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## Dialing For Dollars

**Public financing for election campaigns may not be a panacea, but it's got to be better than what we're doing now.**

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From time to time during this presidential election run-up, victory has been declared. No votes were counted nor polls cited. It was all about the cash, the moolah, the millions pouring in for one candidate or another, who then pulled ahead or fell behind. The entire process has begun to seem like a game show, "Deal or No Deal," "The Price Is Right." Or, if you're an ordinary voter, "Jeopardy."

OK, I get it: campaign finance reform is the Ambien of issues. But as the totals have mounted, a few million giving way to tens of millions and then tens of millions more, the business of the American election has become, if not necessarily corrupted, at least swamped by big money. A series of scandals involving lobbyists and elected officials have proven to those in the cheap seats what they always suspected: you pay, you play. Bought and paid for? Anyone could be forgiven if they feel that way.

John Rauh does, and that's why he founded an organization called Americans for Campaign Reform and got two former Democratic senators, Bob Kerrey and Bill Bradley, and two Republicans, Alan Simpson and Warren Rudman, to be his point people. Rauh ran for the Senate in 1992, and lost. Fifteen years later he can't keep the revulsion out of his voice when he talks about "dialing for dollars" and working the hors d'oeuvres circuits to raise money from lobbyists and assorted rich people. He says that sitting senators told him a third of each incumbent's time was spent raising money to run again.

"I've never seen a search mechanism for any organization that's worse than that for the leadership of the United States of America," says Rauh, who came from the private sector.

His answer is a voluntary public-funding plan for federal elections. Candidates who qualify through a set number of small donations or signatures would receive a grant or matching funds and would have to limit their spending to the amount an independent commission determined was necessary to mount a credible race. Those who wanted to run with private funding could still do so. But Rauh says research shows that that need not dissuade the publicly funded, even in light of races in which millionaires have paid platinum prices for their own campaigns. Citing three Senate contests last year in which the winner defeated the incumbent with half the money, Rauh says, "You cannot buy an election. You can only lose it if you don't have enough to make an impact."

The resulting campaign is called Just \$6, as in per citizen. It sounds like a pass-the-hat approach but is just an imperfect way of saying that public financing doesn't have to break the bank. Naysayers have responded by asking why taxpayers should be forced to underwrite political ambitions. Janet Napolitano, the governor of Arizona who has run twice with state public funding, says they aren't. The \$1.1 million she

got in her last race came from a voluntary checkoff on tax forms and a surcharge on penalties and fines, including parking tickets. "If you don't want to pay, park legally," she says with a laugh.

Since Arizona passed the Clean Elections Act in 1998, public funding has replaced private contributions as the largest source of financing for statewide races. (Those who ran with private donations went to the usual alternatives, one study showed: lawyers, lobbyists, the insurance and real-estate industries.) Napolitano acknowledges it is no panacea; her grant was buttressed more than eightfold by state party spending that supported the Democratic field up and down the ballot. But she says public funding does much of what it is supposed to do: gives ordinary people a sense of ownership, eliminates the automatic advantages of incumbency and opens the door to a broader field. She recalls that during the primaries in her first gubernatorial race there were four Democrats, four Republicans and an independent. "It was a mosh pit!" she says. "No way some of those people could have raised enough to run without Clean Elections." The Arizona system requires a candidate in the governor's race to qualify by raising \$5 donations from 4,200 voters. Napolitano considers that part of the beauty of the system, the \$5 parties with chips and dip and a couple dozen people in someone's living room. "This way you spend more time being able to communicate with voters," she says.

We're already paying for campaign financing in a circuitous and counterproductive fashion, through politicians who are spending a big chunk of the people's time meeting with power brokers who don't necessarily share the people's priorities. Everyone knows the quid pro quo: contributions from a group with a high-hat name like the American Association for Self-Interest, followed by votes for the legislation AASI wants. And sometimes, after an official leaves office, he goes on to become—you guessed it—a lobbyist for AASI himself.

It wasn't always thus. The historian Doris Kearns Goodwin notes that Abraham Lincoln traveled extensively before the 1860 convention and gave speeches of such power that his reputation blossomed. Thousands would listen and hundreds of thousands read the text, reprinted in the newspapers and distributed in pamphlet form. Money was in such short supply that Lincoln's sartorial shabbiness was legendary, but the man sure had convictions. "Little wonder I find it more fun to live in olden times," Goodwin concludes. Americans can't go back. But perhaps they would like to go around the current system, which enables their leaders to declare victory based not on democracy but on dollars.

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