



July 15, 2009

Spotlight on...

Campaign Finance

Remember Watergate? Remember Bob Woodward's reporting in the Washington Post? If you are too young to actually remember, Woodward's articles led to the uncovering of the scandal that finally led to President Nixon's resignation. Remember Woodward's source for his information and the advice that source gave to Woodward? The source was named Deep Throat and the memorable advice was to "Follow the Money."

That advice is all too relevant to today's politics and in understanding why our representatives say what they say, and vote the way they do. To follow the money that is trying to influence Ohio statewide officials go to:

<http://www.ohiocitizen.org/money/finance/reports.html>. where you will find reports prepared by the Money in Politics project of Ohio Citizen Action. They have taken the campaign finance statements required to be filed by all candidates, and have analyzed the ones for the statewide races, so they are more understandable. The latest report shows contributors to the Attorney General race in 2008. The Ohio Democratic Party was the biggest contributor – how much do you think they gave? Who do you think was the second largest group to contribute? Lawyers? Banks? Check it out!

Who may be trying to influence your Congressional representative? Your state Senator? Your state representative? Local officials? Judges? Check out the Ohio Secretary of State's website at: <http://www.sos.state.oh.us/SOS/candidates.aspx>. Click on the red, white, and blue button labeled "Search Candidates and Committees." Unfortunately the Money in Politics folks haven't nicely aggregated the information, but you should be able to get a good feel for where the money comes from because in most cases, the contributor has to name his or her employer. Another great source of information is your county board of elections. Many have the information on their website in an easily searchable format. Try it!

If you are like me, and have looked at this information, you are probably suffering from shock and awe over the amounts of money being spent on these campaigns. Either the insurance companies, unions, banks, attorneys, etc. are incredibly civic minded, or this money actually does have an impact. In case you think these folks are incredibly civic minded, you may want to read some articles from the Columbus Dispatch – their reporters seem to believe that the fact that the nursing home industry is getting generous budget increases while everyone else is being cut has something to do with campaign contributions. In a May 31 editorial, the Dispatch described the largesse of the Ohio House toward the nursing home industry.

http://www.dispatch.com/live/content/editorials/stories/2009/05/31/hospitz.ART_ART_05-31-09_G4_30E0N32.html. In a June 21 article, the reporters described the largesse of the Ohio Senate to the nursing homes.

http://www.dispatch.com/live/content/local_news/stories/2009/06/21/NURSING_HOME_S.ART_ART_06-21-09_A1_4VE8A78.html.

What is a voter to do?

The League's campaign finance reform strategy has two tracks: 1) achieve incremental reforms where possible in the short term, and 2) build support for public financing as the best long-term solution.

Incremental Reforms

LWVUS' Impact on Issues publication describes some of the incremental reforms: full and timely disclosure of campaign contributions and expenditures; one central committee to coordinate, control and report financial transactions for each candidate, party or other committee; an independent body to monitor and enforce the law; and the encouragement of broad-based contributions from citizens.

The League looks for ways to limit the size and type of contributions from all sources and continues to assess proposals to equalize government services for challengers and incumbents so that candidates can compete more equitably. Reforms include voluntary spending limits; public benefits, such as reduced-cost broadcasting and postal services for participating candidates; aggregate limits on the total amounts candidates could receive in PAC and large individual contributions; and closing loopholes that allow huge amounts of special-interest money to influence the system.

Public Financing

The League believes the best long term campaign finance reform is public financing or public funding. "Public funding" is a system of campaign finance in which the government provides all candidates who volunteer to participate and meet strict requirements with enough funds to run a credible, competitive election campaign. Public funding is already working in Arizona, Maine and Connecticut as well as in New York City and many other municipalities. Under the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech, candidates have a right to collect and spend money to get their message out. Public financing doesn't try to stop free speech. However, research has shown that the

candidate spending the most money doesn't necessarily win. All a good candidate needs is enough money to get their message out – not the most money. So public financing can work well without undermining First Amendment free speech rights.

We already have public funding for presidential campaigns. Senator McCain used public funding in his 2008 presidential bid. President Obama supports public funding, but didn't use it because he felt the upper limits on the funding were too low. The expectation is that as president, he will be in a position to address this issue.

The League is supporting H.R. 1826, the "Fair Elections Now Act." It would create a system of public funding for Congressional candidates. Candidates would have to raise a threshold amount of funding from within their communities in order to qualify for capital from a "Fair Election" fund.

Learn more about public financing at You Street: American's Road Back to Democracy (<http://youstreet.org>). You Street is an initiative of Americans for Campaign Reform, a non-partisan, grassroots organization of citizens whose purpose is to help enact public funding all federal elections — for the House, the Senate and the Presidency. It is led by former Senators Bill Bradley, Bob Kerrey, Warren Rudman and Alan Simpson.

Our current system of financing political campaigns allows wealthy special interests to have a larger voice than the citizenry. Many qualified candidates won't run for office because of the amount of time they must spend raising money. We need to pay for and own our elections and let candidates and representatives do what they were elected to do – represent ALL of us.