

## Realizing Real Reform by Dan Jacoby

In this day of enormous anger at elected officials and the way government operates in general, the time is ripe for real reform in many, many areas. Real reform is desperately needed at all levels of government – federal, state and local. Yet the organizations that have been fighting so hard for so long to generate reform have not been able to get much, if anything, done. What's worse, the minor changes these good-government groups, or "goo-goos," have achieved are often burdened with what are generally called "unintended consequences" and could better be called predictable, if the goo-goos had bothered to look closely at their proposals.

One example of an attempt at reform that is gaining support from good people is the "Fair Elections Now Act" (in the House, H.R.1826; in the Senate, S.752). This bill is an attempt at reforming the campaign finance system by introducing partial public funding of congressional elections. It is a noble attempt, but it will fail, because the money that now flows into the campaign accounts of individual candidates will go instead directly into party coffers. The first result will be even less independence, as elected officials and those who wish to run for office will be required continually to fundraise for the party. Debate will be quashed as party leaders dictate to members what they can and cannot support. The second result will be about one billion dollars of our tax money wasted by giving it to candidates while getting nothing in return. It is a well-intentioned but very bad bill. Fortunately, it has little chance of passage.

Why, then, do the goo-goos fail to propose good reform legislation, fail to achieve most of what they push for, and fail to understand the consequences of what they support?

The problem is that the goo-goos are structured to fail. There are several ways in which the groups' structure and methods don't work:

- They are reactive rather than proactive, failing to choose their own battlefields;
- They spend a lot of time, effort and resources to raise a lot of money, but very little of their fundraising is geared toward the issues they push;
- They don't raise enough money to compete with the wealthy special interests they oppose;
- They don't create, much less leverage, a large base of support; and
- While spending too much on fundraising, they spend too little on underpaid, inexperienced people to do their research.

This structure is a recipe for failure. What's worse, the very people who run these goo-goos are afraid to change the way they operate, because they feel safer following the old ways that everyone else follows than they would feel if they struck out on their own.

The only solution is for a new style of good-government group, with a structure and organization that is designed for success, shows the way. This new organization should:

- Choose a limited range of issues on which the organization can take the lead, getting out ahead of the special interest groups that seek to maintain the status quo;
- Link fundraising to the issues on which the organization chooses to work;

- Through low-dollar fundraising, build a large base of grassroots support, and leverage that support when lobbying; and
- Make sure that research is thorough, and the consequences of proposed solutions fully understood.

This new structure can assure not only that more reforms will be enacted, but also that the reforms that are enacted will have the desired effect, with far fewer unintended consequences. Once the new organization shows the way through success, older organizations will have the freedom to reform their structure and methods in order to achieve even more reform in government.

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