

# Protesters Dressed as Founding Fathers Crash D.C. Fundraisers



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*Reporter*

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Rolling around the capital in a dark-green trolley Wednesday morning, a troupe of actors dressed as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and Betsy Ross visited three D.C. fund-raising hotspots to protest special interests and crusade for the **Fair Elections Now Act**, a bill that would establish a public funding system for House and Senate elections and limit outside sources of cash for congressional campaigns.

"We cast off the yoke of British tyranny, and today we are called on again to cast off the yoke of British Petroleum," an actor playing Thomas Jefferson said outside the Democratic National Headquarters, the group's first stop of the day.

Shortly after 10 a.m., the group arrived on the trolley and assembled in front of a giant banner that urged members of Congress to "Declare Independence from Big Money." They repeated the act two more times: at the downtown headquarters of the **Podesta Group**, a major lobbying firm, and at the **Capitol Hill Club**, an elite Republican hangout that was rumored to be hosting 13 fundraisers Wednesday.



"July 4th is Independence Day, but right now, June 30th, is called 'dependence day,'" said Nick Nyhart, CEO of

**Public Campaign**, which, together with **Common Cause**, hired the actors. The two groups work to combat the influence of special interests in Washington.

"Today is the last day of the fund-raising cycle, and right now thousands upon thousands upon thousands of phone calls are being made to wealthy donors. It's part of the system, and it's time we put elections back in the hands of ordinary Americans," Nyhart said.

The actors spoke in mock Colonial English, cracking jokes and reading -- often stumbling over -- quotes from America's founders about the corrupting influence of money in democracy.

"As I wrote in 'Poor Richard's Almanac,'" the Benjamin Franklin character thundered, "he that is of the opinion money will do everything may well be suspected of doing everything for money.' And as we used to say in Brooklyn, 'There ought to be a law!'" Sign-wielding volunteers cheered, and passersby gaped and reached for their cameras.

Washington demonstrators are known to get aggressive on occasion; last year, Greenpeace activists scaled **the headquarters of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce** with ladders and grappling hooks and draped the building with a giant banner. But Wednesday's "trolley tour" had more of an air of festivity, driven by the actors' camp, the delight the spectacle aroused on the street, and the humor of their run-ins with Washington staffers.

"Who are you buying today?" one actor asked a man hurrying into the Capitol Hill Club. Told by club officials that only members and guests were allowed on the premises, the Thomas Jefferson character protested, "The money changing hands in this club has our faces on it, and you still won't let us in!"

"They say Tony Podesta is the most powerful man in Washington," Benjamin Franklin snorted in the lobby of the Podesta Group. "I used to have that title."

Podesta, a veteran of Democratic politics, routinely appears on **lists of Washington's elite**, as the group's Web site is quick to point out. In May, Podesta topped GQ's "**monthly power list**." His firm, which earns more than any other in D.C., handles lobbying and branding work for BP, making him a particularly juicy target for activists.

Staffers in the Podesta Group's building watched the proceeding from their office windows, cell phones and cameras in hand. But once they'd had a look, they closed their blinds, eliciting boos from the crowd. "Podesta is a Tory!" someone shouted.

In an e-mail to Politics Daily, Podesta said he was unaware the demonstrators had visited his office. "I'm sorry I missed them," Podesta said. "I love protests. My first job in D.C. was at Common Cause."

The humorless security guards and doormen the group met at each location -- and the Capitol Police officers who arrived to keep the group at bay on the sidewalk -- didn't stop the Washington and Franklin characters from chatting up passersby, including Rep. John Fleming, Republican of Louisiana. Fleming greeted the group pleasantly and paused on First Street for photographs with the actors.

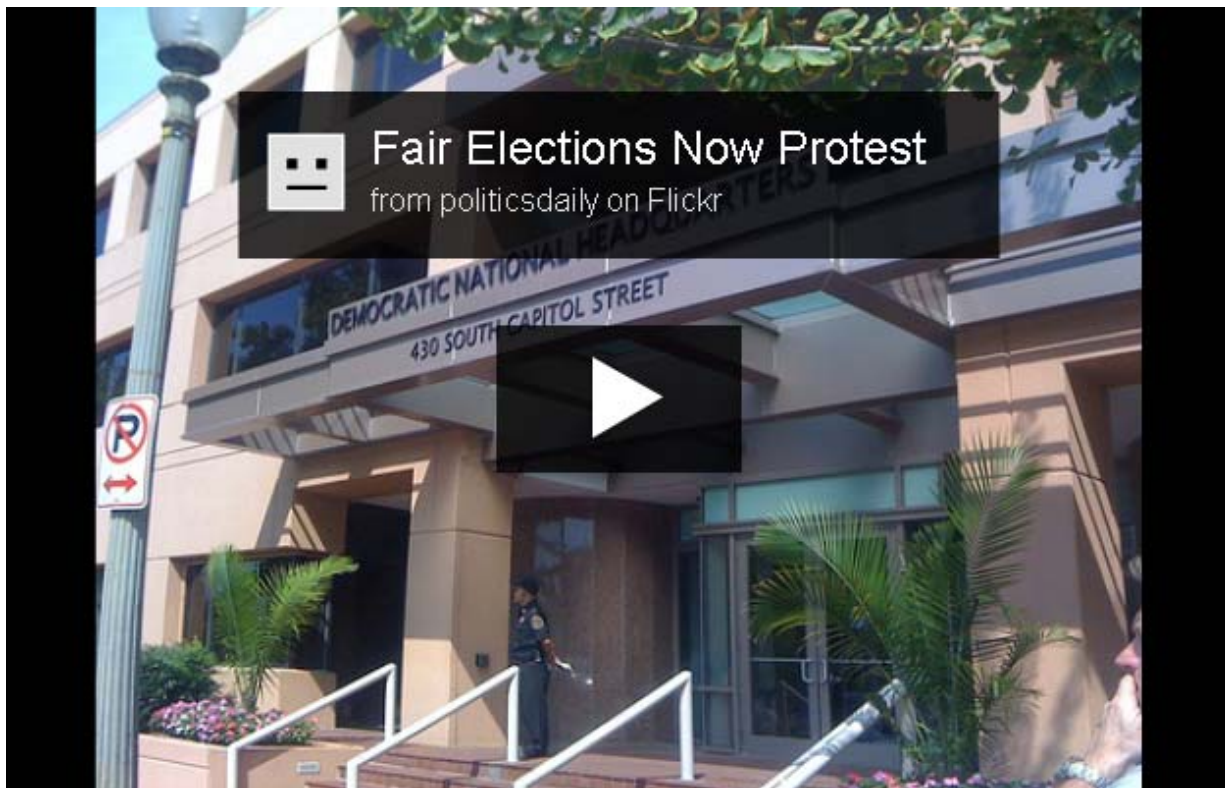
Off to the side of the spectacle, Nick Nyhart was recounting representatives' complaints about the difficulty of staying connected to their districts their first year in office while also raising the enormous sums of money necessary to keep their seats. "When there's wall-to-wall fundraising, there's very little time to be a good member of Congress," Nyhart said.

The trolley tour was part of a publicity campaign for the Fair Elections Now Act, which Nyhart's organization and Common Cause support as the antidote to powerful special interests. The act would set up a public campaign finance system in which the federal government would match small donations from

constituents, and would limit the money parties and PACs could spend on congressional races.

The bill is supported by campaign finance reformers and opposed by some conservatives and free-market groups. In 2009, John Samples of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, **said** the bill demonizes private funding of campaigns but does little to alter the system for those who remain outside the public finance system it prescribes. Samples said the Fair Elections Now Act would institute more government control of elections and drive up federal deficits.

### **Slideshow: Actors Crash D.C. Fundraisers Demanding "Fair Elections"**



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