

## **In politics, money doesn't just talk, it barks orders**

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The sociologists and the newspaper writers have been covering it for years. Now the politicians are talking about the inequalities in social class that have prevailed in the United States since the mid-1970s. In his State of the Union rebuttal, newly elected Virginia Sen. James Webb talked about the average corporate CEO making 400 times what the average worker does, an increase over the already-high 20-1 ratio of past generations. Even business leaders fear that huge disparities in wealth can be politically destabilizing. Conservative writers don't care, arguing that what matters is absolute income. If the poor and middle class are doing better, why resent the rich doing fabulously?

In fact, the poor and middle classes are not doing better. Median incomes are stagnating, but that's not the worst thing about the growing disparities. It's that swollen wealth at the top can distort the democratic process as power gets concentrated, too.

In the 2000 election, 95 percent of those donors making substantial campaign contributions came from households earning more than \$100,000. That may not buy votes, but it does buy face time.

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