



## **Outrageous: Dialing for Dollars**

### **How can your congressman serve you when he's constantly hunting for campaign cash?**

By Michael Crowley

Last fall, a longtime friend of mine ran for Congress and won. He's a good person—smart, caring, and full of integrity. A few days after the election, I called to congratulate him. We spoke briefly about the big issues facing the 111th Congress, ranging from the economy to the future of Iraq and Afghanistan. But he quickly steered the conversation to another topic: money. He was concerned that he hadn't beaten his challenger soundly enough. It was two months before he would be sworn in, and the subject weighing heaviest on his mind wasn't the needs of his constituents or the best interests of our country—it was the pressure to raise enough cash to win his 2010 reelection race.

It's infuriating to watch even the best-intentioned people get sucked so quickly into Washington's money-obsessed political culture. In our capital, the fund-raising never stops. Even with America facing financial disaster and two wars abroad, many of our elected officials spend more time worrying about filling their campaign coffers than they do about governing.

Just ask the lawmakers who come streaming down Capitol Hill every day to dial for dollars. They're headed for fluorescent-lit telephone cubicles at their party headquarters, since federal law prevents members of Congress from making fund-raising calls from their government offices. It's a demeaning comedown from enacting the people's business in the marble halls of Congress but a necessary one for those who like their jobs. "You could be Abraham Lincoln," then freshman congressman Joe Courtney (D-CT) lamented to the Washington Post, but you need "the heart of a telemarketer" to survive in Washington.

The average winning candidate in the House spent \$1.26 million in 2006—42 percent more than in 1996—on a growing army of consultants, increasingly expensive television ads, and direct mail campaigns. The cost of running successfully for the Senate, meanwhile, soared 74 percent, to almost \$9 million.

And it's getting worse. Some congressmen now say they plan to raise \$20,000 for every day the House is in session. Asks one senior Democratic aide ruefully, "How can you serve your constituents when you have that hanging over your head?"

That's a good question. The money chase is increasingly stealing time that lawmakers would otherwise spend learning the issues, grilling witnesses at hearings, and talking to constituents about local concerns. Retired senator Fritz Hollings (D-SC) estimates that his former colleagues spend nearly a third of their time on fund-raising.

What's worse, fund-raisers increasingly dominate and dictate the legislative calendar, with congressional leaders timing debates and votes around big-ticket fetes. If there's a conflict, many members will simply skip the vote.

Guess who's attending these fund-raisers? Usually not constituents but Gucci-loafer lobbyists for big corporations, labor unions, and other special interests who are all buying face time with representatives. Sometimes they're looking for, and get, more than just access. Desperation for precious funding has driven more than a few law-makers to do favors in return for cash. Former congressman Bob Ney (R-OH) is one example. He pleaded guilty in 2006 after prosecutors accused him of accepting tens of thousands of dollars in campaign cash in exchange for legislative favors, among them an amendment that would have lifted a federal ban against gaming for the benefit of a Texas Indian tribe.

We don't have to settle for this crazy system, which makes politicians miserable and gives us rotten government to boot.

Reformers want to offer candidates a way out: "clean" money for refusing contributions from special interests. Bipartisan bills expected to be introduced in the new Congress will aim to provide candidates with public funds based on the cost of campaigns in their areas. If they're anything like proposals last time around, these bills will give House candidates 80 percent of the average cost of running a campaign in the previous two election cycles. Senate candidates would get \$750,000 for the general election, plus another \$150,000 for every congressional district in their state after the first one. Candidates would get vouchers to buy TV airtime, and broadcasters would be required to offer 20 percent discounts. Any candidate who collects a large number of \$5 contributions from within his or her home state could qualify.

Some critics ask, Why go this route when our new president turned down public election funds, then outspent his opponent \$760 million to \$374 million? But that's a false argument. Lesser-known candidates just can't expect to suck up money on the Internet the way Barack Obama did, especially on the local level.

It's true that public financing could require taxpayer dollars—under some plans, as much as \$950 million a year. But that seems a reasonable price to pay to restore integrity to Washington. Public financing is already working for some races in seven states and two cities. President Obama cosponsored legislation to make it federal when he was still a senator.

Let's hope he keeps pushing it. It's time to replace our government of telemarketers with old-fashioned public servants who can work full-time to solve the nation's problems.

**Do More**

The following groups are trying to reform federal campaign fund-raising or create greater transparency:

- > [Change Congress](#) works to end earmarks and lobbyist donations and promote campaign finance reform.
- > [Public Campaign](#) and [Democracy 21](#) are fighting to reduce the role of special interest money in American elections.
- > [Sunlight Foundation](#) helps regular citizens use the Web to track fund-raisers and lobbying in Washington.