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Government doesn't matter. America does

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Government doesn't matter. That's the most important principle to remember in this presidential election year. The candidates who get elected and technically manage our country don't matter much either. This is America. Sovereignty lies with citizens. American government 101, which I teach, reminds us that it is the electorate, you and I, who grant legitimacy to our government.

What actually matters is we, the people. Our elected officials, indeed the whole way Washington does business, is only a reflection of the values, or lack thereof, of the public.

Last Sunday the New York Times front page reported that the Obama administration grants White House access to large scale donors. It seems lobbyists and lawyers who represent special interests often visit the White House right around the time they make major campaign donations. Surprised? This doesn't exactly seem like a scoop that will shock the nation. What is shocking is that we take it so lightly.

I don't blame President Obama for following the example of his predecessors in the Oval Office. Former Rhode Island representative Patrick J. Kennedy was quoted in the Times article as saying, contributions are "how this business works." As scion to the multi-generational Kennedy financial and political dynasty, I trust his word on that.

Sadly, our country has taken the route dreaded by founding father James Madison in the Federalist papers explaining the American constitution. Madison was worried that special interests, which he called "factions," would destroy the fabric of our republic. He was right.

Washington is distant, even to me: a political science professor and clergyman who is civically engaged, a place far away from the daily "street" I travel in my work with local communities in New York City. I can only imagine how distant the policy making process must feel to most Americans worried about job creation, taxes, education and a host of other immediate concerns that touch everyone's family.

For example, did America truly have a chance for an open conversation about the President's healthcare bill? I am not against expanded coverage. I believe President Obama had noble intentions beyond simply passing a large piece of legislation when he focused on healthcare early in his presidency.

It was the backroom deals and lack of transparency in the process that proved disconcerting. When did the machinery of government, and the cliquish work of our elected officials, reach so far over our heads as to leave America behind in the governance of its own present and future? Democracy demands better.

But here's the rub: While Washington shares blame for directly contravening the representative process through its elitist factional intervention, it does not carry all the responsibility for the sorry state of our country's politics. We do. Yes, we the people, rank and file citizens who complain about political corruption and government deafness to our needs. Our moral apathy toward the narrowing of our democracy suggests we live in a society that passes the buck more than it claims it.

I've just used the term "moral apathy." Political apathy is the academic term for this lack of a feeling of connection by citizens to their government. Less than half of Americans even

voted in the 2010 congressional elections. Political apathy remains a critical issue in our national civic life.

But it is more than absence from the voting booth that qualifies apathy. Government is a moral choice. Policy-making concretizes ideas of right and wrong. If government is managed with a heavy dose of “insiderism,” and our very representation is at stake, this is not just a political issue. It is fundamentally a moral one. Insiderism distorts the justice promised by our constitution. Yet we seem to keep accepting it, throwing our hands up in the air claiming powerlessness. There is a social malaise at work.

For example, do we expect the school to educate our children, or instead to reinforce their education, both values and skills, once learned primarily at home? Do we continuously remake our manufacturing sector, keeping it nimble and competitive, or do we more often than not complain about cheaper labor abroad? Do we hold Wall Street to task for the current economic recession and its subversion of the political system, or do we shrug our shoulders, organize a protest for a while and move on while massive home foreclosures continue?

No wonder the two most important American politicians today — President Obama and presidential candidate Mitt Romney — remain men of mystery. We don’t have a clear idea of who they really are or what their positions are because we don’t demand to know.

Representative democracy of the type set up by thinkers such as Madison intended for a thoughtful citizenry that would elect expert statesmen to the beneficent job of public official. Partisanship has its place, as does healthy competition of interests, but not at the expense of favored access within the legislative process. And money, as the arbiter of such, is the crudest source of influence of all.

If voters want change, we must make it known through citizens’ activism in the media, grassroots organizing that is consistent, demands made on candidates for transparency and clarity of vision, and probably even civil disobedience regarding the issues most important to America today.

Where’s the public outcry to the Sunday New York Times article? Our silence is overwhelming. It portends business as usual in Washington, and we have no one to blame but ourselves. The issues are bipartisan: jobs, education, reliable and quality healthcare of whatever variety, security, and a sense of values in the public square that are embracing, and ultimately, decision-making in Washington that can justify itself to our children.

This is a country of the elected and those who elect them. Together, we matter more than any one faction of our republic. After all, we are partners in carrying the load of American democracy. Let’s empower ourselves, the men and women of Main Street and our representative government, to take that claim more seriously than we all have in a long while.