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CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM: A NEW ERA

COMMON CAUSE AGENDA FOR CHANGE
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Executive Summary

The events of 2008 dramatically illustrate the need to change the way America pays for elections.

- Jack Abramoff is sentenced to prison for another four years for conspiring to corrupt public officials.
- The cost of federal elections soars, as a badly outdated presidential public financing system collapses.
- Partisan deadlock leaves the Federal Election Commission (FEC) without a quorum to enforce federal campaign finance laws for six months of a year that saw the highest political spending in history.
- The collapse of the mortgage giants triggers the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, after Congress—which reaped \$907 million in campaign contributions from the banking and financial interests since 2000¹—deregulates the industry and ignores repeated warnings of disaster.
- Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich is arrested for trying to sell Obama’s U.S. Senate seat, extort campaign cash from a children’s hospital, and grant government favors and contracts to big contributors.
- Gov. Bill Richardson withdraws his name from consideration for Secretary of Commerce due to a grand jury investigation into pay-to-play allegations.

On the positive side, the Internet revolution created the potential for unprecedented numbers of Americans to donate to and get involved in elections. Although President-elect Barack Obama raised as much from large donors and bundlers as did President Bush in 2004, more than 2.5 million people contributed a total of \$300 million in amounts of \$400 or less² for the election cycle, much of it online. Obama raised more from those small donors than George W. Bush or John Kerry raised from all private contributions in 2004³.

The problem is not so much the amount we spend on political campaigns—columnist George Will likes to remind us that we spend more on potato chips each year—as it is who pays for them, what they get in return, and how that distorts public policy and spending priorities. Keeping our elected officials dependent on the very same wealthy special interests they are supposed to regulate undermines public confidence in their government and its ability to tackle the tough issues that face the nation. And letting the interests who stand to gain from billions in federal spending and bailouts give politicians campaign cash undermines public faith in government’s ability to spend money wisely. It is time to end the pay-to-play culture in Washington, D.C., usher in a new era of campaign finance reform and give Americans the government they deserve.

Here’s how:

1. Create a modern campaign finance system that enables federal candidates who swear off special interest money to run vigorous campaigns on a blend of small donor and public funds.
2. Ban lobbyists contributions, bundling and fundraising for federal candidates.
3. End internal fundraising quotas on Capitol Hill that essentially require members of Congress to buy their way into key committee posts and foster a corrosive dependence on K Street for cash.
4. Close loopholes that allow candidates to evade contribution limits by soliciting amounts up to 3,000 percent of those limits for “joint fundraising committees” and unlimited amounts for national party conventions.
5. Increase transparency by requiring electronic filing of campaign finance reports for the U.S. Senate (already in place for the House), and full disclosure of bundlers who raise, or help raise, \$50,000 or more for congressional and presidential candidates.
6. Replace the moribund Federal Elections Commissions with a new nonpartisan enforcement agency.

Adopting this six-point plan will create a seismic shift in how Washington conducts the people’s business. It will end the pervasive conflicts of interest created by the current system, open the door to greater involvement by citizens in the electoral process and restore a measure of confidence by the American people in the integrity of their institutions and in the people who serve them. Most importantly, it will liberate members of Congress from the endless pursuit of money that begins on Day One when they assume office, and instead allow them to concentrate on the people’s business—their true responsibility and the core purpose of representative government.

The Need for Reform

The problem is not so much the amount we spend on political campaigns as it is who pays for them, what they get in return, and how that affects public policy and spending priorities. Big money dominated the 2008 elections from the outset. The leading Presidential candidates in both parties had raised in excess of \$39 million by the end of 2007, before the first caucus or primary was held and 11 months before the general election. Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, each raised nearly \$100 million in that time period. Despite the developing storyline about Obama's small donor base, he still relied on large donors (in this example, giving \$1,000 or more) for 54 percent of his campaign funds in the first year of the presidential campaign; Clinton's large donors provided 75 percent of her funds; former Gov. Mitt Romney's 77 percent; and Sen. John McCain's 62 percent.⁴

The presidential public financing system has fallen out of date and out of favor. Few of the leading presidential candidates in the primaries used the public financing system this cycle. Indeed, during the primary season alone, Obama, opting out of the system, raised more than five times the limit of the current primary public financing system, Clinton raised just under four times the limit for the primaries, while McCain raised more than twice the limit.⁵ Reform advocates and candidates alike cite the timing and levels of funding as critical shortfalls of the system. Funding for the primaries is inadequate and is not available until the beginning of the election year even though the campaigns are well underway before then. General election funding is significant—\$85 million—but is not available until after the nominating conventions, long after the nominees have normally been determined.

While the rise of internet fundraising and the successful recruitment of small donors has clearly had an effect on the presidential race, the same cannot be said of races for Congress. When it comes to congressional elections, large donors still dominate fundraising and the candidate with the most campaign cash is a heavy favorite to win.

Congress's standing with the public is at near-record lows—a recent poll showed that only 11 percent of Americans approve of the job Congress is doing. The perception of corruption in Congress appears to be a key part of that dissatisfaction: more than a third of voters believe that most members of Congress are corrupt.⁶

The sense that members of Congress are ruled by their large campaign donors is reinforced by the amount of time members spend fundraising. A recent study pegged this amount at 34 percent, or more than a third of their time.⁷ Fundraising pressure continues to mount on lawmakers. The 2007 freshman class in Congress arrived to the following advice from their leadership:

*'Start raising money now,' [Rep. Tim] Walz said [Rep. Rahm] Emanuel told him. 'And here's your goal. Have \$1 million in the bank by the time this race gets ready next time.'*⁸

Similarly, 23 of the freshman members of the newest Congress were honored at a "New Member Debt Retirement Reception" just two weeks after Election Day, before any of them had served even one day in office. The event featured lobbyists and large donors writing checks anywhere from \$2,500 to \$20,000.⁹ Rather than spending their first days crafting and reviewing policy in the midst of a major fiscal crisis, then, many of the new members met powerful Washington lobbyists and donors at a private fundraiser.

Clearly, the current system for funding elections does not serve America well. The corrupting nexus of special interest money and public office has distorted public policy and driven a wedge between our government and our people. It has been at the root of governmental delay, inaction, misdirection, waste and ineptitude. The true cost of years of allowing powerful interests to dominate the political process is now becoming apparent; the crisis point has been reached. Real change must begin with changing the way America elects its leaders.

Agenda for Change

It is time to end the pay-to-play culture in Washington, D.C., usher in a new era of campaign finance reform and give Americans the government they deserve.

Common Cause has developed a six-point plan to end the pervasive conflicts of interest of the current system, free elected officials from the money chase, and restore public confidence in the integrity of our democracy.

1. Create a next-generation public campaign financing system.

The rules of the current campaign finance system were largely set more than 30 years ago, in response to the Watergate scandals of the early 1970s. Although the Federal Election Campaign Act and the Presidential Election Campaign Fund Act, which Common Cause fought hard for at the time, brought major positive reforms to Washington, they are in bad need of an upgrade. The advent of the computer age and widespread use of the Internet now makes it possible to fund elections in a much more democratic way and end the historic reliance on wealthy donors.

It is time create a modern campaign finance system that enables federal candidates who swear off special interest money to run vigorous campaigns on a blend of small donor and public funds.

Common Cause and its reform allies have developed a new model for changing the way we fund presidential and congressional elections. Here's how it works:

For presidential candidates:

- Candidates who agree to restrictions on contributions and spending qualify for public matching funds for small donors in the primary and a public grant for the general election.
- In order to qualify for public campaign funding, candidates must raise at least \$25,000 in each of 20 states.
- Once candidates qualify, they earn a 4:1 match on individual contributions of \$200 or less. Candidates may raise an initial amount under the existing contribution limits, but after that may only accept contributions of \$200 or less from individuals.
- Public matching funds cap out at a \$250 million for the primaries, but candidates may still raise unmatched individual contributions of \$100 or less.
- Candidates who advance to the general election receive a public grant of \$250 million, and may continue to raise unmatched individual contributions of \$100 or less.

For congressional candidates:

- Candidates who agree to only accept contributions of \$100 or less from individuals, and who agree to a ban on lobbyist contributions, may qualify for a combination of public matching funds and grants for their campaigns.
- To qualify, candidates must raise a threshold of at least \$50,000 in amounts of between \$5 and \$100 from at least 1,500 individual residents from their home states.
- Once candidates qualify, they receive an initial public grant and earn a 4:1 match on small contributions up to a spending ceiling of triple the initial grant for the primary.
- Candidates may continue to raise unmatched individual contributions of \$100 or less over and above the spending ceiling.
- Candidates who advance to the general election receive an initial public grant, earn a 4:1 match on contributions up to a general elections spending ceiling of triple the initial grant, and may raise unmatched individual contributions of \$100 or less beyond that point.

Although the qualifying thresholds, grant amounts and spending ceilings will no doubt be adjusted as we move forward with final legislation, the basic principles are clear. We can use limited public funds to amplify the voices of ordinary Americans and enable candidates to break free from endless pursuit—and influence—of wealthy donors.

This new system draws upon the strongest elements of successful public campaign funding experiments in a growing number of states and municipalities. Last year, Connecticut joined Maine and Arizona as the states with full public financing for all statewide offices, and its success was remarkable. When the next Connecticut General Assembly convenes, 81 percent of the legislators will have been elected without taking a single large donation from a wealthy contributor or special interest.

The success stories come from a wide range of states and cities. In Maine, Clean Elections candidates will hold 85 percent of seats in the statehouse this year. In Arizona, that number is 54 percent, up from 42 percent last session. In North Carolina, 68 percent of the state's top judicial seats will be held by Clean Elections candidates, including five of the seven Supreme Court Justices. In total, close to 400 state legislators, elected judges, and officials in Arizona, Connecticut, Maine, New Mexico, North Carolina and Oregon will work in their state capitols, city halls, and judicial chambers without the influence of special interest money. In addition, Minnesota and New York City have implemented successful versions of public financing that use matching funds and small donor or tax rebates.

The benefits are many. More candidates run for office, giving voters more choices at the polls, and candidates are freed from the money chase. In Arizona, the percentage of minority candidates running for state office has more

than doubled since the creation of the Clean Elections system. In Maine, the number of women running for the state legislature has increased 18 percent since the creation of the Clean Elections program, and in both Maine and Arizona women running for office used public funds at a higher rate than their male counterparts. Furthermore, candidates enjoy using the system. Maine regularly surveys state candidates and found in 2006 that 98 percent of those who ran under Clean Elections were “very” or “reasonably” satisfied with the system.

2. Ban lobbyist campaign contributions, bundling and fundraising.

The events of 2008 dramatically illustrate the need to change the way America pays for elections. The fruits of the deepening systemic corruption of American politics became daily headlines, and our long national neglect of public ethics and accountability became impossible to ignore.

The recent cases of former Alaska Sen. Ted Stevens, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson serve to remind us of a powerful reality: America’s reliance on those who stand to gain financially from government action to fund our elected officials’ campaigns creates an inherent conflict of interest and an invitation to corruption. Blagojevich, Stevens and others may go to jail, but the real culprit is the pay-to-play political system where political access and influence are bought and sold.

It is difficult to tell the difference between legal contributions to political candidates and contributions made with an express quid pro quo. As Congress prepares to pass further industry bailouts and stimulus package topping \$11 trillion that will feature road work and other infrastructure projects in the states, we are likely to see this pernicious pay-to-play culture get even worse.

Common Cause proposes building walls between lawmakers and the private interests that seek to buy their votes by enacting specific pay-to-play laws. Given the broad array of companies that do business with state and federal governments, this is a difficult challenge, but it is critical to the task of severing the connection between big money and politics.

In 2005, in response to major statewide scandals, Connecticut lawmakers banned lobbyists, state contractors, and prospective state contractors from making contributions to legislative and statewide offices. In December 2008, a United States District Court judge upheld that ban, finding:

In light of Connecticut’s recent history of corruption scandals involving high-ranking state politicians, I conclude that the legislature had a constitutional, sufficiently important interest in combating actual and perceived corruption by eliminating contributions from individuals with the means and motive to exercise undue influence over elected officials.

Common Cause has called on congressional leaders to enact a similar law to end the pay-to-play culture in Washington. As a first step, Congress should ban lobbyist contributions, bundling by lobbyists, and other forms of lobbyist fundraising for all federal candidates.

3. End internal fundraising quotas on Capitol Hill.

One of the dirty little secrets in Washington is that to get ahead in Congress what really matters isn’t policy expertise or even political skill – it’s money. Increasingly over the past two decades, the path to getting a desired position on a congressional committee, a committee chair or a leadership position within the party is to raise the most money and share it with other candidates or the fundraising arms of the parties. There are numerous examples of members with less seniority or substantive experience within a relevant issue area getting a committee chair position obviously by virtue of having raised and given more money than his competitors for the spot. And it is clear that the leadership positions in both parties have been filled by men and women who have proven their ability to raise enormous sums of money for other candidates and the party and been rewarded accordingly.

While this is a matter most Americans are unaware of, members themselves have been given blatant fundraising mandates, with the message that failure to meet those standards could impact the member’s standing. For example, in 2008 all Democratic members were required to contribute \$125,000 directly and raise an additional \$75,000 for the party, and chairs of the most powerful committees were expected to directly contribute \$500,000 each, and raise a further \$1,000,000 for the party and its candidates.¹⁰

Some members of Congress have been so exasperated by this system that they have been willing to speak out publicly about it. Most recently, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) justified the elimination of committee

chair term limits in the new package of House rules by stating, “This provision has resulted in Members jockeying for chair positions and has elevated fundraising over experience and knowledge base as a prerequisite for those positions. During the 109th Congress, Rep. Hal Rogers (R-KY), a frontrunner in the battle for Appropriations chair, “boasted” of his claimed \$5 million in campaign donations as part of his case for receiving the position from then-Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL).”¹¹

Most frequently, leadership PACs are the mechanism members have created to raise and share money with other campaigns. Unlike personal campaign committees that limit contributions to \$2,300, leadership PACs allow contributions of up to \$5,000. All too frequently that money is raised from the very industries over which the members seek to have oversight over.

Making fundraising the top criteria for leadership within Congress corrupts the process, skews who the key decisionmakers are toward those who are particularly adept at raising money, and even impacts public policy. Congress should abandon all use of fundraising quotas, whether they are explicit or negotiated behind closed doors.

4. Close loopholes that allow candidates to evade contribution limits.

Joint Fundraising Committees

The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 (BCRA) closed a major loophole in campaign finance law by banning unlimited “soft money” donations to political parties. Before the ban, soft money contributions to both parties reached almost \$500 million during both the 2000 and 2002 election cycles. In studies done after the enactment of BCRA, the Campaign Finance Institute (CFI) found that political parties began raising less money from large contributions and more money from small contributions—and that’s a good thing.¹² But the law also changed the dynamics of campaign financing as wealthy individuals and organizations sought new ways to inject large sums into the political process. Campaign finance laws limit the amount of money an individual donor can make to a political committee. In order to sidestep this restriction, both parties have set up what are known as “joint fundraising committees,” which allow individual donors to give well in excess of the normal limits because the contributions are divided up among many different committees, such as national and state party committees. A joint committee will normally have a lavish event where the candidate will appear, even though the money is not going to his or her campaign. Senator McCain could not raise money directly for his campaign during the general election because he agreed to receive public funding, but he could appear at fundraisers where individual donors gave as much as \$70,000 to joint fundraising committees. Their contributions were then divided between the national party committee and several state party committees and used to support his candidacy.

Individuals are limited to contributing \$2,300 to presidential candidates for the primary and another \$2,300 for the general election.

More than one-third of the total amount raised by the two major candidates came from large individual donors through these joint fundraising committees. Senator McCain raised roughly \$221 million dollars in this way, and Senator Obama raised \$228 million through his joint fundraising committees.¹³

Similar to the general trend in political fundraising, many of the large donors to joint fundraising committees were associated with specific companies with immediate legislative needs in Washington. In October, *The New York Times* reported the following:

Many of these large donors come from industries with interests in Washington. A *New York Times* analysis of donors who wrote checks of \$25,000 or more to the candidates’ main joint fundraising committees found, for example, the biggest portion of money for both candidates came from the securities and investments industry, including executives at various firms embroiled in the recent financial crisis like Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers and AIG. Three top executives of Merrill Lynch, for example, wrote checks of \$28,500 each to Mr. McCain; among them was the chief executive, John A. Thain. A dozen employees at Goldman Sachs wrote checks of \$25,000 or more to Mr. Obama.¹⁴

Below are the total amounts given by individuals associated with leading financial companies to the joint fundraising committees of the presidential candidates:

Barack Obama

Contributor	Total
Citigroup Inc	\$318,690
Goldman Sachs	\$681,500
JPMorgan Chase & Co	\$261,242
Lehman Brothers	\$199,243
Total	\$1,460,675

Source: Center for Responsive Politics

John McCain

Contributor	Total
JPMorgan Chase & Co	\$377,314
Merrill Lynch	\$203,850
Morgan Stanley	\$282,150
Total	\$863,314

Source: Center for Responsive Politics

Federal candidates should be prohibited from forming joint fundraising committees because they have come to serve as an end-run around existing campaign finance laws.

Nominating Party Conventions

One of the most glaring loopholes in our campaign finance laws is the unlimited contributions that are permitted from corporate and union treasuries for the two nominating party conventions. The FEC allows these unlimited donations based on the rationale that they are “motivated by a desire to promote the convention city and not by political considerations.”¹⁵ This is difficult to believe, especially when solicitations for these contributions usually include promises of special access to federal decisionmakers and mostly come from corporations that are not headquartered in either of the convention cities.

These donors are seeking favors. A CFI analysis showed that the “more than 100 organizational donors” spent “nearly \$100 million in contributions to federal candidates and parties, mainly through their PACs but also via giving by their executives and other personnel. In the same period, they have spent over \$700 million to lobby Congress and the Executive Branch.”¹⁶

Congress should close this loophole by extending contribution limits to contributions made for party conventions and require more timely disclosure of those donations. Apart from legislation, a party could simply adopt a policy of refusing soft money.

5. Increase transparency.

Bundling

In the 2008 campaign, lack of transparency around bundlers was a major gap in what was otherwise an improvement in terms of disclosure from past elections. There is no legal requirement for a candidate to disclose his or her bundlers, so it has been only through the demands of reform groups, including Common Cause, that candidates have voluntarily offered some information. In 2000 and 2004, President Bush identified people who had raised at least \$100,000 for his campaign. In 2008, then-Senator Obama provided public information on which “tier” each of his bundlers fell into—at least \$50,000 raised, \$100,000 or \$200,000.

Given this spotty record of disclosure, a coalition of organizations requested by letter in 2008 that the campaigns voluntarily provide more information. Now that the campaigns are over, these voluntary requests ought to become mandatory laws.

As we said then, the campaigns should have to give a single dollar figure that represents precisely and cumulatively how much money the campaign attributes to each individual who bundles contributions of at least \$50,000. The total credited to an individual bundler by the campaign should include the total amount the bundler has raised for the official campaign committee and any joint fundraising committee. Candidates should also be required to provide details about bundlers including their city and state, employer and occupation. Such disclosure would not exceed what the FEC requires for donors who contribute more than \$200. This information should be made available to the public on a campaign's web site.

Hopefully, such a move toward better disclosure won't be too difficult under the new Administration. In September of 2007 President-elect Obama introduced S. 2030, requiring presidential campaigns to report the names, occupations, and specific amounts raised for fundraisers who bring in individual contributions totaling \$50,000 or more. The bill was a good idea then and is a good idea now. It should be passed and signed into law this year.

Senate Electronic Disclosure

Full and timely disclosure of campaign finance information is critical to an informed voting public and a functioning democracy. In a connected, Web 2.0 world in which campaigns almost universally track finances electronically, campaign finance disclosure at the federal level has not kept pace.

Perhaps the most egregious example is the filing of Senate campaign finance reports. Every U.S. Senate campaign tracks its campaign finances electronically. Yet the campaigns must submit campaign finance reports as printed hard copies to the Secretary of the Senate, who scans them and then emails them to the FEC, which then pays hundreds of thousands of dollars to manually load that very same contributor data into an electronic database¹⁷, which is then made available online. Rather than a matter of minutes, it takes several weeks before citizens can view campaign finance information—in the case of the fourth quarter filing, this means months after the election is concluded—and costs roughly \$250,000 per year.¹⁸

The simple fix is to make Senate campaigns file electronically. House and presidential candidates, non-Senate party committees, PACs and 527s have had to file electronically with the FEC since 2001, so this would merely bring Senate campaigns into line and would provide a critical service to the public. There is no public opposition to the Senate Campaign Disclosure Parity Act (was S.223 in the 110th Congress).

6. Replace the FEC with a new nonpartisan enforcement agency.

The FEC is a failed agency held captive by the elected officials it is meant to police. The FEC is different from other law enforcement agencies in the federal government because it has direct oversight and regulatory authority over Members of Congress. As a result, Congress and party leadership tightly control the nomination process and have historically seated commissioners who are loyal to the party that appoints them, or even ideologically hostile to regulation of campaign finance.

The FEC is a highly politicized agency. The commission has three Democratic appointees and three Republican appointees who vote on official agency actions. A 3-3 tie vote results in no action by the commission, effectively giving each party veto power over any potential FEC enforcement action. Last year, a political stalemate in the Senate prevented it from confirming a new slate of commissioners, leaving the agency without a quorum and unable to conduct most business for months during the most expensive election year in history.

Enforcement actions that do proceed can drag on for years, often resulting in penalties that are no more than “the cost of doing business” for campaigns and political groups. For example, the FEC settled a case with a liberal 527 group called America Coming Together (ACT) in August 2007, requiring the group to pay a \$775,000 civil penalty for engaging in electioneering activities financed with unlimited donations. The fine was approximately 0.6 percent of the total amount ACT raised in connection with the 2004 elections and came literally years after the election took place.¹⁹

The record of FEC failure is as long as the agency's history, and it continues. On December 18, 2008, the commission voted unanimously to approve a disclosure rule for contributions bundled by lobbyists that will allow candidates or campaign committees to disclose donations from events sponsored by multiple lobbyists as if each lobbyist were responsible for only a fraction of the total money raised. The rules will not take effect until well into 2009, according to FEC sources, and will require the FEC to agree on a 50-page explanation of the rules. The FEC ruling also created a loophole by allowing lobbyists not to report bundling if they did not receive some "tangible asset," such as some title or access associated with a special event.²⁰

That same month, the FEC's Republican commissioners refused to accept a conciliation agreement reached with a 527 group, the November Fund, in a case brought earlier by litigation by Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics and Washington. The failure to honor the agreement basically "amounts to a refusal to enforce the law," in the words of Democratic Commissioners Cynthia Bauerly and Ellen Weintraub. According to attorney Paul S. Ryan of the Campaign Legal Center, the FEC "has transformed itself from a merely dysfunctional agency to one that now openly thumbs its nose at the law."²¹

Congress gave the FEC few actual powers compared to other law enforcement agencies. The FEC cannot sanction groups it believes have violated the law—it can only negotiate for a payment of civil penalties. If it cannot reach a settlement, the FEC can then begin an enforcement action in court by filing a civil lawsuit. The commission cannot seek court injunctions to halt illegal activity nor can it conduct random audits of campaigns.²²

The FEC is not a credible deterrent to illegal campaign activities, even when it is functioning. It is time to rethink how we enforce our campaign finance laws. Common Cause calls for:

- 1) A new independent Federal Election Administration, as outlined in the pending McCain/Meehan bills (S. 478 and H.R. 421) introduced in the 110th Congress, with enforcement proceedings conducted by Administrative Law Judges.
- 2) In the meantime, the Obama Administration should convene a blue ribbon panel to pick highly qualified, independent nominees to fill the three vacant FEC posts expected to occur in spring 2009.

Common Cause will work with other reform groups to encourage the President to break with the tradition of automatic deferral to congressional leaders in the selection of commissioners, which has in part been the reason the FEC fails so persistently. The strict partisanship of the appointment process for the FEC has helped to ensure that it remains deadlocked, resulting in a collapse of enforcement—and just as importantly—the belief that the rules are unlikely to be enforced, which encourages donors and campaigns to try to skirt or violate the law.

Conclusion

America's current system of campaign financing erodes one of the most essential components of healthy democracy: public trust in its core institutions. Voters believe that large campaign contributions influence the actions of policy makers and will prevent Congress from tackling the critical issues facing the nation, like the economic crisis, health care and global warming.

The current pay-to-play culture dominating American politics threatens to steal the change people voted for in record numbers in 2008. Today's campaign finance system, fueled by big money, creates an environment ripe for corruption. Members of Congress must daily walk a fine line in order to avoid the appearance that they are favoring their large donors. Worse yet, the system has evolved to the point where lawmakers who serve on committees with jurisdiction over specific issues and sectors of the economy now receive much of their campaign money from the very industries they are supposed to regulate.

Restoring public faith in their government—and making government work in the public interest—will require bold action. Common Cause offers an agenda to sweep in a new era of campaign finance reform in Washington. At the centerpiece of that agenda, lies a voluntary system of public funding that enables federal candidates to just say "no" to large contributions and run vigorous campaigns on a combination of small donations and limited public dollars. The new campaign finance model presented here combines the best from successful state public financing systems and Internet-base small-donor fundraising strategies. This 21st Century approach—combined with a lobbyist contribution ban, an end to Hill fundraising quotas, closing loopholes, greater transparency and a nonpartisan, effective enforcement agency—offers the best opportunity to clean up Washington and give the American people the government they deserve.

Endnotes

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