Affecting Change Through Campaign Finance Reform

They say that money talks, and in the world of government, that isn’t usually a good thing. Proponents of campaign finance reform are hard at work to silence the voice that money gives to wealthy donors by changing the way political campaigns are financed.

“We have a political system that values campaign donors and those able to buy access and influence in our public process,” says Adam Smith, communications director for Public Campaign, a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to raise the voice of everyday Americans through common sense reform of the way elections are financed. “The voices of everyday Americans are left out of the process.”

Craig Holman is the government affairs lobbyist at Public Citizen, a consumer advocacy organization. He says that campaign finance reform is about making democracy, with its principals of equality, work well within a capitalist economy.

“To get the two to work together, you have to place reasonable restrictions on the role of money in elections or else you’re going to have just the wealthy dominating the political system,” he says.

Campaigns are incredibly expensive and candidates are forced to constantly fundraise in order to raise enough money to run one successfully, or even close to successfully. That means that public officials — already serving in office and seeking reelection — are frequently fundraising in addition to fulfilling the duties their offices require. Campaign finance reformers say this situation creates a culture that allows political campaign donors access to public officials that the average citizen doesn’t get.

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“[Campaigns] are bought and paid for by special interest groups,” Smith says. “This leads to policy proposals that benefit those who are giving money and not everyday people.”

These special interest groups work to change or influence public policy by lobbying elected officials. Part of lobbying can involve attending fundraisers and donating to political campaigns. Examples of special interest groups include everything from The American Civil Liberties Union to the National Rifle Association, Greenpeace to the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO), and Mothers Against Drunk Driving to the League of Women Voters.

Holman says that public financing would best address the problem. With public financing, government money would pay for campaign elections and candidates would not be permitted to accept contributions from individuals, unions, organizations, special interest groups, or anyone else.

“The most ideal system would be complete public financing on all elections,” he says. “Take all of the special interest money out of the election all together. Remove all of that, and have candidates run publicly financed elections so they can all get their messages out to the public and the public knows where they stand. It’s money with no strings attached.”

That system is currently in place in Connecticut and Arizona, where it has significantly reduced corruption, Holman says.

“Wherever you have money involved, there is the potential for corruption,” he adds.

Smith says that his organization supports fair elections, a small donor system of campaign fundraising. He says that candidates would collect a certain number of small contributions - $100 or less — from individuals at the grassroots level. The money would be matched on a four-to-one basis with the matching funds coming from fees on civil and criminal penalties, or other sources. Smith says this method would eliminate the need by politicians to constantly fundraise.
According to the Public Campaign website: “Being freed from the money chase means they have more time to spend with constituents, talking about issues that matter to them. When they enter office, they can consider legislation on the merits, without worrying about whether they are pleasing well heeled donors and lobbyists. Fair elections would return our government to one that is of, by, and for the people — not bought and paid for by special interests.”

Transparency is also an important part of campaign finance reform — and it’s something needed on all levels of government, Holman says.

“An inherent part of campaign finance reform is disclosure,” he says. “It’s the basis for how everything else is built.”

The bottom line is that campaign finance reform is all about returning the political process to the people, instead of the lobbying firms and special interest groups. And that, Smith says, is a powerful thing.

“A lot of this is about power — who has it and who doesn’t,” Smith says. “In our system the wealthy have the power and the everyday people don’t.”