

Stop Crimes Against Democracy: End Campaign Finance Corruption Now

By Pearl Korn

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The title of this post was also the message on a large banner draped from the balcony of the ironically named "[Million Dollar Staircase](#)" in the state capitol in Albany, New York last Wednesday. An estimated 500 people arrived in a caravan of buses from throughout the state and New York City that morning to take up residence for the day. Their mission: to press for passage of a [Fair Elections bill in the State Senate](#), complementing the one recently [passed in the Assembly](#). Up to 70 percent of New Yorkers support public funding of campaigns akin to the model used so successfully in New York City since 1988, with its six-to-one public funding match with small donations from individual donors. The cost to citizens of the state would be only [\\$2 per person, per year](#), according to [Fair Elections for NY](#). This would be a truly worthwhile investment that would go a long way toward returning government and democracy to the people of New York State, while encouraging citizen activists to run for public office and help re-cast the job of "politician" as a noble profession.

There is great interest in how this plays out in New York among legislators and activists in numerous other states currently considering similar legislation. We may also be sure that its importance would not be lost in Washington if the bill is passed in a large state, with a governor who is most certainly planning a run for the White House signing it into law. The purpose of this people's lobbying effort and protest was to send a strong message to state legislators in New York and the nation that this is the issue of our time. People are fed up and disgusted with their so-called "leaders" in state and federal government, and the crowd last Wednesday was demanding real change from those whom we hire -- and pay -- to represent us.

This was a very polished event, with a coherent strategy for the day -- a great example of Organizing 101. Hundreds rallied and marched through the Capitol, past legislators and their staffs, with such determined rallying cries as "Corporate funding Is hypocrisy, Fair Elections for democracy," "Resist, stand up, Fair Elections will pass when people rise up," "It's time to separate corporations and the state" and "What do we want? Fair elections! When so we want it? NOW!" echoing through the halls. This was followed by an overflowing rally around that expensive staircase in the capitol building, where passionate organizers spoke to energize the crowd. Assembly members supporting the bill were thanked, and an inspired speech was delivered by [Tom DiNapoli, the state comptroller](#) and a strong backer of the Fair Elections bill. Mr. DiNapoli spoke of doing this for generations to come, and he demanded that the bill be passed in the current session of the legislature, which is over at the end of June. "We must change," Di Napoli said, "(P)ower must be returned into the hands of the people (so that) good, everyday people will run for office. People are fed up, and too much is wrong." The hope here is to propel this issue to the national stage and force real action in Washington. While the president continues to attack the obstructionist, regressive GOP, he has little to show for it. Here is his

opportunity to offer a specific remedy to gridlock in DC. Campaign finance reform should be at the top of his priority list, along with passing an amendment overturning [Citizens United](#) -- a two-pronged solution to cure our national failure.

After the opening rally, it was on to the action that had brought us all to Albany: meeting with State Senators to make the case for the Fair Election bill. The lead organizer of the day was John Papagiannis, the field communications manager for [Public Campaign](#). Their sole mission is to build a large and strong coalition on this one issue, and I would say they succeeded on Wednesday. We were organized into groups of 11, each led by an organizer familiar with the legislative offices of the senators with whom we were seeking to meet. This was a blueprint for bringing engaged citizens into direct contact with their elected officials, and it can and should absolutely be replicated across the country. Dialogue is a fundamental element of democracy, and expressing the will and needs of the people is both our right and responsibility as citizens. The coalition was made up of many organizations -- most with heavy clout nationally -- including [Common Cause](#), Organizing for Action - New York (perhaps this is a new direction for the president's former campaign organization?), [The League of Women Voters](#), [moveon.org](#), [Progressive Change Campaign Committee](#), The Sierra Club, United Federation of Teachers, the Communication Workers of America, [Public Citizen](#), [Citizen Action of New York](#) and the [Working Families Party](#). They all shared the costs of the buses, as well as the box lunches that were provided to everyone.

The group I joined met with Brad Usher, the chief of staff of [State Senator Liz Krueger \(D\)](#). Both support Fair Elections, and Brad was very forthcoming in suggesting how to move the bill along with the senators, and what must be done before the end of the current session to get it passed. He mentioned that if it does not pass now, it would likely be forgotten in the next session, as legislators move on to other issues. He further warned of the danger of passing a small piece of the legislation, as that would lead to legislators shelving the issue for a decade, thinking they had addressed it -- or made it go away. He further mentioned that the co-leader of the State Senate, [Dean Skelos \(R\)](#), had said he would not bring the bill to the floor for a vote, so strong action is needed as a follow-up.

Senator Skelos is a powerful GOP leader in Albany, and he can not only change the lives of all New Yorkers for the better, but can help clean up the corruption, scandals and sleaze in a state government that is an embarrassment to all New Yorkers. Senator Skelos could move this issue well beyond the state by being bold, courageous and showing concern for the people of his state. He would have to become a new kind of Republican, however, and do the work he was sent to Albany to do: represent the people, and not obstruct and work for the special interests alone. He could become a statewide hero and garner national attention by allowing a vote on this bill. But first, a major shift in ideology and purpose must occur in Mr. Skelos and his fellow Republicans. I raised the question to Brad Usher of bringing in Governor Cuomo to negotiate, and he said the Governor could do some horse-trading with Assemblyman Sheldon Silver, the Assembly leader, and Mr. Skelos and [Senator Jeffrey Klein \(D\)](#), the co-chairs of the Senate. The governor does have presidential aspirations, and the passage of this bill could be an enormous help to him nationally in his quest for higher office. Brokering a deal on this bill could be a very big deal, and the Governor has had some great successes in doing exactly this kind of negotiation,

including on the recently passed gun law in New York, which is one of the strongest in the nation.

John Papagiannis announced on the trip home that calls must be made to constituents of Senator Skelos -- along with the other holdouts in the Senate -- to get them on board to vote on this bill immediately. There are only a few more votes needed in the Senate, so this can be done. Cards were filled out on the bus so that we could receive the phone numbers of constituents to urge them to call those holdout Senators. One of the members of the group had also suggested during that very good and productive discussion with Brad Usher that the failing fortunes of the GOP could actually lead them to seek a little back up insurance by supporting the Fair Elections legislation, since they are losing support among many constituencies. Perhaps this is an approach that could be used with them?

Here is the opportunity for a state to lead the nation on what must be done to cure our collective political ills. This remarkable and inspiring crowd of actively engaged citizens included some even walking with canes, yet still they came. Lacking in visibility and numbers, however, were young people and members of minority communities, particularly African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Latinos. Does this issue not affect their communities, too? I asked a young photographer about the lack of participation among the younger generation, and he responded, "Young people are interested in climate change and gay marriage as issues more than this."

But no sour grapes here. This was a hugely successful event and must be built upon, for it does affect everyone. There is a great opportunity at hand, and we all must work together to make this aspiration a reality.

With Jonathan Stone