



Are Contributions to Political Campaigns Ethical?

Joanna Student

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Dr. Ashford Instructor

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### **Ethical Contributions to Political Campaigns**

✓ A question that comes up frequently in political discussions is whether organizations like corporations have too much influence over the political landscape today. Corporations have many resources through which to effect political change, including lobbyists, *quid pro quo* back door arrangements and campaign contributions. Because these funds can have a large influence on who wins elections and the legislation that politicians support, it is important for an educated citizenry to be aware of these contributions, and to consider their ethical implications. I will argue that from the utilitarian perspective, indirect contributions to political campaigns by organizations like corporations and unions can be ethical and should be allowed so long as there are sufficient regulations in place to prevent undue harm that might result from giving large organizations too much influence over the political process. I will contrast this view with that of ethical egoism, which would argue that such contributions are ethical inasmuch as they allow corporations to pursue their own long term interests.

✓ According to the Federal Elections Commission (2004), “The Federal Election Campaign Act (the Act) places monetary limits on contributions to support candidates for federal office and prohibits contributions from certain sources.” However, corporations are allowed to create separate bank accounts and then make donations from these accounts to political campaigns as long as they are not connected directly to the operation of the business. The Final Paper will discuss what happens when corporations set up political action committees or PACs.

#### **✓ Utilitarianism**

✓ Utilitarianism is the moral theory that actions are right or wrong in proportion to the degree to which they promote the happiness of all concerned (Mill, 2008). Accordingly, whether or not corporate campaign contributions are ethical will depend on the overall

consequences of such contributions. If a corporation's making a contribution results in better overall consequences than not making it, or than making a different contribution, then the contribution would be considered ethical. On the other hand, if the contribution results in more harm than good, then the contribution would be unethical. For instance, a contribution to a candidate could be unethical if it results in benefits to the corporation itself, but does so at the expense of many others in the society. The primary question of this paper is not whether particular cases of such contributions are wrong, but whether corporate contributions to political campaigns are wrong in general; that is, does permitting them have greater overall consequences than banning them would have? I will argue that with careful oversight, the benefits of such contributions can outweigh their potential harms, so allowing them is ethical from a utilitarian point of view.

There are various reasons that representatives of a corporation may want to donate to a political campaign. Corporations may be trying to advance their particular organizational objectives or they may stand to garner an economic benefit. While a corporation will always be concerned with its own future profits, this does not necessarily conflict with the interests of society as a whole. In many cases, attempting to have a political influence that benefits the corporation can also benefit society as a whole. For example, a contribution that helps a corporation to succeed in the market place can result in the continued employment of thousands of people, as well as the provision of important goods and services at lower prices.

Another example of the positive use of political contributions comes not from corporations but from unions. According to the Center for Responsive Politics (2016), the largest all-time contributors to campaigns has been labor unions such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which ranked number one with \$228,096,452 in

donations since 1989. They were far ahead of the next two contributors, which were the National Education Association with \$96,619,681 in donations and the American Federation of State/County/Municipal Employees Union with \$96,445,616 in total contributions. The millions of dollars from these political contributions have served to promote the goals of their union, which in turn promote the well-being of the many members of the American work force that they represent.

✓ The Final Paper will further explore the role of PACs in providing benefits to their organizational members and society. Further, it will contrast possible negative consequences that can result from allowing corporate contributions, with alternative approaches to regulation.

### **Ethical Egoism**

✓ Ethical egoism is the moral theory that one should do whatever is in one's own interests (Mosser, 2013). This does not mean that one should do whatever one feels like in the moment, but that one should work hard to promote one's greatest long-term success. When corporations donate to political campaigns, they generally will do so with the goal of promoting their own financial interests and thus are acting ethically according to the egoist theory. Some may feel that this kind of self-interested influence is unethical. One can imagine a business supporting legislation that promotes its own interests to the detriment of society as a whole. For example, corporations have often used their considerable influence to create legislation favorable to their own interests but not to the interests of employees, human rights, or the environment (Burley & Hoedeman, 2011). ✓ Because a lot of harm can come to society from such influence, some may feel that this degree of power in the hands of self-interested corporations should not be allowed.

The Final Paper will further explore the metric by which we measure the ethicality of an action based on its overall social consequences and, drawing from the ideas of Smith (2007) and others, evaluate the societal implications of corporate pursuit of self-interest.

## ✓ Conclusion

✓ Donations from organizations to political campaigns can drive legislation and thus have a major influence on public policy in this country. While this influence can have positive and negative impacts, this paper argues that such contributions should be allowed as they satisfy the ethical egoist goal of allowing corporations to promote their own interests, and, at least when regulated, can satisfy the utilitarian goal of promoting a happier society as well. One significant difference between the two approaches is that the utilitarian view would insist on certain regulations designed to limit the harmful results that could result from organizations donating in ways that promote their own interests. However, the ethical egoist would disagree, and maintain that the freedom of organizations to promote their interests has the highest priority; thus, the egoist would likely oppose most kinds of regulations on political contributions by organizations. ✓ Both theories appear to agree, however, that, at least when carefully regulated, corporations should be allowed to make political contributions that further their long-term interests.

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