



HAWAI`I CLEAN ELECTIONS

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In Case you missed this...

HONOLULU STAR-BULLETIN

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Another View

Now is the time to change the way campaigns are financed

By Brian Schatz

If campaign finance reform is such a pressing need, then why is it so hard to make it happen? It seems as if lately we have mostly focused on a blame-game targeting individual lawmakers accused of wrongdoing, or scapegoating members and leadership of the opposing party. To be effective, we have to shift to a more positive paradigm, one that is consistent with the highest ideals of public service.

Campaign finance reform is political heavy lifting because too many Democrats and Republicans find comfort in the status quo. Do the math -- increasingly expensive campaigns facing two- and four-year election cycles, compounded by the attention of office holders who start thinking about raising cash for the next round even before they've served a day in office. Nature may abhor a vacuum, but you can be sure that special interest groups will swoop in to fill the gap. Campaign pledges are exchanged

for just a simple assurance that access to the powerful will be given when the real decisions are made. Where is the average citizen in all this? Growing increasingly cynical about a system where the unmonied voice falls on the political hard of hearing. Sadly, this growing cynicism threatens the basic foundation of our democracy. People don't vote, don't see their actions as making a difference, believe that the system is rigged against them.

Even hard-fought efforts can have unintended consequences. On the federal level, the McCain-Feingold legislation saw honorable and reform-minded advocates become unwitting participants in making the situation worse, not better. So the system continues to wallow in mediocrity, disenfranchisement, suspicion, co-option and, inevitably, corruption.

It has been argued that money will always find a way around any reform. If we accept that reasoning, then we should give up on regulating polluters or the perpetrators of consumer fraud. After all, industry can always find new methods to skirt environmental laws and con men can always invent a new scam to try out on little old ladies.

In a political system flooded by a river of confusion, cynicism and obstinate resistance, an idea is floating that could fundamentally change the way elections are conducted. It will improve public confidence in the system, and ensure that politicians make decisions based on what is best for their constituents. The best news is that it is already working successfully in other places.

This reform is called voluntary full public financing, or Clean Elections. Here is how it works: Candidates volunteer to take no private funding and limit their spending in the coming election, and if they are able to demonstrate sufficient community support through small qualifying contributions, then they receive an allotment that will enable them to run a viable race without having to beg any special interest group for money. Once elected, they are answerable only to their constituents.

States that have implemented Clean Election reform are successfully winning the confidence of voters, too: Nearly 80 percent of the Maine legislature was elected this way, more than half of the Arizona legislature got elected this way, and even Arizona's new governor and eight additional state-wide elected officers used the

Clean Elections model.

In addition, the American Association of Retired Persons believes that the first viable state legislation to provide prescription drug relief was passed in Maine only after Clean Elections was implemented, and that is why they are making it a priority in Hawaii.

We Democrats have been given an extraordinary gift from the people of Hawaii -- trust to run the legislative branch of government. Some want to interpret their resounding victories in local races as a reason to stay comfortable, to move incrementally and to slow down the rate of change. I believe that the people elected Democrats expecting them to deliver change. This is the most significant, far-reaching and bold reform that we could possibly deliver. It's time.

Brian Schatz, a Democrat, represents the 25th District (Tantalus-Makiki) in the state House of Representatives.

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