



Welfare for Politicians

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A proposal to allow the Big Island to experiment with taxpayer-funded political campaigns promises that it will restore citizens' confidence in government and increase citizen participation in politics. But other places that have enacted schemes such as House Bill 661, now in conference committee in the Hawaii legislature, have found that "welfare for politicians" only results in wasted money and broken promises.

Shoveling taxpayer dollars at political candidates does not increase even the most basic form of political participation - voting.

Arizona began government-financed elections in 2000 and is cited by proponents as a model of taxpayer funded political campaigns. But in the last two decades turnout in Arizona is largely unchanged, and the highest turnout in that period occurred in 1992 – before the taxpayer-financed election program began.

Nor do taxpayer-funded political campaigns encourage more citizens to run for political office. A study of Arizona's taxpayer financing system found that the number of candidates in Arizona has decreased.

Perhaps lower public participation could be overlooked if taxpayer-funded campaigns resulted in more competitive elections, but taxpayer-financed campaigns protect entrenched incumbents by reducing the amount of money challengers can spend challenging them.

Political Scientist Pamela Carriveau rightly observes that an "incumbent doesn't need to spend a lot of money" to win an election. An incumbent has the

benefit of high name recognition and their office allows them to consistently attract press coverage.

Consequently, a challenger can often only get on equal footing by outspending the incumbent. Restricting the amount of money a challenger can spend limits their ability to compete.

A study by the federal government published in 2003 confirms that access to government funding did not increase the number of successful challenger races in states with government financing in either 2000 or 2002, and applying the study's methodology to 2004 finds that incumbent reelection rates actually increased.

More than just reducing the viability of challenger campaigns, by openly seeking to reduce the amount of money spent on political races, the proposal directly undermines First Amendment rights.

Spending money is a necessary component used to reach voters in modern campaigns. Former Chief Justice Warren Burger recognized, "We do little but engage in word games unless we recognize that people - candidates and contributors - spend money on political activity because they wish to communicate ideas."

More recently, Supreme Court Justice David Breyer noted that limiting funds available to challengers can "... harm the electoral process by preventing challengers from mounting effective campaigns against incumbent officeholders, thereby reducing democratic accountability."

Campaign advertising leading up to election day may be annoying, but almost all ads educate voters on the merits and demerits of particular candidates. Less money able to be spent means less information that voters receive from which they can make their decisions.

Government-financed elections also can erode public confidence in government. A 2005 study by political scientists Jeffrey Milyo and David Primo concludes that taxpayer financing has a "... negative effect on public views about whether 'people have a say' in their government or whether 'officials care.'"

The previously mentioned federal survey on Arizona's experience with taxpayer-funded political campaigns further solidifies Milyo and Primo's findings. It revealed that only 21 percent of Arizona voters said that government financing increased their confidence in state government and only 11 percent thought that government financing reduced the influence of special interest groups.

Even more important than the public's perception of government, though, is the actual effectiveness of government. A study released last month by Pew Charitable Trusts, which ironically funds several of the groups advocating for campaign finance regulations, found that the many of the best governed states in the nation have the least restrictive campaign finance laws. There simply is no correlation between strict campaign finance laws and well-governed states.

By almost every measure, "welfare for politicians" schemes that force taxpayers to pay for political campaigns fail to deliver on their promised results. Instead, they erode the First Amendment rights of citizens and candidates, protect incumbents from challengers, and waste taxpayer dollars. This proposal is an expensive experiment that will ultimately disappoint.

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House Bill 661 became law without the governor's signature on July 8, 2008. The law establishes a pilot project for comprehensive public funding of Hawaii County Council Elections for three election cycles, beginning in 2010. Though no standards to evaluate the three election pilot study are defined in the bill, candidates are required to file at least two electronic reports, which are always to be available to the general public. The full text of the bill is available at http://www.capitol.hawaii.gov/session2008/Bills/HB661_.pdf.