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More Money Can Beat Big Money

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Nine senators introduced a resolution early this month that would amend the Constitution to overturn the Supreme Court's decisions in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) and *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976). These two cases had restricted Congress's power to limit contributions to political campaigns and independent political expenditures, by both individuals and corporations. Under the amendment, Congress and the states would have the power to limit both contributions and independent expenditures.

"By limiting the influence of big money in politics," said one of the senators, Tom Harkin, an Iowa Democrat, "elections can be more about the voters and their voices, not big money donors and their deep pockets. We need to have a campaign finance structure that limits the influence of the special interests and restores confidence in our democracy."

This proposal is just the latest verse in a very tired song. Once again, the answer to the problem of campaign finance is to "just say no." Limit contributions. Limit independent expenditures. Limit soft money donations. No, no, no.

But at some point, Congress has got to muster the courage to say what every sane reformer recognizes: that we won't solve the problem of "big money donors" until Congress begins to say yes. Not just finance limits, but also finance support. Not just ways to restrict, but also ways to enable.

The framers of our Constitution gave us a republic. They meant by that a "representative democracy." Or as Federalist No. 52 put it, a Congress "dependent upon the People alone."

Despite the founders' intentions, however, Congress has evolved from a dependency "upon the people," to an increasing dependency upon the funders. Members spend 30 percent to 70 percent of their time raising money to stay in Congress, or to get their party back in power. Less than 1 percent of Americans give more than \$200 in a political campaign. No more than .05 percent give the maximum in any Congressional campaign. A career focused on the 1 percent — or, worse, the .05 percent — will never earn them the confidence of the 99 percent. Indeed, according to a [recent New York Times/CBS News poll](#), so far it hasn't earned them the confidence of any more than 9

percent.

So long as elections cost money, we won't end Congress's dependence on its funders. But we can change it. We can make "the funders" "the people." Following Arizona, Maine and Connecticut, we could adopt a system of small-dollar public funding for Congress.

Here's just one way: almost every voter pays at least \$50 in some form of federal taxes. So imagine a system that gave a rebate of that first \$50 in the form of a "democracy voucher." That voucher could then be given to any candidate for Congress who agreed to one simple condition: the only money that candidate would accept to finance his or her campaign would be either "democracy vouchers" or contributions from citizens capped at \$100. No PAC money. No \$2,500 checks. Small contributions only. And if the voter didn't use the voucher? The money would pass to his or her party, or, if an independent, back to this public funding system.

Fifty dollars a voter is real money: more than \$6 billion an election cycle. (The total raised in 2010: \$1.86 billion.) It's also my money, or your money, used to support the speech that we believe: this is not a public financing system that forces some to subsidize the speech of others. And because a campaign would have to raise its funds from the very many, it could weaken the power of the very few to demand costly kickbacks for their contributions — what the Cato Institute calls "corporate welfare," like subsidies to ethanol manufacturers, or tariffs protecting the domestic sugar industry. Cato estimates that in 2009, the cost of such corporate welfare was \$90 billion. If cutting the link to special interest funders could shrink that amount by just 10 percent, the investment would, across a two-year election cycle, pay for itself three times over.

"Just say no" reforms alone have failed. They will always fail in a world where campaigns cost money, and the bulk of that money is raised from less than 1 percent of us. We need these senators to explain this to America, and to take the lead in pushing it — much more than we need yet another reform, like the proposed amendment, designed to just say no.

And if not senators, then here is a version of the Occupy Wall Street slogan that 99 percent of Americans could actually agree upon: campaigns financed by the 1 percent will never earn the confidence of the 99 percent, or appear to any of us as anything other than corrupt. We, all of us, must demand an end to that corruption.

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