ROLL CALL

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It's Time to Implement 'Fair Elections'

By Alan Patricof and Arnold Hiatt
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Between the two of us, we have more than a half-century of experience donating and raising political money. So we've seen firsthand how the cost of campaigning has skyrocketed. The 2008 elections broke candidate spending records, as likely will the 2010 and 2012 political cycles, unless Congress makes significant changes.

The presidential race cost more than $1.8 billion, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Paid less attention to, but still quite costly, were the 470 House and Senate seats that were at stake last year. Combined, those elections cost roughly $2 billion.

Compare this to the situation three decades ago. In 1976, it cost, on average, $87,000 to win a House seat and $609,000 to garner a Senate seat. By 2008, those averages had escalated to roughly $1.3 million and $8.1 million.

The money pressure on candidates is intense. Our incumbents are forced to a third of their hours by one academic estimate toward finding their next campaign dollar. That's time that could be better spent on serving constituents, developing policy, winning over colleagues and enacting legislation. The potential pool of new candidates shrinks as many talented and public-spirited individuals decide not to run because of money concerns, depriving our nation of extraordinary leaders.

Just as candidates tire of the endless rounds of calls asking people for money, many donors have also grown tired of this arrangement. Neither of us will sit on the sidelines while we can help good people get elected with our donations, but we'd rather have lawmakers and candidates solving problems and making their case to the voters instead of being on the fundraising circuit.

There is a practical, proven way to do this: "Fair Elections" campaign finance reform. It has been in place in Maine and Arizona for five full political cycles, recently took root in Connecticut, and is the law in other states and cities as well. Under these systems, voters make small contributions to help their chosen candidates meet qualifying thresholds. Then, qualified candidates receive a public grant. If they require more money for their races, they may accept additional small contributions, which are matched by limited public funds on a 4-to-1 basis. At no point during the campaign can a Fair Elections candidate receive a contribution of more than $100.

It's a system that embraces the burst of small donations we saw in last year's races. It attracts new people to run for office regardless of their ability to raise significant sums of money or self-finance their campaigns. The candidate's time is refocused on voters and the issues of the day. And the public perception of candidates indebted to big campaign givers disappears.

Most importantly, this kind of reform works. In states with Fair Elections, the donations arms race is no longer dominant, and funding promotes a level playing field. Where it has been enacted, more candidates are competing for office and elected officials are more accountable to their voters. In Arizona, eight of 10 current statewide officeholders ran and won using the system, as did more than 80 percent of state legislators in Connecticut and Maine.

The idea is gaining traction in Congress. Drawing on the successful state experience, the bipartisan, bicameral Fair Elections Now Act, introduced by Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Arlen Specter (D-Pa.) in the Senate and by John Larson (D-Conn.) and Walter Jones Jr. (R-N.C.) in the House, would give candidates the option of running for Congress without raising big contributions from the very people who will lobby them post-Election Day. Similarly, the proposed bipartisan Presidential Funding Act would modernize the outdated partial presidential public financing system, strengthening the voice of small donors within the process.

The time has come to make changes in the way we finance political candidates so that the 2008 elections will be the last in which campaigning for votes is undermined by the race for money.

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