

Electoral reform isn't starry-eyed theory, it's happening!

People are electing candidates who shun corporate cash

“We have to leech this excess, this wretched excess, of money out of the system which is distorting democracy.”

—Former GOP Sen. ALAN SIMPSON, Now co-chair of Americans for Democratic Reform

A NUMBER OF TRAVEL FIRMS OFFER a “democracy tour” of Washington, DC. They’ll buzz you through the White House, let you behold the ornate grandeur of the Senate and House chambers, give you a peek into the marbled halls of the Supreme Court, and generally introduce you to symbols of American political power. But to see actual political power in today’s system, you’d need to take what amounts to an “antidemocracy tour,” following the money trail through our Capitol City. Unfortunately, tourist buses don’t go there.

To see money power at work, you could take a five-minute walk from the gleaming dome of the Capitol building to the Republican and Democratic party headquarters. In both, there are banks of small offices (fancy cubicles, really), each with a table, a couple of chairs, and a phone. This is where our stalwart lawmakers spend an inordinate amount of their time telephoning corporate executives, lobbyists, and other special interests, methodically asking each of them to give or raise \$5,000, \$50,000, \$500,000--or more--to fund their re-election campaigns. It’s not unusual for senators to spend three hours a day, three days a week holed up in these dark spaces, doing nothing but making money call after money call to a list of wealthy elites.

Also missing from the Gray Line tours are the secluded watering holes, restaurants, and unmarked private clubs where lobbyists routinely host a full schedule of breakfast, brunch, lunch, cocktail, and dinner fundraisers for members of Congress. GOP superlobbyist Jack Abramoff is one who specialized in these greet-gulp-and-grab functions, holding so many that he opened his own restaurant to handle the traffic.

It’s a corrupt, virulently antidemocratic system in which private money buys multiples of public money. Private interests-- overwhelmingly corporate--put up millions of dollars in campaign funds each election cycle...and, in turn, the beholden recipients deliver billions of dollars to self-interested donors through public subsidies, contracts, tax breaks, regulatory favors, and other financial gains.

This is the “pay to play” system of Tom DeLay, Duke Cunningham, Bob Ney, and others who got caught reaching too openly into the goody bag. But it is also the system of those not yet caught, even of some who speak loudly about the need for reform (as long as “reform” doesn’t go so far as to interrupt the cash flow).

This is the problem with the “sweeping” reform package recently passed with great fanfare by the new Democratic majority in Congress. The provisions are nice, but good grief, didn’t any of our lawmakers have kindergarten teachers? Having to tell members that it’s a no-no to take free rides on corporate jets, winging off on all-expenses-paid golfing junkets with lobbyists, is a measure of how far ethics have sunk in Washington--and such bans are certainly no solution to the actual problem.

The power that lobbyists wield over legislators will be undiluted with the Democrats’ package, for, while it sweeps broadly, it doesn’t touch the one filthy spot that truly matters: campaign donations. If a lobbyist says to a member, “Back my bill, or I won’t buy you dinner,” that’s not a lot of swat. But for a member to be dependent on a lobbyist for raising a half-million bucks or so for the next election...well, that’s swat with some thunder and lightning in it. It’s instructive that only hours after changing the House rules last month to stop lobbyists from doling out certain freebies to lawmakers, Democrats celebrated. How? With a fundraising gala that drew some 200 check-writing lobbyists, still free to pay and play.

Grassroots rebels

Well, say the cynics, the Democrats’ hypocrisy just shows that you can’t change the system-- special interests will always find their way around any restrictions reformers can dream up. Horsecrap. Look to the states and cities, and you’ll find examples of citizens reclaiming their politics and government from the exclusive grasp of the monied powers.

Their reform mechanism is a rather simple notion called “clean elections.” CE gives candidates for state and local offices a choice: (1) go ahead and run the old way if you want, ceaselessly hustling campaign money from private funders and hocking your independence to them; or (2) choose to forego money from private interests (and use of your personal wealth) in return for receiving no-strings-attached public funds to finance your campaign.

To qualify for clean financing, candidates have to demonstrate a broad level of support by getting signatures and \$5 donations (which go to the CE fund) from a certain number of local voters, usually about 200 for a state legislative race and up to 25,000 for a gubernatorial run. This sorts out those running as a lark, for getting this many people to hand you \$5 endorsements is tedious, door-to-door work.

Once qualified, CE candidates receive a fixed and equal amount of public funds. They get an allotment to run in their party’s primaries (including third-party primaries), and those who win receive another allotment for the general election. Also--and very important--if a CE candidate is being grossly outspent by a candidate with Big Bucks backing or one spending a personal fortune, the clean candidate gets an extra allotment of matching funds to stay competitive.

The advantages of clean elections are enormous--not only for the candidates, but also for the public good:

A GREATER DIVERSITY of candidates can come forward to give voters real choices, for public funding means that a school teacher, cab driver, small farmer, factory worker, artist, bookstore owner, veteran, waitress, student or other regular person can run...and be competitive.

ELECTIONS ARE RUN on a more-level playing field, giving “outsider” candidates a better chance to buck the party bosses, funders, media “selectors,” and other power brokers.

BECAUSE CLEAN CANDIDATES spend zero time in corporate suites and lobbying haunts collecting money, giving IOUs, and continually reaching for handouts from special interests to fill the next campaign’s war chest, they are even free to toss pushy lobbyists right out of the door.

RATHER THAN ADVANCING the selfish legislative agendas of big funders, CE officeholders can stay focused on the common good, dealing with the big challenges that face our society.

THERE’S NO NEED for publicly funded lawmakers to sit in a cubicle three hours a day making money calls; instead, they might make random calls to constituents back home and ask, “How ya’ doin’?”

Trying it out

The clean-elections approach is not just starry-eyed theory.

CE got its first toehold in Maine in the mid-1990s, when people there became aware that corporate lobbyists were effectively running (and ruining) their legislature. A tipping point was when lobbyists for greedheaded trucking corporations squirreled a popular public-safety bill that contained new rest requirements intended to prevent tired, overworked truck drivers from causing crashes. Mainers were outraged that legislators would kow-tow to avaricious industry lobbyists at such deadly public expense.

Enter David Donnelly and a hardy band of reformers working with Maine Voters for Clean Elections (MVCE). Rather than tinker around the edges of reform, they went for fundamental change, proposing to Xout the controlling power of lobbyists by pushing for public funding for state elections. Such a bold approach had not been tried, so the reformers were dancing on the creative edge. “We literally sat around, 20 drafts went around the table,” Donnelly told the “Now” show on PBS. “We tried to shoot holes in it. We tried to, you know, stand it up and knock it down and redraft it again. And it’s this thing [clean elections] that we came up with.”

MVCE then took CE to the people. Donnelly notes that there was a spontaneous combustion of grassroots support--on one day, 1,100 enthusiastic volunteers fanned out, and it took them only 13 hours to collect 65,000 signatures and put the CE initiative on the state ballot. On Election Day, in 1996, voters resoundingly said yes to the change, 56% to 44%.

Well, sure, you say, but Maine is a progressive state. However, lest you think that only liberal areas will accept CE reform, note that the next state to embrace and implement it was Arizona, in 1998. Then came North Carolina in 2002, with the legislature approving a bill to provide full voluntary public financing to candidates seeking seats on the state’s top two courts. The next year, New Mexico’s legislature okayed the “Voter Action Act,” creating a CE option for candidates running for seats on the powerful five-member Public Regulation Commission.

New Jersey subsequently approved a pilot program for public funding in two legislative districts, and Connecticut has adopted CE for all statewide and legislative races, beginning in 2008. Also, a 4-1 majority of the city council in Portland, Oregon, voted for the clean option in their city elections, and Albuquerque voters have approved a CE process by a 69%-31% margin, to take effect in this year's races for council and mayor.

It works!

The impact of the public-funding option on elections has been phenomenal. Candidates across the board--Democrats, Republicans, Greens, Independents, Libertarians, and others--have chosen to run clean, rejoicing that doing so liberates them from the heavy load of always going around rattling a tin cup for donations. It has also meant that more women and people of color are running and winning, more incumbents are being ousted (including in primaries), more issues are seeing the light of day, more people are paying attention to elections...and more people are voting. In other words, CE is changing politics.

MAINE. With four election cycles under their CE belt since 2000, Mainers now have a state senate in which 83% of its members were elected with clean money and a house with 84% of its members having run clean.

In Maine's legislative elections last year, 72% of Republicans chose public financing, as did 92% of Democrats, 64% of Greens, and 38% of others. Another significant tidbit: In the 65 legislative races that pitted clean candidates against ones funded by private interests, the cleans won 58% of the seats.

The CE process is opening new political opportunities for women. An astonishing 84% of the 103 women running for Maine legislative seats in 2004 used the public option, 62% of them said the availability of CE was "very important" in making their decision to run, and 42% said they probably would not have run if this funding was unavailable.

Consider Nancy Smith. She first ran for the Maine house in 2002, saying she could not have made that step without CE. Being a farmer, she doesn't run in money circles and has no time to go around hustling money, for she has chickens and llamas to feed and cows to milk. "Clean campaigns allow those who work to run for office, and they create 'citizen legislatures' that bring very different perspectives and a different energy to government," observes Nancy, who just won her third term against a lobbyist-backed opponent.

Another example is Deborah Simpson, a single mom who was waiting tables in an Auburn restaurant in 2000. Being paid only half the minimum wage, plus tips, there was no way she could've run for a legislative seat, but she says "with clean elections it was doable." Now in her fourth term, Deborah brings issues to the table that were ignored in the past, because there were no representatives with her ground-level experiences and viewpoint.

ARIZONA. Lobbyists and old-guard legislators have made repeated but unsuccessful attempts to overturn the state's clean-elections law. Indeed, Arizonans continue to back it, and election results show that they favor candidates who choose public funding, as more and more are doing. As a result, 59% of

Arizona's house and senate members have won office the CE way--without taking special interest money.

It's especially notable that nine of the Apache state's 11 statewide officials, including the governor, attorney general, and secretary of state, are CE participants. Janet Napolitano says that without such funding, she could not have become the nation's only CE governor when she ran against corporate-funded opponents in 2002. Just as significant, even though Democrat Napolitano faces a Republican majority in both houses, a big percentage of these GOP members have also run clean, so they do not have to march in lock step with the corporate lobby. Napolitano says that whenever the business interests wanted something in the past, "they were pretty much able to have their way at the legislature, [but] now they don't have as many members who have to listen to them anymore...You can tell the difference."

NORTH CAROLINA. In 2000, a coalition of Tarheel groups called N.C. Voters for Clean Elections took on the iron fist of money in state politics. The coalition judged a full CE program covering all state offices to be more than the legislature would swallow, so it chose to focus on the most visible point of North Carolina money corruption--the seven-member supreme court and the 15-member court of appeals. These judges are elected statewide, and practically all of them were financed by insurance companies, bankers, corporate lawyers, and other business interests. Such coziness had turned these courts into legal hammers that were notoriously antiworker, anticonsumer... antipeople.

For two years, coalition members ran a vigorous grassroots education campaign. Thousands of citizens held constituency meetings with their legislators, schoolteachers made calls to former students who were now in the legislature, neighbors of legislators put up yard signs in support of the reform, and the coalition enlisted more than 1,300 lawyers and judges to the cause. While Republican legislators locked arms with lobbyists against the CE proposal, a poll by a GOP firm showed 70% of North Carolina Republicans in favor of public funding of these races. Finally, in 2002, the bill passed.

In 2004, with two seats on the supreme court and three on the appeals court up for election, the reform was put to its first test. The results were sterling. While special interests had accounted for 73% of the donations received by judicial candidates in 2002, this time those interests accounted for less than 14% of the funds. Better yet, clean candidates took both seats on the supreme court and two out of three on the court of appeals.

In last year's races for six other seats on these courts, the publicly financed contenders won five. Four of the CE winners are women, including Patricia Timmons-Goodson, the first African-American woman to be popularly elected to North Carolina's top court, and Sara Parker, elected as chief justice. As one of the coalition leaders says, "This change was due in large part to clean elections."

Build your own

William Jennings Bryan said, "Destiny is not something to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved." It's useless to wait for Washington to break the political system's debilitating addiction to the drug of special-interest bribery funds, so it's up to us. In states and cities that have already achieved some form

of clean elections, the Powers That Be did all they could to kill it. In every case, the initiative, energy, and success came from the Powers That Ought To Be: grassroots folks like you.

Don't just be agitated about the corruption, get to agitating and, most important, get to organizing. CE is a reform that can be applied to any level of elections--you can choose certain state offices, your city council, county officials, district water commissioners, or your local hog inspector, for godsake! All can be starting points. Or, if you're one who thinks that national reform is the only arena that matters, go there (see the Lowdown's "Do Something").

Implementing clean elections is real reform that's worth the fight. Indeed, the big-money corruption that rampages throughout our political system touches and taints practically every issue we care about--health care, pollution, war, jobs and wages, pure food, education... you name it. More fundamentally, the money addiction has perverted our government from one of democratic aspirations to a corporate plutocracy. This is the defining battle of our times.