

From the Los Angeles Times

GEORGE SKELTON / CAPITOL JOURNAL

Bill Would Give the Public More Power to Buy Politicians

George Skelton
Capitol Journal

February 2, 2006

The debate sounded familiar. The outcome was different.

Legislators adamantly opposed to public financing of political campaigns — mainly conservatives — argued that citizens' liberties would be trampled. Besides, it wouldn't work: There's just no way to keep private money away from public policy.

Liberals decried the special-interest influence on policymaking and warned about the public's increasingly cynical view of politics and government. The solution: an infusion of public money to zap the clout of private investors.

Old stuff, with a new wrinkle: This time, a bill creating virtually a 100% public financing system for state political races was passed by the Assembly on a mostly party-line vote, 48 to 31, and sent to the Senate.

To be sure, this was the equivalent of a grade school "social promotion," where a student is passed and sent to the next higher class without really earning it. Tuesday was the legislative deadline for passing bills from their original house, so some Democrats closed their eyes Monday and waved this measure along, hoping it would just disappear on the south side of the Capitol rotunda.

Still, this was not a meaningless move. It marked a significant step toward urgently needed campaign finance reform — toward the people, rather than the private interests, buying the politicians.

"Everybody's worn out by this incessant fund-raising, the ceaseless dialing for dollars" the bill's author, Assemblywoman Loni Hancock (D-Berkeley), told me. "Everybody knows that it skews the system. Who do we work for? The people pay our salary. But then we are dependent on special interests to get elected."

Her solution — a product of the California Clean Money Campaign — would be strictly voluntary. Candidates could opt to let the public pay for their campaigns if they agreed to very tight spending limits. There'd be exceptions for candidates being trampled by big-

bucks bullies.

For example, an Assembly candidate would be entitled to \$150,000 during a general election. But if an opponent raised private money and outspent the "clean" candidate — or if the "clean" guy was attacked by an independent committee — another \$750,000 in public funds would be available.

For a gubernatorial candidate, there'd be a base \$10 million for the general election, plus \$50 million to match some rich rival or an independent hit squad.

There are varying estimates about what this would cost taxpayers, ranging from \$100 million to \$134 million a year. But don't bother memorizing figures.

The proposal will change. Sponsors hope to negotiate a final bill in a two-house conference committee. If passed and signed by the governor, it would be placed on a statewide ballot.

The measure would not solve every problem inflicted by the current system. The rich still would enjoy an advantage. Independent committees could wreak havoc.

But it would reduce the influence of special-interest money on public-policy decisions, says Tracy Westen, chief executive of the Center for Governmental Studies. "And it would stimulate a flood of new candidates and more competition."

Realistically, the best chance of passing this bill is if enough legislators think Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger would veto it anyway.

That's what happened 12 years ago. Then-Senate leader Bill Lockyer got a bill passed that included partial public financing. Many squeamish Democrats went along, figuring the measure was a cinch to be vetoed by Gov. Pete Wilson. He obliged, declaring: "It is indefensible to spend taxpayer money to finance political campaigns."

Schwarzenegger hasn't taken a stand. But last October, when he was in a reform mood, the governor told me he'd "absolutely" consider public financing. "The way [campaign funding] is going, it has become a circus. The ones benefiting from it are the television stations."

Actually, everybody in the booming political business — consultants, pollsters, ad-makers — are benefiting from the politicians' money-grubbing.

Most incumbents prefer the current system that got them elected. They're leery of any do-gooder concept that conceivably could benefit a future opponent.

It is true that Republicans are ideologically opposed to expanding government in almost any form. But there's also a political reason for their opposition to taxpayer financing of campaigns: Their funding base is rich people and corporations with fat checkbooks. And

that is a reliable, broad stream of money.

The only Assembly Republican who didn't oppose the clean-money bill was Keith Richman of Northridge. He remained neutral — wondering where the public money would come from — while sounding like a supporter.

"I, like many members, am very concerned about the corrupting influence of money in politics," he said during the debate. "I doubt there are too many of us here who think this legislative body is a good example of a representative democracy."

The more common Republican view was that of Assemblyman Chuck DeVore (R-Irvine). He called it a "feel-good" bill, adding: "You can't take money out of the system. Money will always find its way into the system."

Opponents of public financing — especially Republicans — always have argued that the best reform would be full and quick disclosure of all major contributions. That would tip off the public to any corrupting influences.

This is a good talking point, but we're still waiting.

Regardless, full disclosure would not free up the politicians from money-bumming so they could spend more time on the job they originally applied for: looking after the public.

*

George Skelton writes Monday and Thursday. Reach him at george.skelton@latimes.com.