin Vos and your very own Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald and by the corrupt justices on the Wisconsin Supreme Court – and they're all doing the bidding of the corporate powers behind them.

When I said they don't give a damn about democracy, that's obvious by the fact that they passed one of the strictest **Voter ID** laws in the country.

I don't if you saw the recent [John Oliver segment on his HBO](#) show ridiculing your own Joel Kleefisch, but it was a thing of beauty. He showed Kleefisch on the floor of the Assembly denouncing people who vote more than once in an election, and then Oliver showed him voting twice on one bill, once for himself and once for an absent legislator. Oliver also showed that Sauk City's DMV is only open on the 5th Wednesday of every month for registering to vote, and there are only four months with five Wednesdays this year.

That's how they disenfranchise people. And they do it in other ways, too.

Republicans have also gotten rid of **weekend voting** before the elections.

And they've done away with allowing the League of Women Voters, or anyone else, for

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that matter, to be deputized to register people to vote.

They even won't let the city clerks conduct voter registration efforts in public libraries.

Another way they're assaulting democracy is by drawing some of the most rigged electoral maps in the country. This gerrymandering has got to stop! In secret, in the offices of a high-priced private law firm in downtown Madison, the Republicans met in 2011 to devise, with some fancy computers, some devious electoral maps that stuffed Democrats into fewer and fewer districts. As a result, even though Republicans in the Assembly lost the overall popular vote, they gained 60 of the 99 seats.

I said they don't give a damn about clean and open government. That's clear by their repeated efforts to curtail our open-records laws. You'll remember that Speaker Vos led a sneak attack on these laws on the weekend of July 4 th last year, which showed his appreciation for irony, I suppose.

Fortunately, the people of Wisconsin, and the editorial page writers, rose up and gave legislators a piece of their mind, so they had to back down. But Vos, who has that lean and hungry look, keeps scheming about ways to accomplish this goal even to this day.

They also showed their hostility to clean and open government by **drastically rewriting our campaign finance laws** so that candidates can coordinate with outside groups, which can raise unlimited amounts of money and never disclose where it's coming from. And big donors who give directly to candidates no longer have to say where they work so it'll be harder to tell which piece of legislation is bought and paid for by which company.

And I said they had no respect for the public good. Actually, in their crude and selfish ideology, everything public is bad, and everything private is good. They don't like public workers; they don't like public schools. Hell, they don't even pay for public parks anymore.

So what do they believe in?

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They believe in power, and all they want to do is grab as much as they can as fast as they can . And to reward their paymasters and their corporate crony friends, whether it's the Koch Brothers, or ALEC, or Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce. **There isa sinister symbiosis at play here**

. The politicians who rule our state get the money that keeps them in power from these corporate groups, and then these politicians dutifully push through legislation that benefits these corporate groups, which then turn around and give more money to these same politicians. The leaders in the legislature have turned our government into an ATM for their corporate cronies. And that's what most of the legislation they pass is all about.

Just this week, they passed a bill that helps debt collectors. You know, when these guys were running for office, I didn't hear them saying we've got to make life easier for debt collectors!

There's no public demand for most of the bills that I see flash across my computer every day.

Were people really demanding the right to carry switchblades?

Were they really demanding the right to allow payday lenders to sell more products to desperate consumers?

Were they really demanding the right for bankers to offer misleading sub-prime loans, which were immortalized in "The Big Short?"

Were they really demanding the right of pipeline owners to exercise eminent domain and boot you out of your house?

Were they really demanding the right to give landlords more power to evict people?

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Were they really demanding the right to let huge factory farms have less regulation over their high-capacity wells?

Were they really demanding the right to have more lead in our paint?

Of course not. These are all special-interest bills, written for and sometimes by, they very groups that would benefit from them. They are not written for, or by, you--I can you promise you that.

This is not how democracy is supposed to work.

This is happening not just in Wisconsin, but around the country. And it's not a new problem:

Thomas Jefferson warned us 200 years ago almost to this day, when he said: "I hope we shall crush in its birth the aristocracy of the monied corporations."

150 years ago, **Wisconsin Supreme Court Chief Justice Edward Ryan** warned us that "there is a looming and new dark power. . . .The enterprises of the country are aggregating vast corporate combinations of unexampled capital, boldly marching, not for economic conquests only, but for political power. For the first time really in our politics money is taking the field as an organized power. . . ."

Well, money has really taken the field these days and it wins almost all the time.

Edward Ryan continued: "The question will arise, and arise in your day, though perhaps not fully in mine:

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“Which shall rule — wealth or man?”

“Which shall lead — money or intellect?”

“Who shall fill public stations — educated and patriotic free men, or the feudal serfs of corporate capital?”

You know who picked up on this “feudal serf” line? Not just Fighting Bob La Follette, who fought corporate power his whole life.

No, a more recent Wisconsin politician, a Republican named former State **Senator Dale Schultz**. He was the Senate Majority Leader for the Republicans for a while. And when he decided not to run again, he said that many legislators have become, and these are his words, “feudal serfs for folks with a lot of money.”

People get this in their gut.

This is a bipartisan issue. The people by a huge bipartisan margin, already understand that big money plays too big a part in our political life. In a recent poll:

84 percent agreed that money has too much influence over politics.

And 80 percent of Republicans agreed with.

78 percent said money spent by outside groups in campaigns should be limited.

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And 73 percent of Republicans agreed with that.

People understand a fundamental truth: **We no longer live in a functioning democracy.**

As Jimmy Carter told Thom Hartmann last year, we've become an "oligarchy with unlimited political bribery."

Two years ago, two political science professors, one from Princeton and the other from Northwestern ([Martin Gilens and Benjamin Page](#)) studied 1,779 policy issues between 1981 and 2002 and what they found was startling: "It makes very little difference what the general public thinks...They have little or no independent influence on policy at all. ... In our findings, the majority does not rule—at least not in the causal sense of actually determining policy outcomes."

Why don't they teach that in seventh-grade civics class, or in high school social studies? Because there it is: Our democracy is not working anymore.

We're finally hearing about this in our **Presidential race.**

Oddly, **Donald Trump** has talked about this. Remember in his first debate he said how easy it was for him to buy favors from elected officials? Hell, he bragged that he got Hillary Clinton to sit in the front row of his wedding. And that's the least of it. Usually, tycoons give money not for vanity's sake but because they want government agencies to give them something in return. And they get it! Now Trump says he's not taking money from anyone else—that he's self-financing, and therefore uncorrupted. Last night, he made the point again, saying he knows politicians because he gives them money, and he gives to candidates from both parties because he's a good businessman. It's heads I win, tails I win. And for proof, he mentioned the \$5,000 check he'd written to Ted Cruz.

On the other side, **Bernie Sanders** talks about how the political system is rigged by Wall Street

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every time he says good morning. And he's been saying it for at least 15 years now, God bless him, if you've heard him at Fighting Bob Fest, year in and year out, as I have.

And he's gotten Hillary to start talking about it, too.

Both Hillary and Bernie are on record that they would make sure their Supreme Court appointees would vote to overturn ***Citizens United***.

So let's look at Citizens United for a second.

That decision said corporations can spend unlimited amounts of money to elect this candidate or defeat that candidate. And it contained the two most naïve statements ever written in a Supreme Court decision:

“Independent expenditures, including those made by corporations, do not give rise to corruption or the appearance of corruption.”

And “The appearance of influence or access, furthermore, will not cause the electorate to lose faith in our democracy.”

What planet were those five justices living on when they came up with those whoppers?

Fortunately, people right here in Wisconsin haven't fallen for them.

In 60 villages, towns, cities, and counties all across this state (including here in Lake Mills!), the people or their representatives have voted by overwhelming margins in favor of an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to say, once and for all, that corporations aren't persons and money is not speech. (The vote of the town board on Sept. 10, 2013, here was unanimous,

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by the way.)

But this movement is not just about overturning *Citizens United*; it's about overturning 140 years of absurd Supreme Court precedents that grant personhood to corporations.

Amending the Constitution is the fundamental solution to the problem of money in politics, and I hope I'll live to see such an amendment pass.

I'm an impatient man . I don't want to wait for the pendulum to swing. I want to give it a big Badger shove in the pro-democracy direction.

As Fighting Bob La Follette put it 100 years ago, "The cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy."

We need more democracy, now, in this country.

And we need more democracy, now, right here in Wisconsin.

And no, I don't get discouraged. I know that nothing is static, and that these guys won't be in power forever, and that democracy surges forward unexpectedly – but especially when we give it a shove.

I'm a student of Howard Zinn's, the great people's historian, who chronicled these surges from below. And he once wrote:

“ TO BE HOPEFUL in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and

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places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. To live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.”

So, yes, let’s defy all that is bad around us!

And yes, let’s affirm all that is good!

What is good?

Well, things are starting to move.

Nationally, there’s the **Fight for \$15** movement. Who would have thought, just a few years ago, that people would have been walking off their jobs, en masse, at McDonald’s and Burger King and demanding \$15 an hour? And who would have thought they’d be winning, as they have already in Seattle and elsewhere?

There’s the **Black Lives Matter** movement, focusing attention on police brutality in a systematic way that we haven’t seen since the 1960s.

Or look at the **movement to end climate change**: It stopped the XL Pipeline, let’s not forget.

And then there’s **Bernie’s campaign**, whether you’re voting for him or not, you’ve got to admit he’s drawn attention to some of the key issues of our day: like our rigged economy and our rigged political system, and our rigged media. And he has caught on in a way that few could have predicted.

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Here, statewide, you've got the success of United to Amend, the group that's working so hard to overturn *Citizens United*.

Plus, Walker's approval rating is barely above the freezing mark, and that of the Republican legislators is actually below freezing.

And here's another thing: **The Walker Wrecking Crew wasn't able to get everything that it wanted in this session** .

It didn't get:

--to impose limits on school referendums

--to allow individual landowners to excavate Native burial grounds

--to allow AquaAmerica, a Pennsylvania company, to have an easier time buying up public water utilities

--to allow people who own property on a lake to dredge up and haul away three truckloads of sediment every year.

Here's another ray of hope: **The district attorneys** of Dane County, Iowa County, and Milwaukee County are appealing the horrendous Wisconsin Supreme Court decision on the John Doe straight up to the U.S. Supreme Court, where I think they'll actually win!

But more than any other reason, I'm hopeful because over the last year, I've met some really amazing people in the pro-democracy movement here in Wisconsin.

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Some of the amazing people are in the state legislature, such as **JoCasta Zamarripa**, who stands up for immigrants and poor people, or

Chris Taylor

, who exposes ALEC and defends women's health. Every day, they defy the high school bullies who rule the Capitol. And there are some courageous Republicans in there, too, like Senator

Rob Cowles

, who voted against the Campaign Finance bill and blocked some of the worst elements in the latest shoreline giveaway bill. Or Assembly Rep

Todd Novak

, who voted for nonpartisan redistricting and against the budget.

And some of the amazing people are in the nonprofit sector, like Christine Neumann-Ortiz, of Voces de la Frontera, who last week led 20,000 people in the "Day Without Latinos" rally.

Or people like Jay Heck of Common Cause, or Andrea Kaminski of the League of Women Voters, or Kerry Schumann of the League of Conservation Voters, or Kim Wright of Midwest Environmental Advocates, or George Penn of United to Amend, or Astar Herndon and Martha de la Rosa of 9to5, or Robert Kraig and Anita Johnson at Citizen Action, or like Dana Schultz and Colleen Gruszyński at Wisconsin Voices, or Scott Foval at People for the American Way, or Peter Skopec at WisPIRG.

These are people, many of them a lot younger than me and with a lot more energy, who are working together as never before to get this state back on track.

We've torn down our silos, we've shelved our egos, we're meeting and strategizing together on a regular basis, and we're all rowing in the same direction. And we'll get there yet!

So let me leave you with one final quote:

Seamus Heaney, the great Irish poet who died two years ago, wrote a beautiful poem called "The Cure at Troy." I'm not going to read the whole poem to you but one line sticks in my head: He wrote, there are times in our lives when **"hope and history rhyme."**

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Let's make hope and history rhyme again in Wisconsin.

Let's turn things around here so we can say, once again, that we're proud to be from Wisconsin.

Thank you.