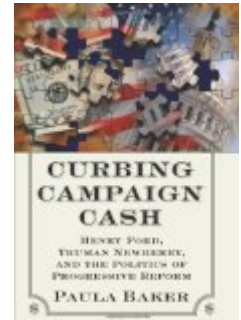


**Paula Baker.** *Curbing Campaign Cash: Henry Ford, Truman Newberry, and the Politics of Progressive Reform.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012. 208 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1863-7.



**Reviewed by** Tom Dorrance

**Published on** H-SHGAPE (March, 2013)

**Commissioned by** Julia Irwin (University of South Florida)

It was “just politics,” Paula Baker concludes in her study of the 1918 Michigan Senate race between Henry Ford and Truman Newberry, that “discouraged the assumption of good faith that made democracy possible” (p. 152). While narrow in its focus, *Curbing Campaign Cash* is ambitious in its attempt to capture the tensions and ambiguities that prevented Congress from enacting effective campaign finance reform in the early twentieth century. Truman Newberry’s thin electoral victory over Henry Ford sparked the first test of the Federal Corrupt Practices Act (FCPA), an act Baker describes as both “spectacularly ineffective” and the “guiding national legislation from the 1910s to the 1970s,” for campaign finance policy p. (6). As the cost of running elections increased, the FCPA failed to provide a framework to mark the line where money ceased to be a necessarily evil and became a symptom of political corruption instead. Likewise, the opportunistic use of the FCPA as a partisan tool, unenforceable in the legal arena, further eroded popular faith in the electoral process. Baker uses the 1918 election

as a case study to show how the “suspicion of money in politics and the suspicion of politics itself” came together in an approach to campaign finance reform that was grounded in political theater with only a thin veneer of substance for show (p. 12).

Baker originally intended the Newberry controversy to be the subject of one chapter in a larger book on campaign finance, but gradually came to see that the complexities of the case merited a full-length monograph, the first such treatment since Spencer Ervin’s 1935 legal study. Mimicking their roles in the election itself, Baker uses Ford and Newberry as proxies to uncover a parade of paradoxes that vexed politicians as they tried to find their footing in the context of changes in early twentieth-century electoral politics. Progressive Era reforms had weakened the power of parties at the same time that campaigns had become more expensive. Into this breach, professional managers took on a greater role in guiding individual candidates through the new political terrain. Campaign funds paid staff, bought advertise-

ments, and helped educate the public about the candidate. The controversy over spending was less about the ways funds were used in campaigns; instead it was the sheer presence of large expenditures that drew charges of corruption, even if the money was not employed to buy votes or fix elections directly.

In showing the ways that politicians adapted to the new electoral terrain, Baker highlights two main tensions: first, whether Newberry's spending was a sign of the corrupting power of money or an equalizing factor to combat the power of Ford's celebrity; and second, a conflict over whether the corrupting power of money was so dire that it gave Congress the right to intervene in state elections, rejecting a legally elected representative even though those voting for Newberry were well aware of the amounts being spent. In the end, nobody stepped up with answers to these fundamental questions. Instead, politicians used the rhetoric and regulations for campaign finance to further partisan warfare. In particular, Baker looks at the way a minority coalition of Democrats and insurgent Republicans used charges of corruption to discredit the regular Republican majority.

Baker begins by looking to Detroit and what the candidates as individuals represented in the local community. Newberry was the well-bred country club denizen who refrained from public spectacle, a friend and admirer of Teddy Roosevelt who reluctantly turned to public service out of a sense of obligation. He was also a parasite, in Ford's eyes, part of the monopolistic elite that stood in the way of his entrepreneurial efforts to bring the fruits of industrialization to the nation's consumers. For Newberry and his ilk, Ford was an irrational loon ill fitted for the sensibilities required of civil service. The election itself quickly got caught up in the national stakes of the 1918 election as well as the world events Woodrow Wilson was attempting to navigate. The two men stood on opposite sides of the League of

Nations debate—one of the central issues of the 1918 election. After resigning in 1922, Newberry proudly listed his two main accomplishments as stopping the League of Nations and keeping Ford out of the Senate. Looking at the Michigan election, Baker then outlines a wider set of political and legal structures that would quickly make questions regarding the morality and legality of Newberry's victory overshadow the vote over the League of Nations. She shows how sitting senators looked with concern at the way Newberry's talented campaign director, Paul H. King, managed to elect what was essentially a "blank-slate candidate" who made no policy statements and avoided publicity.

In Washington DC, Newberry survived legal challenges to his election which culminated in the Supreme Court case *Newberry v. United States* (1921), a decision most notable for prohibiting Congress from intervening in primary elections and allowing for the continuation of Jim Crow elections in the South. In the congressional hearings that followed the Supreme Court case, senators used the opportunity to make speeches about the evils of money in politics which, Baker shows, provided a vicarious outlet for their anxiety over what Newberry's election suggested about the future costs of running a modern campaign. Baker concludes with a discussion of the politics of scandal, showing how the enforcement of campaign finance rested on arbitrary political battles in Congress. As a result, debates over the morality of spending became intertwined with charges that reformers were pursuing a policy of vindictiveness under the guise of progressive reform. Practical questions regarding the role of money in modern elections meanwhile became lost amid charges and countercharges that spoke more to the politics of the moment than they contributed to building legal structures for future elections.

In the end, *Curbing Campaign Cash* tells us little about how the wider public perceived congressional infighting, the influx of advertising,

and/or the possible corruption of the electoral process. Yet Baker still offers an explanation that resonates with our current popular dissatisfaction with elected officials. The Congress she describes is a collection of cannibals, where political factions understood debates over electoral procedure as opportunities for partisan advantage. She is careful to say that her story is neither a tale of money as inherently corrupting the process nor is it a cynical take on reformers using the cloak of righteousness to mask more venal ambition. Yet, in thinking about where the book would sit in a larger study of campaign finance it is hard not to see it as a case study of failure. Ultimately, Baker vividly portrays an era where elected officials looked across the aisles with distrust and, in doing so, confronted changes in electoral politics through partisan warfare, leaving the public with little faith in Congress's ability to either rise above the influence of money or develop rules that would help distinguish acceptable criteria for its presence in modern politics.

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**Citation:** Tom Dorrance. Review of Baker, Paula. *Curbing Campaign Cash: Henry Ford, Truman Newberry, and the Politics of Progressive Reform*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

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