

How to Buy Votes

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AMERICAN ELECTION law, and the machinery to enforce it, was clearly not adequate to protect the country in 1972. The Senate Watergate Committee's staff has now compiled an anthology of clear and obvious abuses. Many of these abuses also appear to be crimes; the question of individual guilt can be left to the Special Prosecutor and the courts. But the urgent need to safeguard the integrity of our democracy is Congress's business—and the voters'.

This new anthology of misdeeds covers a dozen or so cases that the committee staff chose to illustrate a pattern of ruthless exploitation by the administration. These cases are not so dramatic as the milk contributions, since they do not appear to involve President Nixon personally or directly. To the contrary, the cases in this latest compilation are common examples of offenses that were, in 1972, widespread.

Taken together, these transgressions constitute a warning that certain types of tawdry but effective vote-buying are getting easier to commit and harder to detect because of the vast proliferation of federal grant programs. The more grants that the government routinely offers, and the more purposes for which it offers them, the more difficult it becomes for outsiders to police the honesty of the administration.

Most of the cases in this latest staff report revolve around the joint efforts of the administration and the Committee for the Re-Election of the President to fan up support among the minorities. Consider, for example, the missionary work conducted by Mr. William H. Marumoto of the White House staff among the Chicanos. In June 1972 the Labor Department gave \$30,000 to the Southwest Council of La Raza for a conference, and there was discussion of a further grant of \$6 million to follow. But the staff report recalls the following exchange between the committee's chief counsel, Samuel Dash, and Mr. Marumoto in the hearings last November:

Q. Mr. Marumoto, do you recall . . . your statement to us, that at no time did you believe they were going to get any grant, but that you were in a sense engaging with them in what has been known as a stroking session?

A. We were neutralizing them.

Q. You were neutralizing them?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. And by holding them at bay, not giving them a grant, but discussing the possibility of a \$30,000 conference grant, this sort of at least held them away from being an opponent if they were not going to be supportive?

A. That is right.

Reviewing the evidence, the committee's staff now concludes that the administration never intended to give the Southwest Council of La Raza any large grant but, viewing it as a potential ally of the Democrats, was buying its neutrality for \$30,000 of the Labor Department's money plus vague hints of further largesse that never materialized.

To take another example, a White House memorandum

casts a highly unfortunate light on the grant that the Office of Education gave to James Farmer, former assistant secretary of Health, Education and Welfare in the Nixon administration and, earlier, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality. The memorandum was written on May 2, 1972, by one White House staff member, Frederic V. Malek, to another, Robert Finch. It said, in part:

1. Farmer has been given a grant from OE to fund his project here in Washington.

2. He will now be able to spend a major part of his time on the above project while also making time available to the re-election effort.

3. He has agreed to do speaking on our behalf and also to talk to key black leaders in an effort to gain their loyalties.

In a further case, a Chicano consulting firm lost its preferred status as a government contractor when, apparently, it failed to contribute to the campaign. Another group, actively assisting the re-election campaign, got nearly \$2 million of federal funds through grants awarded "outside normal procedures," the General Accounting Office has concluded. In still another instance, \$263,000 of federal funds was spent on brochures extolling Mr. Nixon's services to the elderly. The idea evidently came from the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, but the money was put up by six or seven federal agencies.

Obviously the traditional campaign laws were massively violated in 1972. But the only current effort at reform legislation is now stalled in a House committee where the Democratic leadership seems content to leave it indefinitely. The enthusiasm for campaign reform does not seem to burn very brightly in the halls of Congress. This squalid vote-buying, is, among other things, a perversion of the legislative purpose of the grant programs. But Congress is in no hurry to do anything about it.

Congressmen might want to reflect on the vote last week in California. Under the state's initiative law, voters can petition a bill onto the ballot and pass it themselves in an election. Proposition Nine on last week's ballot was a bill to set rigid limits on candidates' spending, and prohibit lobbyists from making campaign contributions. It proposed an enforcement commission with power to issue subpoenas and levy fines. It was fought bitterly by both business and labor. It was sufficiently sweeping, and incalculable in its promised effect, to draw protests from many disinterested defenders of good government. It was a drastic bill—and the voters supported it by the astonishing ratio of more than two to one.

California's voters evidently decided that the time had come to curb, at last, the influence of money in their elections and to elevate the ethical standards in their campaigns. There may well be voters in other states who feel the same way. This latest evidence of relatively petty but systematic wrongdoing, presented by the Watergate Committee's staff, now gives voters further reason to believe that real change is necessary.