

## **An Honest Politician by Dan Jacoby**

A famous science-fiction writer was fond of defining an “honest politician” as “one who stays bought.” The pervasive perception that all politicians are bought and paid for by some combination of big-money special interests is backed up by reams of evidence. One excellent book detailing the corroboration between special-interest campaign contributions and specific legislation is Micah Sifry and Nancy Watzman’s “Is That a Politician In Your Pocket: Washington on \$2 Million a Day”.

The first attempt to break the connection between big money and elected officials was an offshoot of the Watergate scandals. Congress began using public money to provide partial financing of campaigns. Many states and cities have implemented some form of public matching funds as well. The idea is that by limiting the money candidates can spend, and providing some of it from tax revenues, the influence of special interest groups and large donors is diminished.

It doesn’t work.

Fortunately, there is a better way. An initiative known as “Clean Money, Clean Elections” almost completely eliminates fundraising, and the favors owed large donors after the election. This initiative is already working in Maine and Arizona, and is expanding to several other states.

Besides removing large donors from the post-election picture, this initiative also expands the field during elections, bringing more people, particularly women and minorities, into the mix. Combine this with real lobbying reform, and big-money special interests will be scrambling for years to find a new way to gain access our representatives.

New York is one of the few states in the country without any form of public campaign financing. It will take a titanic effort to get this initiative passed, particularly because few people on either side of the political aisle seem to care about it.

But there is a potential “end-around” that could force the issue.

New York City has one of the most liberal versions of pre-“Clean Money” public financing. Even so, it’s still in the form of matching funds, and doesn’t work either. Incumbents could, in the words of one City Council member, “go to Florida for two years and still get reelected.” Meanwhile, when competing for an open seat, the candidate with the most money almost always wins.

By convincing the City Council to enact “Clean Money, Clean Elections”, and getting Mayor Bloomberg to sign it, the state legislature will have significant pressure to follow suit. So will many other states. Once enough states have passed this reform, even Congress will have no choice but to do the same.

Maybe then, authors Sifry and Watzman will be able to write an upbeat sequel.