

## Toward One-Party Rule

By PAUL KRUGMAN, OP-ED COLUMNIST

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In principle, Mexico's 1917 Constitution established a democratic political system. In practice, until very recently Mexico was a one-party state. While the ruling party employed intimidation and electoral fraud when necessary, mainly it kept control through patronage, cronyism and corruption. All powerful interest groups, including the media, were effectively part of the party's political machine.

Such systems aren't unknown here - think of Richard J. Daley's Chicago. But can it happen to the United States as a whole? A forthcoming article in The Washington Monthly [<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2003/0307.confessore.html> -- moderator] shows that the foundations for one-party rule are being laid right now.

In "Welcome to the Machine," Nicholas Confessore draws together stories usually reported in isolation - from the drive to privatize Medicare, to the pro-tax-cut fliers General Motors and Verizon recently included with the dividend checks mailed to shareholders, to the pro-war rallies organized by Clear Channel radio stations. As he points out, these are symptoms of the emergence of an unprecedented national political machine, one that is well on track to establishing one-party rule in America.

Mr. Confessore starts by describing the weekly meetings in which Senator Rick Santorum vets the hiring decisions of major lobbyists. These meetings are the culmination of Grover Norquist's "K Street Project," which places Republican activists in high-level corporate and industry lobbyist jobs - and excludes Democrats. According to yesterday's Washington Post, a Republican National Committee official recently boasted that "33 of 36 top-level Washington positions he is monitoring went to Republicans."

Of course, interest groups want to curry favor with the party that controls Congress and the White House; but as The Washington Post explains, Mr. Santorum's colleagues have also used "intimidation and private threats" to bully lobbyists who try to maintain good relations with both parties. "If you want to play in our revolution," Tom DeLay, the House majority leader, once declared, "you have to live by our rules."

Lobbying jobs are a major source of patronage - a reward for the loyal. More important, however, many lobbyists now owe their primary loyalty to the party, rather than to the industries they represent. So corporate cash, once split more or less evenly between the parties, increasingly flows in only one direction.

And corporations themselves are also increasingly part of the party machine. They are rewarded with policies that increase their profits: deregulation, privatization of

government services, elimination of environmental rules. In return, like G.M. and Verizon, they use their influence to support the ruling party's agenda.

As a result, campaign finance is only the tip of the iceberg. Next year, George W. Bush will spend two or three times as much money as his opponent; but he will also benefit hugely from the indirect support that corporate interests - very much including media companies - will provide for his political message.

Naturally, Republican politicians deny the existence of their burgeoning machine. "It never ceases to amaze me that people are so cynical they want to tie money to issues, money to bills, money to amendments," says Mr. DeLay. And Ari Fleischer says that "I think that the amount of money that candidates raise in our democracy is a reflection of the amount of support they have around the country." Enough said.

Mr. Confessore suggests that we may be heading for a replay of the McKinley era, in which the nation was governed by and for big business. I think he's actually understating his case: like Mr. DeLay, Republican leaders often talk of "revolution," and we should take them at their word.

Why isn't the ongoing transformation of U.S. politics - which may well put an end to serious two-party competition - getting more attention? Most pundits, to the extent they acknowledge that anything is happening, downplay its importance. For example, last year an article in Business Week titled "The GOP's Wacky War on Dem Lobbyists" dismissed the K Street Project as "silly - and downright futile." In fact, the project is well on the way to achieving its goals.

Whatever the reason, there's a strange disconnect between most political commentary and the reality of the 2004 election. As in 2000, pundits focus mainly on images - John Kerry's furrowed brow, Mr. Bush in a flight suit - or on supposed personality traits. But it's the nexus of money and patronage that may well make the election a foregone conclusion.