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WHITMAN: Too much money in politics

Fair Elections Now Act would collar the cash competition

By Christine Todd Whitman

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With the midterm elections just weeks away, much has been made of the deeply divided character of the American electorate. It is true that on a variety of policies, from stimulus to health care to immigration, Americans do not see eye to eye. But when it comes to political process - who should influence our policy debate and how we elect our national leaders - there is remarkably little dissent. And there is much work to be done.

Indeed, it would appear that everywhere but Washington, Americans on the left, right and center agree that wealthy special interests have too much sway over the political system and citizens have not enough. According to a recent survey, 95 percent of voters think corporations spend money on politics mainly to buy influence on policy and to elect people who favor their financial interests. Meanwhile, roughly the same percentage (93 percent) think average citizens have too little influence over what happens in Washington.

These sentiments find expression in [Tea Party\(/topics/the-tea-party/\)](#) conventions and liberal rallies alike. We may not agree as citizens on the direction our country should take on one policy or another, but we are united in our belief that [American government\(/topics/federal-government-of-the-united-states/\)](#) has stopped working for the American people - and real reform of the electoral process is needed to get it back on track.

I've spent enough time in Washington and my own state capital of Trenton, N.J., to know that most politicians are not bought and sold to corporate or union interests. I believe most people come to Washington genuinely committed to serving the public interest. But if the people we elect to lead us are trying their best, the system in which they operate undermines them every step of the way.

Consider the prevailing incentives that govern modern campaigns. On the demand side, candidates who wish to have a fighting chance at public office must raise millions of dollars in private contributions to get out their message - upward of \$10 million, on average, to run for [U.S. Senate\(/topics/united-states-senate/\)](#). To raise the requisite funds, incumbents in [Congress\(/topics/congress/\)](#) devote an estimated one-third to one-half of their working hours dialing for dollars in the run-up to the election, while challengers must either be independently wealthy or have connections to great wealth and be ready to devote a year or two of their lives to fundraising. Not an appealing proposition for everyday working Americans who may aspire to public service.

On the supply side, those with the means and incentive to contribute large amounts to political campaigns share woefully little in common with the average citizen. They are whiter, older, more urban, more often male and very much wealthier than the average. In fact, residents of Manhattan's Upper East Side contributed more money to politics in 2008 than each of the bottom 39 states contributed. Less than 1 percent of the population was responsible for providing the vast majority of campaign funds, with 0.1 percent of citizens contributing \$2,300 or more in the last election and accounting for fully 60 percent of total itemized donations.

Most disconcerting of all, those heavy hitters who provide the lion's share of campaign funds overwhelmingly represent special-interest groups with a direct interest in what gets done in Washington. Indeed, the Center for Responsive Politics reports that money from the top five contributing sectors - finance and real estate, lawyers and lobbyists, health care, communications, and energy and transportation - accounted for nearly 50 percent of the total \$2.4 billion raised in 2008, compared with just 10 percent from ideological/single-issue groups. One can only imagine the amounts being raised and spent today.

I know of only one way to change fundamentally our broken pay-to-play system: citizen-funded elections. The concept is straightforward: Put ownership of our public elections in the hands of people, not special-interest donors, and the politicians who are elected will be accountable to them. One proposal for citizen-funded elections, the Fair Elections Now Act, is before the [Congress\(/topics/congress/\)](#) and deserves a serious look. Under the proposed act, qualifying candidates who demonstrate a broad base of public support and do not take donations of more than \$100 from their own constituents would be eligible for matching federal funds with which to run a viable campaign.

At less than \$1 billion per year for all congressional elections, a Fair Elections program could prove the best investment ever made with public money, especially when one considers the \$87 billion in annual corporate-welfare subsidies given to major contributors, as tracked by the Cato Institute. Far from limiting political speech as previous regulatory reforms have done, a voluntary Fair Elections system would expand speech on the basis of grass-roots citizen support without imposing any new regulations.

As a lifelong Republican concerned about government accountability, electoral competition and freedom of speech, I can think of no more urgent need for [Congress\(/topics/congress/\)](#) today than citizen-funded elections. Making Washington work for the American people is at least one issue both sides can get behind.

Christine Todd Whitman served as governor of New Jersey and director of the Environmental Protection Agency under President George W. Bush. She is an advisory board member of Americans for Campaign Reform.

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