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Stopping the money chase

The Fair Elections Now Act could help make Congress accountable to us, not corporations and special interests

By Nikki Love

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Sep 27, 2010
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Hawaii's bruising primary season is over and now the general election campaign is upon us. There will be even more slick commercials on our TVs, glossy brochures on our doorknobs and yard signs plastering our neighborhoods.

Adding up all the media air time, consultants, mail pieces and events, it's obvious that today's political campaigns cost serious money. Democrat or Republican, liberal, moderate or conservative, you have to wonder: Who is providing all this cash, and what do those donors want in return?

Hawaii's major Democratic candidates for governor raised more than \$3 million each for the primary, some Honolulu City Council candidates spent well over \$100,000.

For federal races, the numbers are even more staggering. Even popular incumbents in "safe" seats, like our own Sens. Daniel K. Inouye and Daniel Akaka, have to work constantly at fundraising. According to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics, since 2005 Sen. Inouye has collected \$6.1 million for his campaign committee and a political action committee he heads; Sen. Akaka has raised \$2.9 million.

With the skyrocketing cost of campaigns, it's no surprise that fundraising dominates the culture in Washington, D.C. In order to compete, members of Congress typically turn to well-funded interests that are subject to government regulation or seeking favorable legislation. This system makes elected officials accountable to special interests, instead of their constituents back home.

Recent legislative battles have demonstrated the powerful influence of campaign and lobbying money. For example, since 2000, oil and gas companies, electric utilities and other energy interests have spent more than \$337 million on campaign contributions, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. It's no coincidence that this gusher of

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money hit as Congress was debating, but not acting on, climate change legislation that would have pushed the development of alternative energy sources.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Supreme Court opened a new avenue for influence, striking down longstanding campaign finance laws and allowing corporations and unions to spend unlimited amounts on independent expenditures. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce alone is expected to invest \$75 million in campaigns this year.

To get a Congress that's accountable to us, not corporations and special interests, we need to change the system entirely by passing the Fair Elections Now Act (H.R. 6116/1826).

Fair Elections would allow congressional candidates to run competitive campaigns without hefty checks from special interests. Fair Elections candidates would swear off big donations in favor of small contributions -- no more than \$100 each -- from citizens in their states and grants from a new Fair Elections Fund. Because the fund would be

drawn from the proceeds of the sale of the publicly owned broadcast spectrum, the plan wouldn't cost taxpayers a dime.

Under a Fair Elections system, we would know that elected officials are spending their time on important issues facing us, and not collecting money at \$1,000-per-plate fundraisers or dialing for dollars from well-funded donors.

Last Thursday, a U.S. House of Representatives committee passed the Fair Elections Now Act, and the bill could be on the House floor before Friday. The legislation has broad, bipartisan, and cross-caucus support of 164 House members and 25 senators, including Sen. Akaka and Rep. Mazie Hirono. Sen. Inouye and Rep. Charles Djou have not taken a position on the bill.

As the campaign money chase speeds up, there is no time to waste in finding a comprehensive solution to the dominance of big donors.

Please visit www.fairelectionsnow.org to learn more and contact our congressional delegation to urge passage of the Fair Elections Now Act. It's time for government of, by and for the people, not the special interests.



Nikki Love is the executive director of Common Cause Hawaii.

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