



# MONEY AND POLITICS: A Faith Perspective

Perspectives on Policy from Protestants for the Common Good

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## *Why should people of faith care about campaign finance reform?*

Many in our society take pride in home ownership. Yolanda Payton did. Her husband died in 1989, leaving their house to her. Living on a modest income, she had trouble making payments. She went into default. The sheriff who served the eviction notice suggested she call a mortgage company to see about refinancing – Diplomat Mortgage, a company that engages in what is called “predatory lending.” Such lenders charge unusually high interest rates and excessive fees, require unnecessary insurance policies, and often willfully change the terms of the loan. Mrs. Payton lost her home. These lenders need to be regulated, but that is not an easy task when financial interests, including predatory loan supporters, gave \$655,000 to Illinois legislators in one year.<sup>1</sup>

At the close of the spring 1999 legislative session, a gambling expansion bill was passed and signed into law by Governor Ryan. This bill permits a casino in Cook County and grants tax breaks to the state’s horse racing industry. In 1991 the gambling industry was giving a mere \$100,000 to political campaigns. By 1997-98, contributions rose to a record \$1.7 million with Governor Ryan and the four top legislative leaders receiving over \$1 million of this total.

According to Larry Hansen, Vice President of the Joyce Foundation, the success of American corporations in reducing their own tax burdens “is so breathtaking that it makes the illegal nonpayment of taxes by ordinary citizens look trivial in comparison.” He points out that in 1993 nearly half of the nation’s 4 million corporations paid no income tax – including one-third of the country’s 1,085 coal companies, 54 of 56 corporations that manufacture tobacco products, and such corporate giants as Mobil, Goodyear, and McDonnell-Douglas. Three years later, Congress added corporate tax breaks worth \$20 billion dollars to an increase in the minimum wage bill.<sup>2</sup>

## *How can we counter such injustices and acts of political bribery*

Campaign finance reform is the only answer to that question. As people of faith we must do our part to keep our political system from marginalizing all but the very wealthy in our society. As we are reminded by the Hebrew prophets:

You are doomed! You make unjust laws that oppress my people. That is how you keep the poor from having their rights and from getting justice.  
*Isaiah 10: 1-2*

For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who take a bribe, and turn aside the needy in the gate.  
*Amos 5:12*

Jim Wallis, an evangelical preacher and editor, reminds us that Jesus did not spend a lot of time talking about religious ritual or “family values.” But Jesus did spend a great deal of time speaking about the rich in relation to people without great wealth. And that is really what campaign finance reform is all about. People and special interests who contribute large sums to political candidates are skewing our democracy. They are making it hard for ordinary citizens to be heard. In so doing, they are denying justice because in a democracy it is possible to achieve justice only if all citizens are free and equal members of “we, the people.”

<sup>1</sup> Illinois Campaign for Political Reform Issue Briefing #9. *Banking in Misery: Campaign Contributors and Regulatory Reform*. Mar 22, 2001

<sup>2</sup> *The New Plutocratic Order*, lecture by Lawrence N. Hansen, Edward L. Nestingen Symposium. Nov 10, 1998.

In the words of Bill Moyers, our democracy has now become, a “fund-raising arms race” in which only those candidates who can raise enormous amounts of money stand a reasonable chance of being elected to office. In 2000, contributions to all federal candidates and parties from all sources totaled \$2.4 billion. Most of the money came from a very small and unrepresentative portion of the population. Of \$1.3 billion in individual contributions, 40% was provided by only 1/10<sup>th</sup> of 1% of the U.S. population (235,000 out of 265 million people – that’s .0009 of the population). Of the nearly \$465 million in “soft money” (contributions to political parties), 90% was given by corporations, unions, business groups, and wealthy individuals. It is usually difficult to establish a *quid pro quo* between campaign contributions and specific legislation. But would individuals and corporations give enormous sums directly to office holders and political parties if they did not think the money would provide access to personal or corporate favors?

*Can campaign finance reform help to restore democracy?  
Can it even begin to provide equal access for the ordinary citizen?*

Changes in the way political campaigns are financed will by no means eliminate the impact of money in politics. It will not address the influence that the wealthy can muster through the hiring of lobbyists and the mounting of grassroots campaigns on behalf of their special interests. Experience in other states is demonstrating that campaign finance reform can make a major difference, especially through the vehicle of *public financing*, or “*clean elections*.”

Here’s how that works. Candidates who agree to limit their spending receive public funding to meet the costs of their campaigns up to a specified level. Such funding is made available only to candidates who have demonstrated a credible amount of support by raising small contributions from a broad base of their constituents. Public financing of this kind is in full swing for state legislators in Maine and Arizona and has also been approved in Vermont, Massachusetts, New York City, and Washington State. It is proving to be a success. Over one-third of all candidates in Maine in 2000 ran under the “clean elections” banner; the number of individuals running for office increased by 15%. Illinois, however, is a long way from public financing of state legislators. Although a bill did pass the Illinois House in 1998 calling for this approach in the campaigns of the six statewide constitutional officers, including the Governor and Secretary of State, it was never brought to a vote in the state senate.

But this year in Illinois, the opportunity exists to build a constituency toward a very significant first step – one which even the most strident critics of campaign finance reform could scarcely oppose. Specifically, a bill permitting the public financing of campaigns of state supreme court justices is currently before a committee of the Illinois House. A commission of the American Bar Association has recommended this kind of public financing for judicial campaigns. We expect our courts and their judges to be impartial and independent. If those with the mandate to uphold justice are compromised, where can we turn? People of faith must let their legislators know the importance of this step.

You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

*Deuteronomy 16:19*

Our faith insists on our equality before God and one another. It demands justice in all dimensions of our public life. Campaign finance reform is critical if we are to restore justice to our democracy. With public financing for judicial races in place we would then be able to press for broader financing reform across our political system. Our faith demands that we take the first but strong steps to bring justice to campaign financing in Illinois.