

The Democracy Center - Citizen Action Series

Excerpts from The Democracy Owners Manual
(To preview or purchase the book visit www.democracyctr.org)

Campaign Financing - Agendas For Reform

In a representative democracy we place the authority and power of government in the hands of those we elect. The rules that govern those elections determine the course of every other public issue we care about. One area of deep concern is the role that money plays in our political system, with our elected officials becoming ever more dependent on wealthy special interest groups to finance their campaigns, groups who, in turn, use their clout to shape public policy. Efforts to reform campaign financing generally rely on some mix of the following:

Public Disclosure: The federal government, along with most states and cities, all require candidates to publicly disclose their major contributors. Technology promises to make this information even more accessible by making campaign reports available through the Internet. Many reformers argue that we should also add a requirement that candidates identify their top contributors in their paid ads.

Contribution Limits: The federal government, as well as most states and localities, have also set limits on how much a contributor can give to an individual candidate. Supporters of strict contribution limits argue that they prevent big donors from having too much influence and shift the emphasis on to small donors. Opponents of contribution limits claim they hinder freedom of speech by limiting people's ability to provide support to candidates they like.

Limits on Campaign Spending: Many reformers argue that placing some reasonable limits on what candidates can spend will help decrease their dependence on wealthy contributors. So far, the U.S. Supreme Court has forbidden such spending limits as an infringement of free speech. As a result most spending limits in place now are "voluntary", rewarding the candidates who comply with some form of public campaign support.

Public Financing of Campaigns: Many reform groups contend that the only real way to eliminate the dependence of candidates' reliance on special interest contributions is to establish some form of *public* campaign financing. Under such a system, candidates receive public dollars to help pay for the cost of communicating with voters, often as matching funds for small private contributions they receive from individuals. Opponents object to the use of taxpayer dollars to pay for political campaigns, including those for candidates they don't agree with. Public financing has been available in Presidential campaigns for contests for nearly three decades and has recently been approved at the city and state level in Maine, Vermont, Arizona, New York, California and elsewhere.

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