

Moosa Zaidi
Granite Bay High School, Granite Bay
2012 Second Place Winner

The institution of democracy is perhaps one of the most beautiful ever imagined. Through freedom of speech, each individual is guaranteed a voice. Groups of individuals engage in dialogue with the arguments spoken by the most people being heard most loudly. The result is a government which serves the common good, while giving consideration to many sides, a government of the people, by the people, for the people. However, democracy has long come across a continuing problem. A functioning democracy requires that we all be given an equal voice. Instead, we live in a society where due to wealth disparity, a few individuals are given booming megaphones, and millions of others are only able to whisper. This wealth disparity has increasingly become a threat to the democracy we all cherish. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis's declaration that "We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both" rings truer than ever.

While there are several ways in which wealthy interests can exercise undue power, perhaps one of the most obvious ways is through direct influence of legislators. This influence can come in several forms from lobbying, to campaign contributions, to pamphlets that provide just the right information based on research paid for by wealthy interests. This unfair influence has only been exacerbated in recent years by the Supreme Court's loosening of regulations and the emergence of Super PACs. Ostensibly, wealthy interests donate without expecting return. Unfortunately, there is little doubt that looking to the next elections, politicians feel indebted to their previous donors. However, we cannot have a democracy until the only debt felt by political representatives is an equal debt to all they represent.

In addition, to unfair influence over politicians, wealthy interests threaten democracy through purchasing control of information. A democracy depends on the free and rapid spread of ideas. However, wealth concentration chokes democracy with a leash around the flow of ideas. In the United States, a few conglomerates own almost all the media. In addition to controlling the media, the wealthy can purchase disproportionate amounts of advertisement time, hammering minds into the mold of their version of any story. Politicians fear the power of media and too many individuals unquestioningly swallow its information. The power of media was seen readily in its ability to appropriate public property in the 1996 Telecommunications Act. A democracy depends on a free thinking and informed populace that furthers the common good. However, such a populace becomes increasingly difficult when the flow of information is carefully controlled by the few, so that the public is inundated with certain ideas and almost cut off from others.

Unless, something is done to heed Supreme Court Justice Brandeis's farseeing warning we appear to face a bleak future. As long as great wealth remains concentrated, a few voices will remain much louder than others. These louder voices will drown out the voices of everyday individuals and so drown democracy.