

# Four Puppet Politics

by S. Bryce Graves

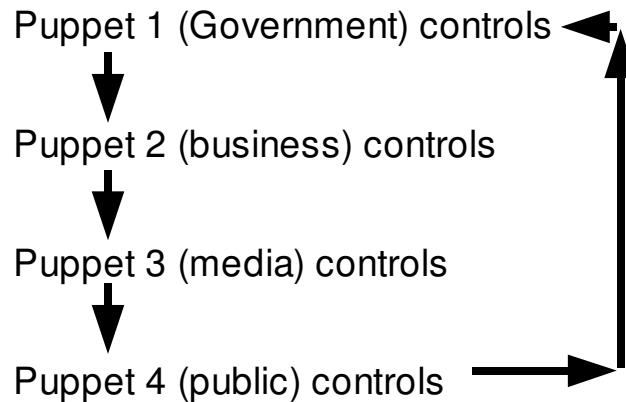


Figure: Four puppets in a circle with government controlling business, which controls commercial media, which controls the public, who officially control the government through the democratic process<sup>1</sup>

The political system in the United States might be described in terms of the accompanying "Four Puppet" diagram: Government officially writes and administers the rules by which everyone in society, especially business, are supposed to live. Through their management of advertising budgets, big businesses control any media organization that depend on advertising. Commercial media provide the news and the fiction from which the public develops their world view. And the public officially control the political process through elections.

This diagram shows only the most obvious connections. There are 8 other possible connections, all active to varying degrees. The most important such connection today may be the massive influence of big business on government. In the US, this takes the form of lobbying, made exceptionally effective by the US bribery system of campaign finance. It is extremely difficult to get details on how much the US public actually pays for this system. However, a sweet example is provided by the price of sugar, which in the US is roughly double the international price. Around 1990, it was estimated that tariffs against foreign sugar and other legislation netted US sugar producers roughly \$3 billion in excess profits; to secure these \$3 billion, they invested \$2.6 million in campaign "contributions".<sup>2</sup> In this one example, the return on investment in campaign contributions exceeded \$1,000 for each \$1 invested in campaign contributions.

1 Similar to M. C. Escher (1960) "Ascending and Descending", "<http://www.mcescher.com/Gallery/recogn-bmp/LW435.jpg>", accessed 2010.05.30.

2 Philip M. Stern (1992) Still the Best Congress Money Can Buy (Regnery Gateway, esp. pp. 168-171). Tables 3 and 4 of "Sugar and Sweeteners: Recommended Data", United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service provide data on the world and US prices of raw sugar from 1960 to 2009. During this period, US price averaged more than double the world price. "<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Sugar/data.htm>"; accessed 2010.05.30.

This is only one of many hidden ways in which the US (and the world) public pays for US political campaigns. Another is how the finance industry massively increased their share of profits in the US economy in recent years, going from perhaps 11.5 percent in 1983 to 20 percent in 2002,<sup>3</sup> a difference worth \$85 billion on a base of \$1 trillion.<sup>4</sup> Campaign contributions from this industry averaged roughly \$120 million per year from 1990 to 2008, for a return of roughly \$700 for each \$1 invested in campaign contributions.<sup>5</sup> This is a conservative estimate; the actual returns could be double.<sup>6</sup>

However, the impact of big business on government would be substantially reduced if a critical mass of the public made a greater effort to select sources for news and general values that were less obviously distorted by money. Commercial media exist to sell behavior change in their audience to advertisers. News sources that accept advertising typically lose revenue from anything that business executives perceive to be negative. Only if there is a likely prospect of loss of audience will the commercial media disseminate a story that is critical of an advertiser or that presents a perspective that would not support the advertisers' political program. Herman and Chomsky described this as "worthy and unworthy victims."<sup>7</sup> The brutal murder of Father Popieluszko by Polish authorities in 1984 received more coverage in the US mainstream media than 100 religious workers in Latin America combined. The difference in news coverage was attributed to the fact that Poland was an official enemy of the US at the time, while the Latin American death squads appeared to be supporting the political agenda of US multinational business.

This analysis suggests remedies. Most obviously, voters can seek out, create and support media that do not accept advertising and rely on them for news and entertainment; If money stops winning elections, we will get more honest politics. Individuals and groups can work to identify and reduce the amount of business they do with the most egregious corporate actors. Anyone who changes will reduce their contributions to the problem. If enough people change, the worst corporate contributors will not have the money to buy political favors, and others will be less motivated to do so.

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3 Jay R. Mandle (2010) *Creating Political Equality: American Elections as a Public Good* (Academica Pr., Table 16.1, p. 80, extracted from *Historical Statistics of the United States Earliest Times to the Present*, Millennial Ed., Vol. 3, Table Ca35-53).

4 "Domestic Industries" row in "NIPA Table 6.16D. Corporate Profits by Industry (Annual)"; "<http://www.bea.gov/national/nipaweb/SelectTable.asp>", accessed 2010.05.30.

5 Mandle, *ibid.*

6 Frederick Smith, President and founder of FedEx was quoted in the March 2010 issue of *Le Monde Diplomatique* (p. 12, French edition) as saying, "In 1983, the financial sector represented 15 percent of the profits in the American economy. In 2008, the last period before the crisis, its part of the profits was roughly a third." NIPA Table 6.16D, *ibid.*, showed profits in the financial sector as 23 percent of total US domestic profits increasing to 30 percent in 2000 and to 40 percent in 2001 - 2003, then descending to 28 percent in the crisis year 2008 and rebounding to 32 percent in 2009.

7 Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (Pantheon, Table 2-1, pp. 40-41).