

By Albert Hunt

The fears that big money would corrupt the political process in 2012 weren't realized, the conventional wisdom says. The fat cats, unshackled by U.S. Supreme Court and lower court decisions, weren't able to buy the presidency or the Senate.

True. It also misses the point. About \$6 billion was spent on the campaign, and outside groups poured \$1.3 billion into political races, according to data from the Federal Election Commission and the Center for Responsive Politics.

Supporters of the Citizens United and other campaign- finance rulings dismissed the concerns about corruption, contending that more money in politics would increase voter participation and turnout and enhance the public's knowledge about the candidates and important issues.

Actually, even though considerably more money was spent than four years earlier, turnout in the general election was down a little. Even in some of the most competitive states such as Ohio, where both sides poured in cash, voter participation decreased.

And the higher turnout in some other venues was due more to the political infrastructure and ground game than the money the outside groups spent on the airwaves. During the autumn campaign, dozens of voters in those states told me that the carpet bombing of political television commercials caused them to turn off their televisions.

### Primary Turnout

The outpouring of money was pronounced in the Republican primaries and turnout didn't soar there either, even though there wasn't a real competing Democratic contest.

One irony was that the super political action committee backing former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney devastated his Republican opponents in the primaries; in the general election, it was a super-PAC backing President Barack Obama, with its early attacks on Romney's private-equity background, that was most effective.

Did the record amounts of money inform and edify voters? It would be hard to find a serious Republican or Democrat who argues it did.

The flood of outside money weakened political parties. The incumbent party always dominates its national committee, as did Obama this time. The Republican chairman, Reince Priebus, did a good job cleaning up the shambles he inherited, but the unofficial party chief was Karl Rove, with the checkbook he controlled through American Crossroads, the Citizens United- enabled outside group he led.

Most insidious is the corrosive corruption of big money. This is a reality that the ruling's backers in the Supreme Court majority -- none of whom had to run for office -- tried to play down. Do they believe that Texas billionaire Harold Simmons, who could gain a lot more money with a favorable Nuclear Regulatory Commission decision permitting his West Texas dump site to accept depleted uranium, contributed \$27 million to Romney and other Republicans only in the interest of good government?

The Republicans' biggest sugar daddy, the Las Vegas casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, forked over \$90 million in this cycle. The Huffington Post reported that Adelson was in Washington last week to meet Republican members of Congress, possibly to discuss changes to the anti-bribery Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. His company is under investigation by the Justice Department and Securities and Exchange Commission for possible violations of the law by his casinos in Macau.

On the Democratic side, there are reports that Obama's next ambassador to the U.K. -- or perhaps France -- will be Anna Wintour, the Vogue editor whose chief qualification appears to be that she held at least three big fundraisers for the president and, as a top bundler, raked in more than \$2.7 million for his campaign.

Constitutional Amendment

Correctives to the Citizens United ruling are difficult. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi is pushing a constitutional amendment to overturn the decision. That's not going to happen: Such an effort has the support of almost no Republicans and requires approval from two-thirds of the Congress and three-fourths of the states.

Two House Democrats, Chris Van Hollen of Maryland and David Price of North Carolina, are pushing a measure that would match small contributions with government money. This solution would be much cheaper for taxpayers than relying on special interests, but it's a tough slog in the current Washington climate. They also are pushing for greater transparency when it comes to the fiction that candidate super-PACs are distinct from the candidate's campaign. And Van Hollen would end the secret contributions now permissible under Federal Election Commission rules and require complete disclosure.

These proposals meet the Supreme Court's standards. A test of whether the measures go anywhere is whether they can garner some Republican support; advocates are waiting to see if one-time campaign-finance reform champion, Senator John McCain of Arizona, will rekindle his reformer's zeal.

The bankruptcy of the money-driven system was evident in the amount of time the presidential candidates spent fundraising. In the three weeks after the Republican convention, Romney held 12 rallies, three press conferences and 18 fundraisers in places such as mansions overlooking Biscayne Bay in Florida and a Las Vegas steakhouse where Adelson had a front-row seat.

It was at a fundraiser, which he thought was private, as most were, that Romney made his infamous comment about the 47 percent of Americans who "believe they are victims," and "pay no income tax."

Obama hustled almost as much, taking time away from governing and campaigning. Spending so much time in the opulent homes of donors, filled with priceless art and antiques, reinforced the president's view that the rich can afford to pay higher taxes.