

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF TULARE COUNTY

“... To promote informed citizen participation ...”

THE VOTER

DECEMBER 2015 – JANUARY 2016

LWVTC Calendar

2015

December 10 9:30 am
Board meeting at Dale Simmons' home

DECEMBER 15 Noon
Unit meeting at Sue Sa's:
Holiday Fest (see p. 3) and
Program: "Money in Politics:
"A Peek behind the Curtain" (see
p. 2); Reserve by Dec. 11

2016

January 14 9:30 am
Board meeting at Dale Simmons's home

JANUARY 19 Noon
Unit meeting at Sue Sa's:
Program: Reaching consensus
on Money in Politics (see pp.
3 & 5); Reserve by Jan. 15.

January ???
Movie Night? *Suffragette*
(see p.7)

February 11 9:30 am
Board meeting at Dale Simmons's home

FEBRUARY 16 Noon
Unit meeting at Sue Sa's:
Program: TBA; Reserve by
Feb. 12.

Don't forget to make your Lunch Reservations

Contact: **Mary Ann Bringhurst**
on or before Fri. **December 11**
by e-mail
newellgb@hotmail.com
or phone (732-1251).

November Program Recap

MONEY IN POLITICS PART II

“WHAT IS SMART CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM?”

By Terry Cornelius



Continuing our LWVUS Study of Money in Politics, Pete Weber and Phillip Ung from California Forward gave us insights into the complexities of campaign finance reform. The discussion began with a review of the 1st Amendment of the U.S. Constitution which states that “Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech or of the press...” With the *Citizens United* decision, the Supreme Court extended freedom of speech to corporations, protecting their right to donate money to influence elections as an exercise of their freedom of speech.

How can undue influence of corporate and special interest groups over the voting public be curtailed? One solution is to make easily accessible up-to-the-minute, accurate and detailed information on the money behind candidates and ballot measures. Data currently available at the federal and state levels fall short of meeting these criteria. It takes newer technology to make this happen. The FEC is updating the federal database. California needs to make it a fiscal priority to do the same.

Another option is to use only public funding to support campaigns. A number of studies indicate that some of the same issues with the current system can impact public funding systems as well. Public financing would have to be looked at in light of the current *Citizens United* era. Again, it seems to go back to the key point that knowledge is power. Public funding of accurate and impartial information access gives the voter a valuable edge in making an independent choice.

Legislation can continue to attempt to curtail abuses. On October 15, the Fair Political Practices Commission (FPPC), California's governmental ethics and campaign disclosure agency, approved new regulation that “adds more situations in which a presumption of coordination exists between a candidate and an outside spender expressly advocating on the candidate's behalf.... These rules will help ensure money that is given to outside groups is spent without the direction or influence of candidates. The expanded presumptions include stricter rules for candidates attending fundraisers,...for the transition of top-level campaign or political staff to Independent Expenditure (IE) committees ... and ... include provisions for candidates and IE committees who share consultants.” (FPPC)

This is an example of small steps that can reform. Some argue for taking the bigger step of undoing *Citizens United*. As this is not likely in the near future, Weber prefers looking for smart—but smaller—reforms of current laws that can be implemented now.

DUES REMINDER

Last Chance to pay dues before 2016.
Contact Jeanine Blessing.
Individual — \$65
Household — \$90.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE...

- LWVTC Calendar1
- Nov. Program Recap: Money in Politics, Part II1
- Lunch reservations for Unit Meetings.....1
- Editorial Musings: Tuition inflation2
- December Program: Holyoke—MiP, Part III2
- LWVTC celebrates the season3
- January Program: MiP—Reaching consensus...3, 5
- Issue Background: Democracy v. oligarchy4
- Issue Background: Dark money4
- Issue Background: Ethical lobbying5
- Member Profile: Donna Denham6
- Elections News: League effort in Florida6
- Movie Night: *Suffragette*7
- Film review: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.....7

THE COSTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The kids are coming home from college for the holidays, and talk inevitably turns to tuition costs. (This will be part of the upcoming state League study of higher education.)

Private colleges have always been expensive. What's new this generation is that public education is now beyond the reach of nearly everyone, unless incurring serious debt.

The University of California (and Cal State, and junior colleges) used to be tuition-free for residents—from 1868 to 1974. In the mid-70s, I paid \$568 (\$2,511 in today's dollars) at U.C. Berkeley. When I graduated, I owed nothing. When you're starting out in life, *that is freedom!* A generation later, my niece's tuition **doubled** from her freshman year to her senior. Annual tuition and fees are now \$14,460.

Public funding of U.C.—initially 100%—dropped to 32% in 1974, and took another dive in 2004, to just 16%. As public institutions lose public funding, two things happen: tuition climbs, and schools solicit funds from private sources.

In my day, buildings were named for venerable faculty—many of them Nobel laureates. Now the campus has an anti-poverty innovation program housed a building named for billionaire investment banker Richard Blum, and my niece's Business Ethics class was in—get this—Arthur Anderson Hall!

Perhaps even more insidious is the concomitant rise in student loan debt.

The financial sector is always trying to figure out new ways to squeeze blood out of a turnip. Our economy—no matter how robust—simply can't expand as quickly as a Wall Streeter would like to see his career grow. So money has to be fabricated somehow. Credit cards were the rage in the 1970s. When that market maxed out, subprime mortgages were invented. Now, it's student loans.

But this has one big twist: it is the only kind of debt in the U.S. that cannot be shed through bankruptcy, creating financial serfs from the get-go. Whether you can pay your student loan debt or not, you are indentured to that debt for decades, just when you should be freest. Some never get out from under the onus.

Part of the genius of American democracy was public education, which nurtured a population ready to go forth and create new worlds. This produced a dynamic, cutting-edge economy. More importantly, it produced knowledgeable, thinking citizens. Now, I'm afraid it's producing tens of thousands of indentured servants annually.

Thomas Holyoke “Money and Elections: A Peek behind the Curtain”

As our study of campaign finance issues progresses, Fresno State political science professor Thomas Holyoke will help us bore down into important aspects of this complex topic.

Holyoke has done research on Congress, and his expertise is in interest groups, lobbying, and other forms of political advocacy (as well as education policy and western water policy). He is the author of *Competitive Interests: Competition and Compromise in American Interest Group Politics* (2011 Georgetown University Press). Other writings include *Interest Groups and Lobbying: Pursuing Political Interests in America* (2014, Westview Press), *The Ethical Lobbyist* (Georgetown) and articles in *Politico*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *Educational Policy*, and the *American Journal of Education*.



Holyoke obtained his PhD from George Washington University, in D.C. His BA is from Iowa's Drake University, and his masters is from Syracuse University in New York—all in political science.

He has himself worked for several interest groups—in transportation, local government and finance—as well as the U.S. Senate and the New York State Senate. He is vice-chair of the University's Academic Senate and, in 2008, received the Provost's Most Promising Faculty Award.

This presentation should help us grapple with the League's consensus questions (on pp. 3 & 5). What should be the goals of campaign finance reform? How might regulations be administered and enforced? What would be considered corrupt in terms of the relationship of candidate/office holder and donors? To what extent does the First Amendment allow campaign financing by individuals, PACs, for-profits, non-profits, trade associates, labor unions, political parties, media, etc.? Should public funding be supported as a viable option?

These questions are fundamental to the health of our democracy. Dr. Holyoke will give us a “peek behind the curtain.”

THE VOTER

Monthly newsletter of the
League of Women Voters of Tulare County

P.O. Box 3011
Visalia, CA 93278

<http://tularecounty.ca.lwvnet.org>

President:	Denise Nelson	627-1306
Membership Chair:	Jeanine Blessing	635-4456
Editor:	Maile Melkonian	802-3315

LWVTC CELEBRATES THE SEASON !

In addition to our program in December, we'll be marking the holidays with some festivity. Sue Sa's buffet lunch will be fortified with a wine selection, compliments of your Board. Also, we are reprising a couple of recent traditions:

In the spirit of the season, **please bring a couple of canned food items**, which the League will donate to Emergency Aid.

As we head into a new year, **bring your prediction for 2016** on a slip of paper. These will be read anonymously at the Unit meeting. (We'll also be able to see how accurate our predictions were last year...)

*Don't forget to **reserve with Mary Ann by Friday, December 11.***

JANUARY PROGRAM

MIP CONSENSUS QUESTIONS

Please be thinking about these. At the January Unit meeting, our task will be to gather members' opinions on the following three categories of questions. ***You will be asked to respond without regard for the Supreme Court's current views on the First Amendment.*** Interpret the words in their most general sense. Keep in mind that LWV intentionally words positions from member studies in the broadest possible way so they have relevance for many years. Future national Boards will determine when and how to apply our positions.

Members' written comments (250-word limit) are also welcome. Please note that, while comments will be read and considered, only responses to questions can be tabulated.

The links below provide helpful, fascinating background information on each topic. All readings can be found at <http://forum.lwv.org/category/member-resources/our-work/money-politics-review>.

PART I: Democratic Values and Interests with Respect to Financing Political Campaigns

Background Readings

- [Money in Politics: Introduction and Overview](#)
- [Shifts in Supreme Court Opinion about Money in Politics](#)
- [The Role of the Supreme Court in Interpreting the Constitution](#)
- [Evidence of Spending's Impact on Electoral and Legislative Outcomes](#)
- [Corruption and Rationales for Regulating Campaign Finance](#)

(Possible responses: Agree, Disagree, or No consensus)

1. What should be the goals and purposes of campaign finance regulation?

- a. Seek political equality for all citizens.
- b. Protect representative democracy from being distorted by big spending in election campaigns.
- c. Enable candidates to compete equitably for public office.
- d. Ensure that candidates have sufficient funds to communicate their messages to the public.
- e. Ensure that economic and corporate interests are part of election dialogue.
- f. Provide voters sufficient information about candidates and campaign issues to make informed choices.
- g. Ensure the public's right to know who is using money to influence elections.
- h. Combat corruption and undue influence in government.

2. Evaluate whether the following activities are types of political corruption:

- a. A candidate or officeholder agrees to vote or work in favor of a donor's interests in exchange for a campaign contribution.
- b. An officeholder or her/his staff gives greater access to donors.
- c. An officeholder votes or works to support policies that reflect the preferences of individuals or organizations in order to attract contributions from them.
- d. An office holder seeks political contributions implying that there will be retribution unless a donation is given.
- e. The results of the political process consistently favor the interests of significant campaign contributors.

PART II: First Amendment Protections for Speakers and Activities in Political Campaigns

Background Readings

- [The First Amendment](#)
- [The Debate: Can Government Regulate Money in Politics?](#)
- [Hard, Soft and Dark Money](#)
- [Independent Expenditures](#)
- [The New Soft Money, pp. 17-27](#)

See CONSENSUS p. 5

Issue Background Reading

These three excerpts offer insights into some of the complexities of MiP. Click on the periodicals for the full articles.

ALL BY THOMAS HOLYOKE

MONEY, SPEECH AND OLIGARCHY IN U.S. POLITICS

Fresno Bee

September 30, 2015

Last July, presidential candidates and their supporting super PACs filed their first contribution reports. The results should chill the blood of anyone who cares about participatory democracy in America. Nearly \$400 million has already been donated to presidential campaigns or, more frequently, to super PACs supporting those campaigns.

According to analyses by *Politico* and *The New York Times*, the vast majority of this money came from fewer than 200 families or corporations.

Sixty-seven of these were billionaires giving over \$1 million each—which is three times more than the combined donations of the smallest 508,000 contributors. This is...the makings of an oligarchy where a few people with similar interests dominate the nation.

How did we get here? ... *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010)... eliminate[d] nearly all of the new restrictions on contributions enacted in 2002 by a bipartisan Congress. Now people, corporations, and labor unions (the latter two categories are [also] “people” under the law) can spend all the money they want to spread all the political speech they want, even speech directly endorsing or attacking candidates, as long as it is not specifically coordinated with any candidate’s campaign. And that is no restriction at all... effectively nullified our oldest campaign finance restrictions. The 1907 *Tillman Act* forbade corporations from contributing directly to campaigns, and the 1947 *Taft-Hartley Act* forbade unions from doing the same. Now they

can simply give to somebody’s super PAC without limits...

The court majority in *Citizens United* grounded their argument in democratic principles, but it is hard to see how their principles square with reality. ...[T]he court enabled the very result it claimed to be preventing. Media are a business, charging as much for advertising as super PACs are willing to spend. Citizens unable to spend more than \$200 thus cannot advertise on television, radio or even in newspapers and lose their speaking opportunities. Contributors able to drop a few hundred thousand dollars can buy all of the speech

“Democracy is not a spectator sport.”

— Lotte E. Scharfman
former LWV Massachusetts president

they want. ...

...There is no equality...in a society where one person’s voice can be so loud that it drowns out everybody else. The only thing that can match a million-dollar voice is another million-dollar voice, but how different can the interests of two millionaires be? How free and open an exchange of ideas can we have when only they get to speak? ...

LET’S SHINE A LIGHT ON ‘DARK MONEY’

Fresno Bee

December 31, 2014

[After each election, candidates file] their campaign finance paperwork. Yet some of what is called “outside spending” will never be accounted for. Outside spending is money spent by parties, traditional political actions committees (PACs), or other organizations ... The Center for Responsive Politics estimates there was \$736 million of it [last November’s] election, tipping senate races in Iowa, Colorado and North Carolina.

...In 2010 the U.S. Supreme Court held in *Citizens United v. FEC* that any law prohibiting political spending by people, corporations, or unions violates the First Amendment’s free speech clause. Soon afterward, the Court of Appeals ruled in *SpeechNOW.org v. FEC* that these same organizations could contribute without limits to PACs specializing in attack ads, and Super-PACs were born. This year they spent an estimated \$339 million on mostly negative attack ads.

Yet something even more disturbing than Super-PACs emerged this election cycle.

Citizens United also allows contributors to give unlimited amounts of money to nonprofit organizations... [M]ost are new and are organizing as 501(c)(4) nonprofits, which permits them to spend money on anything that might be called “social welfare.” Apparently that includes political attack ads.

Nearly half of the ads seen in 2014 were sponsored by these nonprofits.

What makes these (c)(4) nonprofits more disturbing than Super-PACs is that while the latter must disclose their contributors (after election day), these nonprofits have no similar obligation. Designed to operate only a few months, they are essentially sham organizations providing cover for people or other organizations that prefer to make massive contributions in comfortable anonymity. They do not even have to reveal themselves to the government until months after they start operating, unlike Super-PACs that almost immediately must file with the [FEC]. This is why the approximately \$170 million spent in 2014 by these nonprofits is called “dark money.”

How can we solve this problem? In California tens of thousands of people signed a petition supporting the new law SB 27 requiring dark money groups to disclose their donors, and other states are considering similar laws. ...

ETHICAL LOBBYING IN CONGRESS

London School of Economics US Centre's blog on American Politics and Policy
[undated blog entry]

Americans do not like lobbyists, the shadowy figures apparently pressuring gutless lawmakers into serving wealthy special interests at the public's expense. ... Yet the truth is that lobbyists provide representation for thousands of Americans who would be lost in Washington if left to their own devices. American politics, though, requires compromise to work, and lobbyists are often pressured into compromising the desires of the people they represent to accommodate lawmakers. But if lobbying is representation, then these compromises may be inherently unethical.

... The problem is that compromise might actually conflict with the only legal justification lobbying has. Lobbying is constitutionally protected by the First Amendment's clause giving people the right to "petition the government for a redress of grievances." The Supreme Court has more than once ruled that the profession is protected because lobbyists provide petitioning services for others. Given the complexity of modern government, it makes sense for people who want government to pay attention to them to hire professional petitioning agents. Lobbyists are essentially representatives, and therefore lobbying is only defensible as long as lobbyists advocate for exactly what their employers want. Compromise, necessary or not, is potentially misrepresentation and an abuse of the petitioning clause. ...

Why is ethical lobbying not just lobbying for the public interest? Because even if Americans could all agree on some kind of public interest, the First Amendment's petitioning clause is an individual right, not a collective one. Consequently, the principle is that lobbyists can only be devoted to representing their employer's interests. That is ethical lobbying.

CONSENSUS from p. 3

PART II continued

(Possible responses: *Spending banned, Some spending limits, Unlimited spending, or No consensus*)

- 1. Should spending to influence an election by any of the following be limited?**
 - a. Individual citizens, including wealthy individuals like George Soros and the Koch Brothers.
 - b. Political Action Committees, sponsored by an organization, such as the League of Conservation Voters, Chevron, the American Bankers Association, and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.
 - c. For-profit organizations, like Exxon, Ben and Jerry's, General Motors, and Starbucks, from their corporate treasury funds.
 - d. Trade associations, like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Wind Energy Association, and the American Petroleum Institute, from the association's general treasury funds.
 - e. Labor unions, like the United Autoworkers and Service Employees International, from the union's general treasury funds.
 - f. Non-profit organizations, like the Sierra Club, Wisconsin Right to Life, Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, American Crossroads, and Priorities USA, from the organization's general treasury funds.
 - g. Non-partisan voter registration and GOTV (get out the vote) organizations and activities, like the LWV and Nonprofit Vote.
 - h. Political parties, like the Republicans, Libertarians, and Democrats.
 - i. Candidates spending money they have raised from contributors.
 - j. Candidates for public office spending their own money.
- 2. The press plays a major role through endorsements, news coverage, etc. that are often important to the outcome. Should such spending to influence an election by any of the following be limited?**
 - a. Newspapers, like *The New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.
 - b. TV and other electronic media, like Fox News, CNN, MSNBC, CBS.
 - c. Internet communications, like *Huffington Post*, Breitbart, Daily Kos, and individual bloggers.

PART III: Methods for Regulating Campaign Finance to Protect the Democratic Process

Background Readings

- [Options to Reform Money in Politics](#)
- [Action in the States](#)
- [Enforcement of Federal Campaign Finance Law](#)

- 1. In order to achieve the goals for campaign finance regulation, should the League support?**

(Possible responses: *Agree, Disagree, or No consensus*)

 - a. Abolishing SuperPACs and spending coordinated or directed by candidates, other than a candidate's own single campaign committee.
 - b. Restrictions on direct donations and bundling by lobbyists? (These may include monetary limits as well as other regulations.)
 - c. Public funding for candidates? Should the League support:
 - i. Voluntary public financing of elections where candidates who choose to participate must also abide by reasonable spending limits?
 - ii. Mandatory public financing of elections where candidates must participate and abide by reasonable spending limits?
 - iii. Public financing without spending limits on candidates?
- 2. How should regulations be administered and enforced?**

(You may choose more than one response.)

 - a. By an even-numbered commission with equal representation by the two major political parties to ensure partisan fairness (current Federal Election Commission [FEC] structure)?
 - b. By an odd-numbered commission with at least one independent or nonpartisan commissioner to ensure decisions can be made in case of partisan deadlock?
 - c. By structural and budget changes to the FEC (e.g., commission appointments, staffing, security, budget, decision making process) that would allow the agency to function effectively and meet its legislative and regulatory mandates.
 - d. No consensus.

Member Profile

DONNA DENHAM

"I'm a political junkie," admits Donna Denham, with a smile. "I even love to watch the conventions on TV!" She's been this way since she was a girl, but says, "I really got interested when my daughter, Lori, moved to D.C. and started working in government (first for a member of Congress; now with a lobbying firm)." Donna lived in D.C. for a year and half to help with new-born grandkids, giving her a chance to explore the District thoroughly. Now she makes extended visits twice a year, and loves staying abreast of goings-on in our nation's capital.

Very active in A.A.U.W., Donna co-founded a policy discussion section that deals with meaty issues at the local and state levels. That's where, three years ago, Terry Cornelius told her about the League. "[LWV] is interested in politics, and I'm interested in politics," she reasons, and she's been a member ever since.



Donna was born in a rural Ohio town with a population of about 300. She lost both her parents by the time she was 13, and was raised by her older half-brother and his wife, Wayne and Ginny Shelly. When Wayne took a job with Line Material (later McGraw-Edison) he was transferred to Visalia to set up what would be Visalia's first major industrial plant, in 1957. (He became Visalia's vice mayor.)

She started at Divisadero School, graduated Mt Whitney High, C.O.S., and then Fresno State with a BA in education and a teaching credential. Her career started with kindergarten at Conyer, then Mt. View Elementary, where she met her husband, Cliff, also an educator. In those days, spouses could not work at the same school, so she went to Divisadero—full circle!—where she taught P.E.

She stayed home while their three daughters were preschool, returning to the classroom at Willow Glen. Soon she became the gifted education resource teacher for V.S.U.D., developing curricula throughout the District.

Energetic and devoted to education, even her extracurriculars are educational. They include Questers and Sequoia Garden Club. She also volunteers weekly at Sycamore Valley Academy, V.S.U.D.'s only charter elementary school, where she was on the founding Board. Daughter Jennifer is an academic coach there, and three of her six grandchildren are enrolled.

Daughter Suzy is director of internal audit at Kaweah-Delta Hospital. Donna is now widowed.

In addition to touring the U.S., Donna has enjoyed seeing Europe and Central America, a passion that prompted her to start a travel group in A.A.U.W., as well as a gourmet section. She has served on that organization's Board, too.

Come spring, she wants to help with our high school senior voter registration effort.

Elections in the News

This clipping highlights a Florida LWV voter-rights effort. The full article can be found on the [Miami Herald](#) website, and the League's years-long effort is detailed on the [LWVF website](#).

FLORIDA SUPREME COURT APPROVES LEAGUE REDISTRICTING CHALLENGE

By Mary Ellen Klas December 2, 2015

...[T]he Florida Supreme Court gave final approval to Florida's congressional map [Dec. 2], rejecting the Legislature's arguments for the fourth time and selecting boundaries drawn by the challengers in time for the 2016 election.

"Our opinion today—the eighth concerning legislative or congressional apportionment during this decade since the adoption of the landmark Fair Districts Amendment—should bring much needed finality to litigation concerning this state's congressional redistricting that has now spanned nearly four years in state courts," the court wrote in a 5-2 decision.

The ruling validated the map drawn by a coalition led by the League of Women Voters... after the Florida Legislature tried and failed to agree to a map in a special redistricting session. ...

House and Senate redistricting leaders, who have spent more than \$11 million in taxpayer money unsuccessfully defending their congressional and state Senate maps, said they disagreed with the ruling but were not surprised by it. ...Rep. Jose Oliva, chairman of the House Redistricting Committee said...he looks forward to a federal challenge over allegations that the map violates the federal Voting Rights Act.

David King, lead attorney for the challengers, [said] "We simply followed the constitution. We drew a map that followed the constitution, and now the Supreme Court has verified that." ...He said the plaintiffs are seeking to recover their attorneys fees under a law that allows the state to pay the legal costs borne by a private party that wins a verdict benefiting the entire state. ...

The court said that...the original map "was tainted with partisan intent coming out of a shadow process in which political operatives infiltrated and influenced the Legislature." ..."[T]he operatives concealed their actions by using proxies to submit their proposals, wrote scripts for others to state, and made a mockery of the Legislature's proclaimed transparent and open process." [N]one of the meetings in which staff met with attorneys to develop "base maps" "were recorded or transcribed."

MOVIE NIGHT ?

What could be more apropos to the League than *Suffragette*? Unfortunately, it came and went in Fresno, and is not scheduled for Tulare Co. 😞 **Some of us are calling the Regal decision-makers in Tennessee [sic] (865-922-1123) and Woodland Hills (818-737-0574) to request it come here in January (before the Oscars). We'll let you know if it works.**

Just released in October, this film chronicles a moment in Britain's struggle for women's rights. The road to enfranchisement there seems to have been even more rocky than in the U.S. First explicitly *disenfranchised* in 1832, women over 30 with property got the vote in 1918, and then all women 21 or older in 1928.

The film also reflects a more militant campaign for suffrage than here. When a laundress and the wife of a member of Parliament, among others, join forces to testify in favor of suffrage, domestic abuse, jail, unemployment and losing custody of children are consequences.

Writer Abi Morgan (*The Iron Lady*, *The Hour*) incorporates some fictional characters into her mostly historical storyline, starring Carey Mulligan, with Meryl Streep and Helena Bonham Carter. British director Sarah Gavron managed to make a little history herself, as *Suffragette* is (according to Wikipedia) the only film ever to be shot in London's actual House of Parliament.

Keep your fingers crossed!

Suffragette

someday in **late January ??**

somewhere, probably in Visalia
(Members will be notified by e-mail,
if and when...)

RT: 106 minutes. Rated PG-13.

Film Review

MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON

By Newell Bringhurst

This 1939 film presents American politics as highly dysfunctional, with politicians a venal lot under the control of corrupt political bosses. Directed and produced by Frank Capra, the movie revolves around freshman senator Jefferson Smith (James Stewart). Smith—idealistic, but naïve—arrives in Washington following his appointment by the governor of an unnamed western state. There he encounters the stark realities of American politics. This involves Smith's complex relationships with his state's senior senator, Joseph Paine (Claude Rains), the corrupt political boss James Taylor (Edward Arnold), and secretary, Clarissa Saunders (Jean Arthur).

At the time of the movie's October release, "the black cloud of war hung over the chancelleries of the world," as Capra recalled. World War II, declared just one month earlier, pitted Germany, Italy and their fascist allies against Great Britain, France and an array of smaller allies—thus a less-than-propitious time for "a satire about government officials."

Capra characterized his movie as much more. "A ringing statement of America's democratic ideals... The soul of our film [is] anchored in Lincoln," he

declared. "Our Jefferson Smith [is] a young Abe Lincoln, tailored to the rail-splitter's simplicity, compassion, ideals, and unswerving moral courage under pressure." One observer saw the movie as a reflection of Italian-born Capra's deeply held patriotism.

Others disagreed. The political establishment condemned the movie. At the premier in D.C.'s Constitution Hall—drawing some 4,000, including 45 senators—a number of lawmakers walked out in protest. Critics labeled it "anti-American and pro-Communist."

The film also drew criticism from abroad. Joseph Kennedy, U.S. ambassador to Great Britain, expressed fears that the film would damage "America's prestige in Europe." He urged it be withheld from European release. The totalitarian nations of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, Fascist Spain, and the Soviet Union banned the movie, but others did not.

Mr. Smith is still timely, given the highly dysfunctional state of the American political process today, akin to when Capra's controversial classic first opened.



League of Women Voters of Tulare County
P.O. Box 3011
Visalia, CA 93278



Be an engaged citizen! *Join . . .*

**THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS
OF TULARE COUNTY**

The League is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that encourages informed and active participation in government through education and advocacy. Members include women and men of every age, race, background and political belief. The more than 1,200 local Leagues work to promote citizen action on local, state and national issues.

Why the League ?

Because you care about the future of America. You recognize that your rights as a citizen come with a responsibility to participate fully in the democratic process. As a member you can:

- Stay informed about the issues that concern you the most,
- Make your views heard by adding your voice to ours
- Sharpen your skills for effective leadership, networking and public outreach.

Annual membership dues are \$65.00 for individuals and \$90.00 for households. Dues and donations to the League are not deductible as charitable contributions for tax purposes.

Visitors are welcome to our regular meetings, at noon every third Tuesday of the month—September through June—at The Clubhouse, 699 W. Center St. in Visalia.