The political reality in America today is that it costs a lot of money to win an election, and a ridiculous amount of money to win a big election such as the presidency. With the average cost of a presidential campaign being well over $300 million dollars, it is no wonder that candidates and political parties do everything in their power to raise the money it will cost them to run. A very popular way to raise the kind of funds needed to run a campaign these days is through "soft money" contributions.

"Soft money" is money that is not donated officially for a campaign, but money that is to be used for "party building activities" (new commoncause.org). This money, however, is not used to help a party grow by furnishing a new office or registering voters, rather it is slipped through legal loopholes into the pockets of candidates who buy their seat in congress, the senate, and even the Oval Office. "Soft money" contributions exploit a flaw in the laws set by the Federal Election Commission. They take power away from the people of the United States and give it to powerful corporations and special interest groups who see their financial muscle to muffle the political voice of the American people.

The financial power of large corporations such as AT&T and special interest groups such as national labor unions, combined with the great financial need of politicians today, has made running for office a competition to see who can raise the most money. These corporations and groups have been able to find a loophole in the legal limits of campaign finance, and continue to worsen the abuse of this loophole. It is now illegal for an individual to donate more than $1,000 dollars to a federal candidate, and no more than $20,000 dollars per year to a political party for the purpose of an election (www.commoncause.org). These limits, put in place by the Federal Election Commission, are intended to keep people from buying influence from candidates, but there is an important loophole in the law. In 1979, Jimmy Carter signed legislation allowing the donation of "soft money" to political parties for the purpose of encouraging party growth, and this legislation has been exploited to make huge donations by individuals and corporations a reality. This money corrupts the political system in a few ways. First, by donating millions of dollars to political parties, corporations and special interest groups are buying the favor of these parties, and their candidates. For example, AT&T donated $5,110,500 in "soft money" last year to the Democratic party, not because AT&T has liberal political views, but because it is buying influence within the party. Even more ridiculous is that AT&T donated $1,823,635 to the Republican party, showing that this corporation is simply trying to buy influence and favor within both parties so politicians are less likely to give the huge corporate donations to the future. Candidates who benefit from "soft money" donations do not forget who helped them during their campaigns, and their party doesn't let them even if they wanted to. The result is corporations and special interest groups that will not be touched by lawmakers, because they pocket the lawmakers' power.

Whereas AT&T obviously chooses to buy influence in both parties, the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees has chosen to be the largest donator to the Democratic party, the trend is in all directions of donatons that are Republicans and not into allegiance with large corporations, and Democrats are left with labor unions. Both parties are paralysed to do anything negative to those who gave them so much money. The fact that these huge groups are able to buy influence from our country's major political parties means that the voice of the regular people is drowned out by the overwhelming influence of the party's opponents.

"Soft money" donations have contributed to the growing belief that politicians now see to buy their positions rather than earn them. With the average cost of a Senate seat being $3,365,000 and the cost of a seat in the House being $787,000, no politicians are able to finance a campaign without the backing of huge money donations. The days where any person can grow up to be president are vanishing before our eyes, simply because there are few who are afforded to make their voice heard. Quoting a former DNC turncoat, "The White House is like the subways - you have to pay coins in to open the gates" (www.commoncause.org). Our current president, George W. Bush, broke all campaign fundraising records by raising $150 million, forging any federal aid for his campaign in favor of not having to follow any of the Federal Election Committee limits because of the huge soft money donations he received for his party. "Soft money" is taking the voice of the common people, and with it the heart of the American dream.

By using "soft money" donations to advertise and promote the agenda of their candidates, political parties are using a legal loophole and corrupting the American political system. "Soft money" donations must be stopped, because the problem is only getting worse. "Soft money" donations in 1992 totaled $86 million, but in the 1996 election the amount increased to $260 million. The U.S. Senate recently passed the McCain-Feingold Bill, which would ban "soft money" donations to political parties and give political influence back to the people. The matter of the country is in favor of such legislation, with 51% saying it is time to limit campaign contributions, and only 25% of people opposed. The American people know that their leaders have been bought by the huge financial power in this country, and they also know that it is time for that change and for the people to get their voices heard by their elected leaders once again. Elected officials must be free to make choices on what is right, not on who gave them the most money when they were running. If "soft money" donations are allowed to continue, the American people will continue to be cheated out of their rightful voice in politics.

What do you think about the HC housing situation?

"There is a problem. Then I suppose more buildings could help." - Patrick Twomey '02

"Housing?? How about stall doors and shower curtains in the Carlin 2 bathroom?" - Chad Clifford '01

They should buy Cambridge dorms. "Dorms are cheaper and less crowded. Departments out and clean them up." -Mollie Cura '01

"They should put upperclassmen apartment buildings on Howard Johnson lot." -Sarah Foley '01

Clearly, as Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY-AL) commented with regards to the controversial campaign finance reform plan under consideration, "nobody likes to be labeled as (being) opposed to reform." But when "reform" takes the shape of blatant constitutional defiance, some are willing to take this risk. In opposition of a soft-money ban, McConnell and several of his colleagues from both parties have vehemently opposed the plan Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Russell Feingold (D-WI) propose to ban soft money donations. Introduced in 1997, the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act has finally been passed in Senate after five years of persistent attempts to reform campaign finance. Though the bill still has a way to go, awaiting approval in the House and then Bush's signature, Monday's vote in the Senate is considered a major victory for the bill.

This plan and others of its kind aim to remedy campaign finance corruption by imposing limits on soft money contributions. The term "soft money," in contrast to "hard money," describes money raised and spent outside the regulations for federal election campaigns. Hard money therefore includes direct expenditure on campaigns. The distinction between the two emerged in the 1976 as a series of laws were passed to limit the size of campaign contributions, requiring detailed disclosure of campaign fund sources. The limited, reportable monies were termed hard money. Soft money includes all contributions that are outside of the regulations imposed by the Federal Election Campaign (FECA). Generally, soft money includes contributions from individuals that exceed the dollar limit of $20,000 per year, and funds that come from corporations or labor unions. McCain's plan specifically targets these sources of funding, calling for a ban on soft money and limitations on advertising. Despite the seductive nature of such a plot, (indeed, who would oppose reform?), there are several factors which render McCain's plan both constitutionally dubious and, in practice, likely to be counter-productive.

Fundamentally, the limits suggested in the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act violate First Amendment rights. Freedom of an individual or a corporation to support a political party is not, in essence, objectionable. Rather, fault lies in the abuses of corrupt politicians who inappropriately favor certain contributors. Clearly, neither the system itself, nor the principles of free speech and association are to blame. Denying the liberty to practice freedom of association by imposing increased government regulation is not the way to better our political situation.

The Supreme Court has already discouraged imposing limits on political contributions. The 1976 Supreme Court decision Buckley v. Valeo, which came in the wake of the Watergate scandal, addressed this issue directly. According to this landmark decision, "the First Amendment denies government the power to determine that spending to promote one's political views is wasteful, excessive, or unnecessary. In the free society ordained by our Constitution it is not the government, but the people—individually as citizens and candidates and collectively as associations and political committees—who must retain control over the quantity and range of debate on public issues in a political campaign." (Buckley v. Valeo) Thus, in accordance with the First Amendment, the U.S. Supreme Court has already established the fact that government regulation of political spending is unconstitutional.

Rights of free speech and free association are vital to a working democracy, not ideals to be maintained at convenience and discarded at whim. House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-MO) describes the challenge in campaign finance as an issue of having "two important values in conflict: freedom of speech and our desire for healthy campaigns in a healthy democracy. You can't have both." (NY Times Magazine) Wrong. We cannot have a healthy democracy that ignores free speech, the two are inextricably linked.

Furthermore, if we ignore the unpleasantly conspicuous reality that a soft money ban is unconstitutional, McCain's plan shows little hope of decreasing corruption within political fundraising. On the contrary, increased regulation promises to move politicians to devise more questionable, less accountable means of acquiring funding. Historical hindsight doesn't have to be too acute to recall that current practices are based in previous attempts to reform campaign finance. As hard money was restricted in the 90's, soft money contributions increased at a staggering pace. Thus, to pretend that restricting soft money contributions will actually preclude those groups that wish to buy influence represents severe naivete. These groups and individuals will not forfeit their influence but will instead resort to more covert attempts to skirt regulations. In short, the proposed McCain-Feingold plan to reform campaign finance offers little hope of improving our current political degradation. It vows to encourage deceptive fundraising practices, deprive the American people of control over their government, and violate the Constitution in the process.