



CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM: A MATTER OF FAITH

WHAT'S THE MATTER?

In the United States, most political campaigns are privately funded, which means candidates wanting to run for elected office must aggressively raise money to finance their campaign. Legally, a political campaign can solicit donations from two sources: individual donors or political action committees (PACs). Running a campaign is expensive. Fundraised money is used for various expenses, including: staff salaries, campaign materials, and paid advertising time in the media. Particularly in close races, the cost of running a campaign can be compounded exponentially. As the cost of a campaign increases, fundraising for individual and PAC donations demands a significant amount of a candidate's time and energy. It also puts candidates in the position to offer access, time, and favors to their donors once elected. This leads to situations in which special interests and wealthy donors can edge out the many other voices and priorities in a community.

THE VALUES OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY

Faith traditions the world-over warn us against the corrupting influence of wealth: when politicians become beholden to moneyed interests, it can blind them to injustice and iniquity. This, too often, prevents elected officials from standing up for the needs of their constituency and for the collective wellbeing. Lawmakers, as public servants, should prioritize the needs of the whole, in as much as that is possible, and take into account public preferences that include the needs of working class people and people of color.

Central to faith traditions is the inherent dignity and equal worth of every human being. This is also a core democratic principle for which we strive. When money in politics makes elected officials responsive to their big donors and special interests, the dignity and equality of Americans is fundamentally violated. Our faith traditions and democratic principles call for every voice and every vote to carry equal weight. Money in politics gives undue influence to large donors and prevents our democracy from fulfilling this basic principle.

THE DISTORTION OF OUR DEMOCRACY

The role of money in politics has grown exponentially in the last decade. The 2020 federal election cycle alone cost over \$14 billion and was the most expensive election cycle ever. Indeed, this doubled what was spent in the 2016 cycle, which had previously held that record.¹ These statistics only reflect spending in federal races and do not account for spending in state and local races. The environment of escalating campaign expenses resembles an arms race in which entities that can write large checks to candidates and political action committees (PACs) are accumulating greater power and influence among our elected officials.

This phenomenon means that elected officials devote a significant amount of their time and attention to an elite, donor class comprised of an extremely wealthy, 90 percent white, and overwhelmingly male subsection of the population² and that they are increasingly responsive to small groups of wealthy elites. As the pressure to focus on donors intensifies, it draws elected officials away from understanding and being responsive to their constituents' needs.

The current system also prevents many people from running for office at all, skewing campaigns so that wealthy, white men have an edge compared to working class people, including women and candidates of color. Many people lack the social networks with access to the wealth necessary to launch or sustain a campaign and cannot afford to stop working to campaign. Unsurprisingly, this is especially true for people of color who experience a significant wealth gap compared to white networks.

Our current campaign finance system is not structured for accountability and severely restricts access for broad swaths of the population to run for public office. Our nation needs an alternative campaign finance system that will help balance the power of money and unlock possibilities for a diverse pool of community leaders to run for public office.

THE FAITHFUL RESPONSE

Creative reforms to campaign financing are gaining traction, creating financing systems that enable candidates and elected officials to be more accountable and present to their constituents. Since elected leaders are public servants, many campaign finance reforms look to public financing as another, viable option to fund campaigns. In fact, states and localities are leading the way by creating alternative campaign financing systems. New York, Seattle, Connecticut, Florida, and others have instituted public finance programs for state and local elections. These programs improve the integrity of elections while amplifying the small contributions afforded by lower income donors and donors of color.

The *For the People Act (H.R. 1/S. 1)* includes a small donor matching program that would significantly increase the value of small donations. For every dollar a presidential and congressional candidate raises from small donations (less than \$200), the federal government would match six dollars. The *For the People Act (H.R. 1/S. 1)* funds this matching program through a 2.75 percent fee on criminal and civil fines, fees, penalties or settlements with banks and corporations that commit corporate malfeasance. This fee allows for publicly funded financing to be paid for by the same corporations that consistently try to circumvent the rules, not by taxpayers. To participate in the matching program, candidates must agree to reject contributions over \$1,000 from individual donors (the current limit is \$2,800). Participating candidates also agree 1) to reject money from PACs (unless the PAC is small donor funded), 2) to forgo creating a leadership PAC or joint fundraising committee, and 3) to limit the personal funds they will use on their campaigns.

A small donor matching system to finance campaigns is a key part of restoring fairness and integrity to American elections. It amplifies the voices of non-affluent donors, often from communities of color, which are currently drowned out by the loud “speech” coming from the dark or special interest money of big donors.

“Our current finance system is inherently corrupting. The gradual, insidious, reinforcing cycle of pursuit of money leads to dependency on donors. Engagement with donors leads to friendships with such sources. The result, even if inadvertent, leads to enabling funders to manipulate the system and even encouraging them to do so. **If the Courts of our nation will not act, then Congress must legislate to put an end to this pernicious influence of money on our political spirit.**”

- Rabbi David Saperstein, Former United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.

¹ <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2020/10/cost-of-2020-election-14billion-update>

² <https://www.demos.org/policy-briefs/designing-public-financing-systems-advance-equity-and-independent-political-power>

