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Roemer's crusade outshines campaign ; He denounces financing system

By Jonathan Tilove - Washington bureau

WASHINGTON -- In announcing his independent candidacy for the presidency last week, Buddy Roemer boasted, "We are the only candidate to meet the requirement for federal matching funds -- the only candidate."

In fact, whatever else he may achieve in his pursuit of the presidency, the former Louisiana congressman and governor may be remembered as the last presidential candidate to ever receive federal matching funds; the very fact that he is the only candidate seeking and collecting those funds this year is prima facie evidence that the public financing system for presidential elections is already functionally dead.

"In the current political campaign environment, the presidential campaign finance system doesn't work at all and cannot work," said Craig Holman, who lobbies Capitol Hill on ethics and campaign finance issues for the nonprofit consumer advocacy group, Public Citizen. "No serious candidate for president would want to participate in the current presidential financing system."

"It's become a kind of stigma; it's an indication you are going to lose," said John Samples, who directs the Center for Representative Government, which studies campaign finance issues at the libertarian **Cato Institute**.

Once again, Roemer's campaign is proving its point about the power of money in politics, very much at its own expense.

Roemer has been running for president, first as a Republican and now as an independent, as a crusade against the corrupting power of money on politics, but his refusal to accept any contribution of more than \$100, re-enforced that money is the mother's milk of politics, without which a campaign cannot thrive.

Now, his singular participation in the campaign finance system is calling attention to a system that has failed to keep pace with the rising costs of campaigns, especially in a political cycle in which so-called super PACs, as a consequence of the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, can spend unlimited sums for or against candidates as long as they maintain a veneer of distance from their candidate's official campaign apparatus.

"It's very sad," said Stephen Griffin, a young historian from San Diego who gave the Roemer campaign \$5, dutifully reported on its FEC campaign finance report for January.

"It's certainly not Roemer's failure," Griffin said. "It's a failure for the rest of us."

Off the public radar

In the meantime, Roemer presses on, convinced that until money no longer holds sway in Washington, nothing meaningful will get done.

"The Buddy Roemer problem," Samples said, is that "he was fooled by the people."

What Samples means is that while many people share Roemer's concern, most don't feel strongly about it.

Consider, he said, the dramatic drop-off in the percentage of people who check off the \$3 contribution on their tax returns to pay for public funding of elections, even though it doesn't cost them a cent but only earmarks \$3 they have to pay in any case.

Back in the 1970s, when the system was created in the wake of Watergate, Samples said close to 30 percent of taxpayers checked off the box. Now it's down to single digits.

"People don't care about that," said John Pitney, a professor of politics at California's Claremont McKenna College and a co-author of "Epic Journey: The 2008 Elections and American Politics."

"It's not the type of thing people talk about in line at the supermarket," Pitney said. "Any change will come from the judiciary, not from Congress, because people, just ordinary voters, just don't care." And, he said, "they are

smart enough to know that corruption is going to go on, no matter what."

'The system is broken'

Moreover, he said, the failure of any other candidate to seek public funding is telling.

"Even (former Pennsylvania Sen.) Rick Santorum, who didn't start out with a big war chest, declined it," he said. "The matching funds -- you've got all the rules -- it required a degree in theology to figure it out." And no serious candidate would accept its stringent spending limits.

"Everybody's hoping to win the political lottery and be the guy who raises Obama levels of cash," Pitney said.

Every presidential election since 1976 has been financed at least in part with public funds, rising from \$73 million in 1976 to nearly \$240 million in 2000.

"Throughout the history of the presidential public finance system, the program has operated admirably to the point of fairly equalizing campaign expenditures between the major party candidates, and providing primary candidates with the resources to be able to run campaigns," Holman said. "It made elections very competitive, quite open and fairly scandal-free."

But in 2008 public financing of the presidential campaign plummeted to \$139 million, largely because candidate Obama, a prodigious fundraiser, opted out of public financing for the general election.

"The system is broken," said Fred Wertheimer, the president of the nonprofit reform group, Democracy 21. Amid the super PACs, "the spending limits are so out of sync with what it costs to run a modern campaign."

"We think it's essential to fix that system, even more so in the post-Citizens United world, so candidates can have an alternative way of running for president," he said.

But in December, the Republican House, on a party-line vote, voted to abolish public funding for campaigns altogether, and eliminate the check-off. The measure stalled in the Senate.

Outside Washington, Lawrence Lessig, who heads the Safra Center for Ethics at Harvard University and is the author of "Republic Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress -- and a Plan to Stop it," believes it is an issue on which the tea party and Occupy Wall Street share common ground. However, he said, it may take "this cycle disgusting people so completely," before Washington is moved to action.

The age of supersizing

Amid the ruins of the public financing system, Roemer's FEC report reads like a relic from some quaint past.

There are \$100 contributions from the poker dealer from Las Vegas, the home-schooling homemaker and part-time pizza server in Eatonville, Wash., and the astronomer in Garland Texas; \$50 from the Presbyterian minister in Carthage, N.C.; \$40 from the busker in Tres Piedras, N.M.; \$25 from the bus driver in Staten Island, N.Y., and the philosophy professor at Lehigh University; and \$20.12 from the archivist at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama.

"I like that he hasn't given up," said Laura Anderson, the archivist. "So maybe I can buy him a biscuit to keep him going, to keep him saying what he's saying."

"It's awesome," Roemer said of his contributors. "What are my chances -- 1 percent, 2 percent, 3 percent. But, who cares. We're making a point, and you know who is standing behind me -- real people."

It's a wholesome image.

"Mom-and-pop groceries are wholesome," said Pitney. "But we live in the age of Walmart."

But Griffin, the history professor who gave Roemer \$5, said that is precisely the problem.

The supersizing of contributions "makes your contribution to the democratic process unnecessary." People think, "Why bother," said Griffin, the co-author of "Washington and Napoleon: Leadership in the Age of Revolution," who said that kind of disengagement was also what permitted an ultimately despotic figure like Napoleon to emerge from a plebiscitary democracy rather than the electoral system that produced Washington.

Warned Griffin: "Our current politics, our society is very much more like France in the 1800s than American in the 1780s."

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