

Getting Money Out of Politics: Putting the Public First

The role of private money in politics is the itch that political cynics can't seem to scratch, the stain that politicians can't seem to clean, and the barrier ordinary Americans can't seem to overcome. On one hand, raising private money to run for public office has been a part of American democracy from its outset.

On the other hand, one of the basic principles of American democracy is that all voices should be represented fairly regardless of race, gender, socio-economic background, sexual orientation, or age. From this perspective, the current system is bysmal – the ratio of lobbyists to legislators is 23:1 and private financing of campaigns is corrosive to the idea of government as being accessible to all people. It perpetuates a system where elected officials are beholden not to the public interest, but rather to the special interests that fund their campaigns and have undue influence in the legislative process. In short, relying on private financing for campaigns and allowing lobbyists to crowd out legislators creates fundamental inequalities at the very foundation of the democratic process.

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• Michael Surrusco
• Common Cause



In the U.S., the ratio of **lobbyists** to **legislators** is 23:1.

A Core Problem: Elections Dominated By Money

First, private financing of political campaigns distorts the power of one's voice in the political process. Those who have more money to donate to political campaigns, whether they are corporations, industry lobbyists, special interests, or wealthy individuals, simply have more power in the political process since members of congress rely on those donors for large campaign contributions to run for office. Only one quarter of one percent (0.25 percent) of the American population donates over \$200 dollars to political campaigns. This small, wealthy minority provides around 90 percent of the money that funds political campaigns. Individuals in this 0.25 percent have the financial capacity and connections to contribute or bundle large campaign contributions in support of a particular candidate with a particular agenda and, in turn, receive more access to that candidate, hence gaining more influence in shaping policies and legislation. This dynamic can be seen in a number of issues.

Health Care. One of the hottest topics in politics recently has been the solution to ever-increasing health care costs and the millions of Americans who cannot afford health insurance or cannot get insurance because of medical issues. Although this has been a problem for years, Congress has been afraid to touch it because of the backlash from some of their biggest campaign con-

Campaign Contributions from Healthcare Industry (1989-2009)



Given to congress members with jurisdiction over health reform

tributors. Like other industries, the health care industry directs most of its campaign contributions to the members of Congress best positioned to influence policy and regulation that affects them. More than half the total contributions from health care companies since 1989 have gone to the members who sit on at least one

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“The energy industry is betting millions that they can buy influence in Congress and protect their profits, even if it means blocking an important step towards clean, renewable energy and a healthier planet,” said Common Cause President Bob Edgar. “Tackling problems like global warming must start by ending the flow of Washington’s ‘Black Gold’ of campaign contributions and lobbying cash to the most influential members of Congress from the very industries that this new law would affect.”

According to lobby disclosure reports, 34 energy companies registered in the first quarter of 2009 to lobby Congress on legislation to limit greenhouse gases, known as the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009. This group of companies spent a total of \$23.7 million -- or \$260,000 a day -- lobbying members of Congress in January, February and March. Many of these same companies also made large contributions to the members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which has jurisdiction over the legislation. Data shows oil and gas companies, mining companies and electric utilities combined gave more than \$2 million just to the 19 members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee from 2007 to 2009.

It is impossible to say how each of these issues and many others would have been resolved in Congress

of the five committees in the House or Senate that are currently working on producing health care reform legislation. The health care industry has given a total \$313.8 million in campaign contributions to the sitting members of the 111th Congress, from 1989 - 2009. Of that, \$166.7 million or 53 percent has gone to the members of the House and Senate who sit on at least one of the five committees with jurisdiction over health care reform, according to data from the Center for Responsive Politics.

Climate Change. Although there has been near consensus around the world of the harmful effects of carbon emissions, Congress has only recently taken up legislation to limit the emission of greenhouse gases. During the debate, the energy industry spent lavishly on lobbying and campaign contributions to fight any proposal. During just the first three months of 2009, when the House of Representatives was considering climate change legislation, oil and gas companies and electric utilities spent nearly \$24 million lobbying Congress and made more than \$4 million in campaign contributions to members of Congress.



9 out of 10

political campaigns are won by the candidate who spends the most money

In 2008:

Average winning House candidate spent **\$1.3 million dollars**

Average winning Senate candidate spent **\$75 million dollars**

if members were not dependent on these same companies for the campaign contributions they need to get reelected. What is clear, however, is that these companies enjoy an undue amount of influence in the process of addressing these national problems simply because they had the money to do so, and that this influence almost certainly affected the outcome in each of these cases.

Second, private financing of political campaigns limits the opportunities of qualified people to run for and win elected office. Nine out of ten political campaigns are won by the candidate who spends the most money. Facing such odds, campaigning becomes more about fundraising with large donors than it does about mobilizing all kinds of voters around ideas and issues. With the costs of campaigns skyrocketing – in 2008 the average winning House candidate spent \$1.3 million dollars and the average winning Senate candidate spent \$75 million – it has become increasingly difficult for citizens who are not independently wealthy and whose platforms do not appeal to wealthy donors to mount a competitive campaign against a well-funded incumbent or well-connected political insider. The constant need to raise campaign cash creates barriers for huge segments of the population.

Third, private financing of campaigns forces members of congress to spend too much of their time fundrais-

ing, and not enough time serving their constituents. Elected officials spend at least 20 percent of their time, while in office, dialing for dollars and raising money for their next campaign. That is time not spent reading bills, responding to constituent concerns, and meeting with voters to discuss pertinent legislative issues. When newly elected members of Congress are welcomed into the world of Washington politics, they are immediately asked to set fundraising goals – agreeing to raise a certain amount of money each week for not only their own future campaigns, but for their party’s fundraising arm as well. In 2008, elected officials solicited \$5 billion in total campaign contributions, which works out to an average of \$600,000 an hour.

For all the reasons mentioned above, too many citizens feel locked out of their democracy and turn cynical to the whole political process. This is one of the many reasons America has one of the lowest voter turnout rates amongst the world’s democracies, 54 percent during presidential elections and roughly 40 percent in off-year elections. People simply don’t feel like voting will change anything, because at the end of the day, elected officials seem to be more beholden to their campaign contributors than to their constituents. In order for a democracy to thrive and for the political process to produce outcomes that advance the interests of the public, citizens must have faith that the system works



Thirty-four energy companies registered in the first quarter of 2009 to lobby Congress on the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009 to limit greenhouse gases.

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Janet Napolitano ran and won Arizona's governorship twice using a Fair Elections style public financing.

and adheres to the ideals under which their democracy was founded.

One Solution: Fair Elections

Campaigns, of course, are an essential part of the democratic process. Ideally, they require that elected officials continually develop a coherent message, listen to the concerns of citizens, educate the public about important issues, and make their case to constituents for why they are best equipped to represent their interests and needs. In many ways, campaigns represent a stage in the political process where citizens are asked to be most involved; whether it is voting for or against a candidate, actively campaigning on behalf of a specific issue or candidate, or running for office themselves.

The key to strengthening America's democratic process is to reform the campaign financing system by implementing Fair Elections – a voluntary system of public financing for campaigns where candidates running for office can qualify to receive a 4:1 match from the government on donations of \$100 or less. It is a voluntary system and candidates using this system are

not allowed to spend any of their own private wealth or accept any donations over \$100. By creating a system that prioritizes small donors, Fair Elections levels the playing field, provides equitable opportunities for citizens to have their voices heard, and allows elected officials to do better serving the public interest once in office. Once elected, a candidate who ran under a Fair Elections system won't feel beholden to a set of large campaign contributors, but rather the public at large – the way it is supposed to be.

Fair Elections has a proven track record of success and enjoys bi-partisan support. Several states and cities across the country have successfully implemented Fair Elections style public financing. In so doing, they have created more accountable government and restored confidence in the political process. Maine, Connecticut, and Arizona all have Fair Elections at the state-wide level. Eighty-five percent of Maine's state legislature, both Democrats and Republicans, were elected using a Fair Elections style public financing. Janet Napolitano, former Arizona governor, now Secretary of Homeland Security is one of the most outspoken supporters of Fair Elections. She ran and won Arizona's governorship twice using a Fair Elections style public financing. To qualify for public funds she gathered four thousand, five dollar contributions from Arizona residents. In 2008, Connecticut became the first state to have Fair Elections public financing passed by the legislature (other states' public financing system were passed by voter referendum). Today, eighty-one percent of the Connecticut legislature is made up of politicians who used the system.

Voters like public funding because it makes elected officials more accountable to them, reduces conflicts of interest, and gives them more choice at the polls. Polling in states that have Clean Election-style programs con-



The famous Backbone of the Backbone Campaign with leader Bill Moyer.

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tinue to show strong public support. A June 2009 poll found that 74 percent of Maine voters surveyed want candidates for governor to use the system in 2010, and 55 percent said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate that did (only 11 percent said they would be less likely to vote for a participating candidate). By large margins, Connecticut voters believed that the influence of money on elected officials needed to be limited (82 percent) and that state politicians were more concerned with the needs of their campaign donors than the needs of the general public (62 percent).

Keeping our elected officials dependent on the very same wealthy special interests they are supposed to regulate undermines public confidence in their government and its ability to tackle the tough issues that face the nation. It's time to get our leaders out of the fundraising game and let them do the jobs we've elected them to do. Fair Elections is one possible solution. If your Representative supports Fair Elections, please thank him or her or if your Representative has not yet signed on, please ask him or her to do so.

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Michael Surrusco is Common Cause's Director of Research. He produces research and reports for all of Common Cause's program areas. Michael worked at Common Cause from 2001 to 2006 in the research department and as Director of the ethics campaign before taking a job as Lead Researcher at the American Federation of Labor. Michael returned to Common Cause in 2008.

