WHY STUDY PACs?

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Ann B. Matasar. *Corporate PACs and Federal Campaign Financing Laws*. (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1986). x + 161 pp. Tables, notes, appendices, bibliography, index. $35.00.

Undue influences is the mystery of election finance. The major approaches to the issue war with each other. One definition focuses on transactions with officeholders (Lowenstein, 1985: 833–836). The concern is that the benefits available from those who seek favors may tempt officials to sacrifice public trust for private gain (Noonan, 1984). From this perspective, drastic restrictions on what public officers may accept are crucial. Provisions that allow noticeable support of public officials are apt to corrupt their judgment (Wertheimer and Huwa, 1980–81: 61–64).

Opposed to this idea is the concern with responsiveness of elected officials to constituent pressure (Lowenstein, 1985: 837–843). Pressure is viewed as necessary and appropriate but considered to be "undue" when it is out of proportion to "justice" or to the size of political support. This approach suggests a focus on equality among contributors and on scaling down contributions to a figure that is manageable for most citizens.

Flatly opposed to such notions, however, is the concern with providing the public with the means of rational decision. If equality reduces the level of funding, the system may be less rather than more fair. Incumbent officials and institutions have considerable resources. The public also needs considerable resources to evaluate both people and policies (Ceaser, 1979: 106–107, 126, 131–132). In fact there are crucial minima of expenditures necessary to reach the public (Jacobson, 1980: 157, 194). Without reaching those levels, equality is a cruel mirage. From this perspective, the crucial issue is how to increase the level of funding, rather than the attractive but damaging error of responding to rising costs by restricting expenses.

In *Corporate PACs and Federal Campaign Financing Laws*, Ann Matasar (pp. 89–91) argues that corporate PACs have been responsible citizens and would be still more responsible if more aggressive. It is not clear, however, what question of election finance her book is trying to address. She (p. 3) quotes Alexander (1980) briefly on the conflict between economic inequality and electoral equality, but thereafter ignores the insight. Research on the campaign process suggests that efforts to equalize political influence by restricting campaign finance have failed and that more stringent limitations are unlikely to help (Gottlieb, 1985). Matasar would agree, but her book is beside the point.

Matasar argues that corporate PACs do not make much difference in the outcome of elections. However, her evidence, which shows the conservatism of corporate giving and its preference for incumbents (p. 4), is inconsistent with this conclusion. More important, without seriously considering any theory of corporate influence, she answers none. While she may be correct in asserting that corporate PACs are not significant culprits in the current election system, she entirely misses the reasons for this.

On the level of transactional theory, it is crucial to understand what influences Congress. Although mentioning the debate, Matasar (p. 65) does not address this problem. She merely reviews familiar data on the extent, sources, and recipients of the contributions of corporate PACs. One cannot examine their influence, however, by studying aggregate behavior.

On the level of proportional theory, it is crucial to understand the influence of PACs. Matasar (pp. 29, 66) argues that corporate PACs are themselves restrained by the risk of public reaction to corporate politics. Her data, however, do not show that corporate PACs are without influence. Proponents of a proportional theory are unlikely to be swayed without examination of the relative impact of PACs.

On the level of a resource theory, it is crucial to understand how corporate PACs might fill in gaps in public awareness. Her emphasis on the risk averseness and conservative and incumbent bias of corporate PACs suggest the opposite (pp. 51–66).

Thus Matasar treats the PAC literature as a collection of horror stories in search of a theory of abuse. Her own book reads as a collection of justifications in search of a charge.

The cutting edge of this issue is not regulation but finance ("Campaign Spending Is Focus of Hearing," *Campaign Practice Reports*, March 9, 1987: 1–3). The goal is to reconcile equal personal influence and sufficient funding without using a formula that perpetuates outdated voter preferences (cf. Adamany and Agree, 1975: 189–192, 196–201, with Jacobson, 1980: 199–200).

Matasar's book might yet have been useful if she had provided useful new data. Unfortunately, her only contribution to the available literature is a questionnaire, a form of research that poses well-known difficulties. Matasar presents no data from which we could glean either the representativeness of her sample or the reliability of responses to her questionnaire (see p. 28). Even her use of statistics is poor; she insists (p. 26), for example, that the 1976 SUNPAC decision (Sun Oil Company, Federal Election Commission Advisory Opinion, 1975-23) stimulated PAC growth, while presenting an unexplained chart that shows continuous growth before that year.

One can engage one's mind and eyes much more productively than by reading Matasar's book.

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