

Pieces of Silver by Dan Jacoby

The Democratic Party is on the verge of claiming complete control of the New York State government. There is a Democratic governor, and Democrats make up about two-thirds of the state Assembly. The last remaining Republican holdout is the state Senate, and Democrats are only two seats away from a majority there. In addition, the watchword for this election is “change,” and Democrats are on the “change bandwagon.”

The major stumbling block to turning the state Senate blue is that Republicans have several million dollars available. The Senate Republican Campaign Committee (SRCC) has \$1.7 million in cash, compared with just under \$1.3 million for the Democratic Senate Campaign Committee (DSCC). As of a week ago, the Democratic state party committee had a tiny advantage over the Republican state party committee, \$418K to \$360K. In addition, over the last two months the SRCC had transferred far more to individual candidates than the DSCC had transferred to its candidates.

In other words, Democrats need a major transfusion of money, and there’s no time to raise it.

There is a source of money that might be tapped. After a three-way primary in which he got 68% of the vote, Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver still has \$2.5 million in his own campaign account. State law only allows him to transfer small amounts to other candidates’ campaign accounts, but it also allows him (or any candidate) to transfer as much as he wants to the DSCC, which could then transfer all they want to individual Senate candidates’ campaign committees.

In other words, he could send \$1.5 million to the DSCC, which would give Democrats a huge leg up in the battle to win the state Senate, and still keep a million dollars.

But wait – there’s more!

The Republican Assembly Campaign Committee (RACC) has about \$800K available, while the Democratic Assembly Campaign Committee (DACC) has over \$3.1 million. Since the Democrats are guaranteed to remain in control of the Assembly for a long time to come, it should be easy to transfer another \$1.5 million from the DACC to the DSCC.

An influx of \$3 million would not guarantee a Democratic victory in Senate campaigns this November, but it could make all the difference. Right now, at least one Democratic incumbent is trailing in a major poll, while no Democratic challenger is leading by more than a couple of points.

The key is Sheldon Silver. He controls his own campaign committee and, for all practical purposes, he controls the DACC as well. He has the power to send \$3 million where it will do the most good for the party (and if you’re a Democrat, for the state as well), while keeping enough cash in reserve for his own and the DACC’s future needs.

One might think that after nearly 15 years as the Assembly Speaker, most of it being the only Democrat among the “three men in a room” who make all the final decisions, Sheldon Silver would want to be able, finally, to get things done. If one were to think so, however, one might not be correct.

Sheldon Silver has reached the pinnacle of his political career. At this point, he has two options. He can use his power to achieve the changes that New York desperately needs, or he can utilize the Machiavellian technique of “failure and blame” to maintain power without actually achieving anything. In other words, if the state Senate remains in Republican hands, he can continue to blame the Republicans for his failure to accomplish anything significant. If, on the other hand, the Senate comes under the control of Democrats, then Silver has to make the changes because he won't have any excuse for failure.

Given the choice of sitting back and maintaining power, or actually having to work to earn that power, most people would prefer to sit back and relax. That's especially true when the power broker is sitting on almost six million dollars.

My dictionary defines “miser” as “one who lives in wretched circumstances in order to save and hoard money.” If, for New York Democrats, “wretched circumstances” can be defined as the current situation where Republicans in the Senate block progress and change, then the question becomes whether Sheldon Silver chooses to change the circumstances by sending the money he has saved where it can effect that change, or whether he chooses to be a miser.

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