Nearly a decade ago, most grass-roots environmental activists stopped trying to pass new laws. From a grass-roots perspective, legislatures seem to be controlled by wealthy polluters who aren't about to pass tough laws to curb pollution.

Dumping pollution into the environment means using nature as a toilet, and nature's toilet is free. The polluter does not have to pay for the resulting breast cancer, asthma, diabetes, lupus, reduced IQ in children, diminished sperm count in men, and so forth. Cause-and-effect is nearly impossible to establish in cases of indirect injury; therefore, the burden falls on specific individuals and on the taxing public to pay the inevitable costs of pollution, thus subsidizing the polluters, who bank their ill-gotten gains. Under these circumstances, polluters and their elected representatives in legislatures have no real incentive to pass laws to curb pollution. In sum, grass-roots activists have quit trying to pass new laws because they see it as a waste of time.

The more traditional Washington-based environmental movement won an early victory for pollution prevention in 1976 when Congress killed the supersonic transport (SST) airplane proposal, in order to protect the earth's upper atmosphere. For nearly 20 years the Washington-based enviros have been trying to reproduce that early pollution-prevention victory, without success. Now things have gotten so bad that the 15 largest Washington-based environmental groups jointly issued a cry for help last summer, saying, "Even during the Reagan/Watt/Gorsuch years, we have never faced such a serious threat to our environmental laws in Congress. Polluters have blocked virtually all of our efforts to strengthen environmental laws, but still they are not satisfied. Now, they are mounting an all-out effort to WEAKEN our most important environmental laws."[1] Since that time, the situation has deteriorated further; with Mr. Gingrich strutting his stuff, there seems to be no hope of passing effective new pollution prevention laws in Washington.

Some people translate these harsh realities into "all government is hopeless." They thus join hands with the Libertarians who seek to diminish all government as a matter of principle. (The polluters can only celebrate this response; it eases their public-relations task as it diminishes all government as a matter of principle. (The polluters can only celebrate this response; it eases their public-relations task as it swells their treasuries.)

Most people, however, still recognize that there are some legitimate purposes for government. Even people who are completely committed to the "free market" can see that the market encourages polluters to dump toxic "externalities" into nature's free toilet. (If the free market encouraged pollution reduction, the market would have solved the pollution problem long before 1948 when Congress passed the first pollution control law.)[2] The victims of pollution (those who get cancer, asthma, multiple chemical sensitivity, lupus, etc.) need government to protect them and their children from these glaring free-market failures.

How big does government need to be? Only big enough to protect the earth's upper atmosphere. For nearly 20 years the Washington-based enviros have been trying to reproduce that early pollution-prevention victory, without success. Now things have gotten so bad that the 15 largest Washington-based environmental groups jointly issued a cry for help last summer, saying, "Even during the Reagan/Watt/Gorsuch years, we have never faced such a serious threat to our environmental laws in Congress. Polluters have blocked virtually all of our efforts to strengthen environmental laws, but still they are not satisfied. Now, they are mounting an all-out effort to WEAKEN our most important environmental laws."[1] Since that time, the situation has deteriorated further; with Mr. Gingrich strutting his stuff, there seems to be no hope of passing effective new pollution prevention laws in Washington.

Plainly put, here is the problem: The current electoral system is rigged for the benefit of wealthy candidates or those who can raise money from the wealthy, leaving us without candidates who really represent the middle class, working people, and the poor.

Long before the political parties select their nominees and voters cast their ballots, long before the vast majority of citizens have focused on upcoming elections, candidates compete in a critically important phase of the modern electoral process: THE WEALTH PRIMARY. The person who collects the most money --the "winner" of the wealth primary --almost always captures his or her party's nomination. Then, in the election, the person who raises the most money wins nearly 90% of the time. In 1992, 86% of U.S. Senate candidates who outspent their opponents in the wealth primary went on to win the election. In the U.S. House of Representatives, 89% of the wealth primary winners went on to victory at the ballot box.

There are four kinds of participants in the wealth primary: 1) incumbents (people already holding elected office); 2) millionaire challengers; 3) challengers not wealthy enough to bankroll their own campaigns but financially secure enough to campaign full-time for private contributions from others; and 4) non-affluent citizens who cannot afford to subsidize their own campaigns or to campaign full-time.

Incumbents are subsidized by taxpayers and thus are given a tremendous advantage over challengers. In the first place, U.S. Senators and Representatives are paid $133,600 each year; on top of that, each member of Congress receives more than a million dollars for mailing expenses, newsletters, telephone, computer systems, fax machines, legislative and administrative assistants, interns, press secretaries, and travel budgets. Many members who chair committees end up with millions more that they can spend on their own re-election campaigns.

During an election, the average House member spends more than $170,000 on postage (free, courtesy of the American taxpayer), most of it spent mailing out newsletters that trumpet the members' accomplishments. Between 1991 and 1992, the average House member spent more on mailing to constituents than the challenger was able to spend on his or her ENTIRE CAMPAIGN. Thus the system unfairly subsidizes those who already hold office.

Incumbents are in a position to influence legislation now, and they are very likely to be returned to power. So private money, seeking their money are out of control.

It is time for everyone who opposes pollution --grass-roots activists, workers, the chemically sensitive and the chemically injured, environmentalists in Washington, and anyone favoring reduced taxes and reduced health-care costs --to confront this problem head on. It is time to campaign to get money out of politics. (It is also time for a national debate on what to do about the real root of these problems -- the corporate form --but we leave that discussion for another day.)

A new pamphlet, just published, clearly describes the problem of money in politics, and offers real, affordable solutions.[4] THE WEALTH PRIMARY, subtitled CAMPAIGN FUNDRAISING AND THE CONSTITUTION, argues that money is now so influential in elections that it deprives ordinary citizens of a voice in government and thus violates the principles of one-person-one-vote, popular election, and meaningful political equality that make up American constitutional democracy. Further, THE WEALTH PRIMARY argues persuasively that the present system violates the equal protection clause of the constitution and is thus illegal. A lawsuit has been filed in the state of New York on these grounds[5] -- the opening salvo in a legal and political struggle that may take a decade or more, but which seems essential to win if we are to take back our democracy from the polluters.
influence, flows into their campaign coffers. In 1992, the average House incumbent had $692,000 to spend, compared to $155,000 for their challengers.

This is the crux of the problem: Congress is elected with money raised from wealthy people. As a result, Congress is far more responsive to the political interests of the wealthy and often acts to the detriment of those left out of the wealth primary. As political campaign costs and expenditures have soared in the last two decades, the non-affluent majority has steadily lost economic ground, while wealthy individuals and corporations have been greatly enriched. A government drenched in campaign cash has allowed working people to sink. (See REHW #409, #419, #421, #422.)

The solution to these problems is public financing of election campaigns, to level the playing field and allow political candidates to compete on the merits of their ideas, not on their ability to raise money from the wealthy. Public financing of elections would cost each taxpayer between $5 and $10 per year. This seems a small price to pay for regaining control of our democracy. Those who think it is too expensive should remember that Congress voted to bail out the savings and loan industry with taxpayer funds to the tune of $500 billion. That is enough money to finance all federal elections for more than 1000 years.

As we have seen, incumbents already have their re-election campaigns publicly financed by taxpayer subsidies. The question is, how can challengers be publicly financed as well, so no one has to depend upon wealthy people to run an election campaign? There are at least 3 ways that public financing of elections could occur. We'll describe in detail them next week.

In the meantime, Ellen Miller, director of the Center for Responsive Politics, says this about campaign finance reform: "It is the reform that makes all other reforms possible." If you seek pollution control or prevention, you first need to pay attention to the way elections are financed. There's a powerful reason why your elected officials don't listen to you. That reason is money. We have to get money out of politics.

--Peter Montague


[3] See Richard L. Grossman, "To the arenas of self-government...." an unpublished draft paper dated January 6, 1995. We cannot distribute this draft, so please do not request copies. Mr. Grossman can be reached at: P.O. Box 806, Cambridge, MA 02140.


[5] The case, known as Albanese, et. al. v. FEC, Susan Molinari, and Committee to Re-Elect Susan Molinari, CV 94-3299, is currently pending in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Descriptor terms: elections; law making; legislative process; money in politics; human health; supersonic transport; victories; pollution prevention; libertarians; corporations;