

The \$2 billion Congress

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While the upcoming midterm election will be the most expensive non-presidential poll in US history, voter turnout is expected to fall to record lows. Public disapproval of both the Democrats and Republicans—both of which are running on right-wing platforms—is at the highest levels ever recorded.

There is an ever-widening chasm separating the political institutions and both parties from the broad mass of the people. At the same time, the dividing line between elected officials and the financial oligarchy that controls economic life is growing ever thinner. With the passage of every election, the government is increasingly not only controlled by, but also composed of, the extremely rich.

Some recently released figures make this clear. The combined net worth of the members of the US Congress hit \$2 billion last year, up \$150 million from 2012, according to *CQ Roll Call*'s annual tally. The median net worth of the members of Congress is over \$450,000.

The release of the report follows the announcement earlier this year by the Center for Responsive Politics, using a different method for estimating the average wealth of US lawmakers, that 2012 marked the first time a typical member of Congress was worth over a million dollars.

Enormous wealth knows no party boundaries in US politics. The Democrats, who like to posture as partisans of the “middle class,” were on average richer than their Republican counterparts. Congress’ notable multi-millionaires include:

* California Republican Representative Darrell Issa, the wealthiest US lawmaker, who heads the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. Issa has a net worth of at least \$357 million.

* Texas House Republican Michael McCaul, who is second on the list, with a net worth of at least \$117 million. McCaul serves as chairman of the House

Committee on Homeland Security. Unsurprisingly, his top five campaign donors include the defense contractor Boeing and the airport security device manufacturer OSI Systems.

* Maryland Democratic Representative John Delaney, who placed third. His stated net worth increased over 60 percent between 2012 and 2013, hitting \$111 million. He is a member of the House Financial Services Committee. Four of his five biggest donors include financial companies, including Credit Suisse and JPMorgan Chase.

* The House and Senate leaders are all multi-millionaires. Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid is worth about \$2.8 million, while Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell is worth \$11.97 million. Republican House Speaker John Boehner has a net worth of \$2.32 million, and outgoing House Majority Leader Eric Cantor \$9 million. Democratic House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi has a net worth of \$29 million, making her the 14th-wealthiest member of Congress.

In comparison, the net worth of a typical US household was \$56,335 in 2013, down a massive 36 percent since 2003, according to a study published earlier this year by the Russell Sage Foundation. Based on that figure, a typical member of Congress is 20 times wealthier than a typical American.

In being staffed and run mostly by millionaires, Congress is in the company of almost every other major institution in the US. For example, eight of the nine Supreme Court justices are millionaires (by far), according to a review of their financial disclosures by *USA Today*.

The growing wealth of those who populate the institutions of the state is an expression of the decay of democratic forms in the US and the ever-more openly oligarchical character of the US political system.

Corruption, bribery, fraud and all manner of insider-

dealings: such is the standard operating procedure of government in the United States. With the whole process fueled by unprecedented levels of cash, candidates spend a majority of their time in office fundraising among the corporate elite and the well-heeled. Increasingly, individual wealth is leveraged into positions of political power.

If politicians are not extremely wealthy going in, they generally find fortune going out—either through extravagant speaking fees paid by corporations or through the “revolving door” between Congress and big business. A case in point is the Clintons. The couple, according to Hillary, were “dirt poor” after leaving the White House, but have since racked up over a hundred million dollars from speaking fees and other sources, putting them squarely in the top 0.01 percent of income earners.

Without glorifying the past, one can note changes in the forms of class rule over the past century of American politics. The two major parties, the Democrats and Republicans, in an earlier period had broader constituencies. The Democrats had the active support of layers of the middle class and large sections of the working class, along with sections of big business. The Republicans counted on support from small businessmen and small farmers as well as most of corporate America.

These parties have largely lost any substantial, active popular base. They have become hollowed out. They are little more than electoral instruments of a tiny financial aristocracy allied to the military-intelligence apparatus. All important decisions are made behind the backs of the population and sold to the people by a mass media whose leading personnel are themselves multi-millionaires.

Over the course of the past 50 years, amid the deindustrialization and financialization of the economy, accompanied by an extraordinary growth of social inequality, any marginal, relative distance between the political apparatus and the corporate-financial elite has vanished. At the same time, the middle class, the traditional social basis of support for parliamentary democracy, has been increasingly broken up. Broad sections have been proletarianized while the upper layers have seen their wealth soar in line with the stock market.

It is a basic tenet of Marxism that the social class that

dominates economic life controls the state as well. This historic truth is being expressed ever more openly and nakedly in official politics.

Under these conditions, nostrums such as the belief that change can be realized by voting or writing your congressman are becoming increasingly discredited. Progressive political change cannot come without a direct assault by the working class on the fortunes and property of the ruling class. The task is not to reform, but to overthrow the existing political system and replace it with institutions that are under the democratic control of the working class, together with the reorganization of economic life to meet social needs, not private profit.



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