

Want a Better State Legislature? Fix Campaign Finance!

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Last week, I talked about the changing culture of the [Florida Legislature](#), where nearly half of the members are millionaires – a stark contrast to those they serve in what is supposed to be representative government. I suggested that the low "part-time" pay was one of the things that kept average people from being able to pursue such a demanding position – especially if they were above, or not in a position to line their own pockets while they were there, like so many legislators who write favorable legislation for the very industries they profit from in their "other jobs."

If an average Floridian cannot run for an office because they do not have the sort of job that allows them to fly off to Tallahassee for months at a time, and cannot afford the 10 or maybe 20 grand pay-cut that would be required, then the challenges of running are moot. Who'd run for an office they couldn't afford to win? But let's say we remedied that and modestly improved the salary. Then they run into the significantly larger problem – the increasingly exorbitant cost of mounting a campaign that has a snowball's chance in hell of getting them elected.

Over the past decade, the cost of running even a local political campaign has gone through the roof, with some county races hitting the six-figure mark. In fact, by 2008 some races for the state legislature were rivaling what had spent on some successful races for Congress as late as 2000! Not that congressional races aren't also continuing to cost exponentially more at the same time – even in a down economy. In the boom year of 2004, Tom Daschle and John Thune spent an unthinkable \$33 million in that year's most expensive congressional race. In 2010, while the economy had been in some of the worst shape in history, Linda McMahon and Richard Blumenthal spent more than \$58 million in the Connecticut Senate seat race that topped that cycle.

In 2010, state representatives in the Florida House spent just under \$33 million total on their races – nearly 30 percent more than they had in 2002. [House Speaker Dean Cannon](#) raised the most money, a record \$1.18 million. Just about every winner with an opponent spent well over \$100,000 and six spent over \$400k. Back in 2002, not a single state House candidate raised even \$350,000. The Florida Senate was even more expensive in 2010, with 11 candidates spending over half a million.

Now remember, the limit on legislative races is \$500 per contribution. Imagine trying to come up with the kind of money that would make you an even modestly viable candidate. Think of how many phone calls you could make to anyone who could fork over \$500 or how many small donations from family, friends and associates it would take to raise a hundred grand. Politically connected pols however, have shown that if you have friends with deep pockets, it's not only easy to raise, but that there are also many ways for the well-off to skirt the system and raise even more.

If I have a rich businessman interested in me getting elected, he can only donate \$500 (once during the primary, then again during the general). But so can his wife, and his daughter, and his son, and so on and so on and so on. His business can also donate \$500, as can every subsidiary of it that he's incorporated. His employees can too, as well as their wives and kids, etc., etc., etc. This is how a candidate raises that kind of scratch and it's just the beginning.

If that rich businessman friend of mine really wants to help me, he can form a PAC and now he and other interested parties can fund expensive attack ads against my opponent, that I can say I haven't approved and do not endorse because they aren't funded by my official campaign. In this way, it becomes pretty hard to know who is supporting me as a candidate, or who I might have allegiance to as a result. In the end, a system designed to be transparent is anything but, and though someone can still mount a grassroots campaign, and each citizen still has one vote, the [Cato Institute](#) reports that an incumbent that seeks reelection and is not in poor health, has over a 99 percent chance of winning!

Why? Simple, it is nearly impossible to be heard by the voters when you can so easily be shouted down by the money of a well-financed opponent. No matter how many doors you knock on or events you attend, half a million dollars in direct mail, robo-calls, TV and radio ads will make your opponent more well known. And when that PAC drops the last minute attack-ad saying you kick dogs, hate old people and have an illegitimate baby with a space alien, try getting your side out without a five-figure media blitz.

Bottom line is that the expense, like the pay, helps to ensure that the average citizen need not apply. I talked to two high-ranking campaign people (one from each major party) off the record and they both said nearly the identical thing. For state House and Senate candidates they look for wealthy types who can afford to self-fund the first HUNDRED GRAND and then easily work through their Rolodex for the next hundred. Then the party figures they're worth lavishing with some of their own considerable war chest of funds – that is if it's one of a handful of districts that they deem "in play," meaning that gerrymandering has not made the result a foregone conclusion.

It should be no surprise that you wind up with so many trial lawyers, finance execs and developers and so few teachers, nurses and firefighters in high office when you have criteria like that. Nonetheless, as long as we keep the current system and kid ourselves with easily-skirted donation limits it is unlikely that things will not continue to move in that direction. If you want to have a better state legislature, and right now I don't know many Floridians who don't, throw out the big money and move to shorter, publicly-financed elections where ideas and not dollars are the currency that counts.