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K STREET INSIDERS

This series of weekly columns by the biggest names on K Street unpacks the most important issues facing the lobbying business and the people in it.

Two cents



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Washington woke up Sunday morning to a front-page story of lawmakers and lobbyists doing a delicate legal dance around the edges of the new lobbying and ethics reform measures passed by Congress and signed by the president.

The issues of whether a lobbyist can pay for dinner, host a party or bundle campaign contributions are mere distractions from the greater issue of money in politics. As a member of Congress for 18 years and now in my 14th year working as a lobbyist, I believe public financing of our federal elections is the only way we will ever shed the “pay to play” perception Americans have of our electoral, political and legislative process.

Unfortunately, lawmakers believe most Americans would gasp at the thought of footing the bill for congressional and presidential elections. But the truth is taxpayers have been paying for presidential elections since 1976, but that system needs to be updated and expanded to congressional candidates.

Opponents of public financing argue the declining number of taxpayers

willing to check the box on their tax returns to fund presidential elections is proof that Americans don't support the idea. The numbers they use are legitimate; the rationale, however, is not. Participation in the check-off program has fallen dramatically since its inception in the Revenue Act of 1971, declining from a high of 28 percent on 1980 returns to 13 percent on 1994 returns to last year when only 10 percent of Americans participated.

But does that really mean that 90 percent of taxpayers, of voters, don't support public financing of elections, or is it more of a misunderstanding that checking the box increases your tax bill? A 2006 poll reported by Public Citizen that showed almost 75 percent supported a voluntary public financing system, including 80 percent of Democrats and 65 percent of Republicans.

More and more candidates for president are opting out of accepting public funds because they can raise more money on their own during the primary, nomination and general election cycles. Take a quick look at Federal Election Commission records and you will find that after only six months on the campaign trail, candidates for president have already raised more than \$265 million. Some public watchdog groups are predicting the eventual nominees will need to raise more than \$500 million each to compete successfully.

That is a number Americans should gasp at — and, astonishingly enough, one that does not even touch congres-

sional campaigns. Since the mid-1960s, hundreds of pieces of legislation have been introduced to tweak our system, but only two come to mind that struck at the very heart of the matter.

Still recovering from the sting of Watergate, the 95th Congress debated expanding the public financing of presidential elections to include congressional races. In 1977 the Congressional Election Financing Act (H.R. 2979) and Congressional General Election Campaign Financing Reform Act (H.R. 2610) attempted to show wisdom beyond their time, but had little support. That kind of bold thinking and leadership is needed to fix our broken system.

TODAY'S MOTIVATION BY LAWMAKERS TO REFORM THE SYSTEM IS RESPECTABLE, BUT MISSES THE MARK.

Today's motivation by lawmakers to reform the system is respectable and genuine, but misses the mark as it fails to look above the weeds of the intricacies of campaign finance laws and address the larger issue ... the money. I am not claiming to have the one answer that solves this overwhelming problem, but suggest looking at states like Arizona, Connecticut, Maine, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina and Vermont. All have successfully enacted measures for the public funding

of campaigns for elected offices.

I recognize the transformation to public financing cannot happen in a vacuum. Other reform measures are needed to help make the electoral environment more conducive and worthwhile for candidates to take advantage of the financing. Reducing the cost of campaigns should be the primary emphasis of those measures, and elimination of leadership political action committees would be a productive first step.

The race for campaign money has been the topic of attention-grabbing headlines for some time, but more recently those headlines have covered activities that have shamed some and sent others to jail. The action by this Congress on ethics and finance reform measures have clearly helped restore the Hill's credibility with voters, but I would safely guess lawmakers still freely admit that too much of their time is spent on fundraising for their next election.

The only way to remove the shackles of the demands of constant fundraising by lawmakers and the continued skepticism of voters is to provide substantial amounts of public funding at every stage of the process for presidential and congressional elections along with a thoughtful public education campaign.

Russo is the chief executive officer and senior vice chairman of Cassidy & Associates. He served for 18 years in the House from Illinois's 3rd district.