Political Responsibility for billionaires

In today's America, the top 5 percent of households control nearly a quarter of all income. Wealth is even more concentrated than income. The top1 percent own a quarter of all corporate stocks. Many of those wealthy families and individuals are active in politics through campaign contributions, philanthropy, media ownership, social networks, think tanks, universities, and direct access to political leaders. We would like them to use their political power responsibly. What would that mean in practice?

One way to answer that question would be to start from a school of thought that poses the same question for corporations. That line of thought, known as Corporate Political Responsibility (CPR), offers a set of norms for responsible corporate political activity. The following adopts the CPR approach wealthy and ultra-wealthy individuals.[1]

A New Social Contract for Economic Power

CPR begins with the observation that prosperity and profitability depend on a set of foundational institutions, including functioning markets, democratic government, reliable public discourse, and a healthy natural environment. The rules of property rights and contract enforcement; the media outlets, scientific research, educated workers, stable government, and social trust that underlie these institutions are not produced by any single firm. They are collective achievements.

Businesses not only benefit from these systems but also influence them. CPR argues for a social contract in which business firms have a set of rights and obligations. Corporations have a license to operate, earn profits, and participate in public life. In return, they assume a responsibility not merely to obey the law but also to safeguard the health of the foundational systems on which both business and society depend.

Wealthy individuals, too, can be thought of as operating under an implied social contract. A free society creates the legal and institutional conditions under which individuals can accumulate wealth and grants them the right to deploy that wealth for political as well as personal ends. In return, they assume the responsibility not to undermine the systems on which their wealth depends.

Here is how I would outline the norms and responsibilities that govern the political activities of the rich and the super-rich under such a social contract.

Three threshold norms

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[1] Draft by E. Dolan. Further information about Corporate Political Responsibility can be found at The CPR Hub (https://thecprhub.org/).

The CPR approach suggests that before engaging in significant political activities, a responsible actor, whether corporate or individual, should be able to answer three questions: Is my involvement legitimate? Am I willing to be accountable for it? Am I transparent about it?

Legitimacy. CPR advises that corporations should think twice about engaging on issues that do not affect them directly. For individuals, the threshold is lower; not “does this issue affect me directly?” as “do I care about this issue”? Any individual, rich or poor, has as a legitimate right to care about and engage politically regarding the war in Ukraine even if they are not Ukrainian, or to care about school vouchers even if they are not a parent. The question of legitimacy for individuals, then, is not so much one of having the standing to engage on a given issue as the way they go about it. All citizens have broad rights to participate in politics, but responsible participation should still avoid coercion, respect democratic processes, and recognize the difference between persuasion and domination.

Accountability. Accountability, in part, means to acknowledge ownership of any political actions – a willingness to acknowledge that “yes, I did this.” It also means being ready to explain one’s actions to anyone with a legitimate interest to ask. And most importantly, it means a willingness to accept the consequences of one’s political activities.

Transparency. Wealthy individuals, like corporations, should be open and honest about their political activities. In particular, they should be willing to disclose direct or indirect political spending and identify themselves as the authors of direct or indirect political speech.

Compliance with these threshold norms does not fully define political responsibility, but it does open the door into the realm of responsible political activity.

Responsibility as stewardship

The remaining norms for responsible political activities focus on the obligation to protect the health of foundational systems of markets, democracy, civil discourse, and natural systems. Here, the way CPR applies these obligations to corporations is more similar to their application to wealthy individuals than was the case of the threshold norms.

The unifying principle for these norms is the *duty of stewardship*, in the sense of accepting responsibilities toward the systems that make long-term prosperity possible. Stewardship does not necessarily mean altruism. Instead, it also encompases the practical reality that both firms and individuals depend on healthy systems and can either strengthen or weaken them through their actions.

Free and Fair Markets. Markets depend on rules and institutions. Property rights, contract enforcement, competition policy, transparency, and protection against fraud all help markets function effectively. Problems arise when people try to gain personal advantage through political activities that manipulate rules, exclude competitors, seek special tax privileges, or externalize costs onto others. The key question, then, is "does this political activity strengthen market competition and value creation, or does it tilt the playing field toward favored interests?"

Constitutional Democracy. All of us benefit from democratic systems that create predictable processes for resolving conflicts and changing policies, but the ultra-wealthy should take particular care, since their vast resources can distort democratic processes if used irresponsibly. People with extraordinary economic power are entitled to participate in democracy, but not to dominate it. The key question here is, "do these political activities strengthen democratic institutions and public trust, or do they allow economic power to overwhelm political equality?" Support for the rule of law, fair elections, transparency, and accountable institutions strengthens democracy. Attempts to secure special influence or weaken democratic constraints undermine it.

Civil Discourse. Markets and democracies both depend on reliable information and productive public debate. Civil discourse does not require agreement. It requires institutions and norms that allow disagreement without destroying trust. However, the modern information environment is increasingly vulnerable to disproportionate influence by both corporations and wealthy individuals through advertising, media ownership, digital platforms, algorithms, and artificial intelligence. The key question: "Do the public communications by or financed by wealthy individuals contribute to citizens' ability to make informed judgments, or do they increase manipulation, polarization, and mistrust?

Natural Systems. Many public policies intentionally or unintentionally affect the natural systems on which all of society depends, including laws and regulations that seek to influence climate change, habitat destruction, and health impacts. Keeping the duty of stewardship in mind when engaging in those policy areas is not a matter of philanthropy but rather, of pragmatic protection of the conditions necessary for long-term prosperity. The key question here is: "Does this political activity safeguard the health of shared environmental resources, or does it shift environmental costs onto others while preserving private benefits?"

The bottom line

To summarize, although the CPR framework was developed for corporations, its underlying logic is broader. Through campaign spending, philanthropy, media ownership, and support for.advocacy organizations, universities, and think tanks, ultra-wealthy individuals often shape public life in ways that rival or exceed the influence of corporations.

The key premise of the CPR approach is that power and responsibility should be linked. Wealthy individuals possess political influence because they control significant economic resources. Such influence carries obligations. Those obligations continue across generations as inherited wealth and large family fortunes play a growing role in American economic life.

Democracies have long debated how to limit concentrations of power. The solution cannot be that the wealthy, any more than those with fewer resources, should withdraw from politics. Participation is a democratic right. No *Citizens United* is needed to give wealthy and ultra-wealthy individuals the right of free speech.

Instead, the extended application of CPR thinking poses a more challenging set of questions that pertain not to how power should be constrained, but how it should be exercised.

- Should the political influence of private wealth be restrained by shared norms similar to those that apply to corporations?
- Should wealthy individuals pause to think whether their political interventions are legitimate?
- Should they be transparent about their political activities?
- Should they be accountable for the consequences of their influence?
- Should they view themselves as stewards of the economic, democratic, informational, and natural systems from which their wealth ultimately derives?

In short, the central insight gained by extending the norms of CPR to the political activities of wealthy individuals is that the health of a free society depends not simply on limiting abuses of power, but on encouraging those who possess power to exercise it responsibly.