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Don't Let the Governor's Race Become a Game for the Rich

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If you're following the current race for governor, there's no escaping the pungent aroma.

It's the scent of burning money, fueling the three major candidacies.

There's probably nothing illegal going on. But it's not exactly the democratic ideal, either.

One Democratic candidate — state Controller Steve Westly — is trying to buy the office with riches collected by being in the right place at the right time with EBay.

His primary election opponent — state Treasurer Phil Angelides — is benefiting from a sugar daddy whose family last week dumped \$5 million into an Angelides rescue effort.

Then there's Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who once told voters he was so rich he didn't need to hit up special interests for political money — then commenced to set a global record for mining special interests. He's up to around \$100 million in total fundraising.

The governor also has been promoted in TV ads paid for by a secretive U.S. Chamber of Commerce operation that won't disclose its donors.

To put all this in perspective, there's a \$22,300 limit per election on any contribution to a gubernatorial candidate.

But there are enough loopholes to enrich dozens of Sacramento political attorneys and frustrate attempts at reform.

The main loophole is that donors can give unlimited amounts to "independent expenditure committees" if the organizations don't coordinate their campaign efforts with the candidates they're promoting.

Thus, Angelides' former developer-partner, Angelo Tsakopoulos, can pump \$5 million into a TV ad committee.

Garry South, Westly's attack-dog strategist, says that Tsakopoulos' donation is "without any question" the largest contribution ever to an independent committee plugging a candidate.

"This is the most blatant, brazen example of an attempt to violate and circumvent campaign finance laws that I've ever seen," South complains.

But there's another humongous loophole that the U.S. Supreme Court created years ago by ruling that money is "speech," not property, and therefore protected by the 1st Amendment. That means a candidate cannot be limited in how much of his own money he spends.

So far, Westly has dug into his pocket for \$20 million and probably will be digging much deeper.

"Voters are inherently suspicious of candidates who try to buy elections," asserts Angelides spokesman Dan Newman.

Maybe. But Westly is running ahead in the polls.

So what's so noxious about a mega-rich guy spending his own bucks on his own candidacy? Or some group running an independent campaign?

Answer One: An unlevel playing field.

Answer Two: Accountability.

Politics has always favored rich people, but modest-means types also have had a shot at high office. Pat Brown, George Deukmejian and Pete Wilson didn't need big personal bank accounts to be elected governor.

That could be changing. All three current candidates are rich, although Angelides apparently is a pauper compared to the other two.

It would be a sorry state if we got to the point where only the very rich could become governor.

"As campaign costs get so high, otherwise viable candidates are being muscled aside by people wealthy enough to be self-funded," says Tim Hodson, director of the Center for California Studies at Cal State Sacramento and an expert on campaign financing. "When a multimillionaire's money is so great that the opponent doesn't have an opportunity, then there's a distortion."

As for independent committees, they allow a candidate to claim innocence for any ugly ads or dirty tricks that benefit his candidacy. *I didn't do it.* A candidate should be accountable for any campaigning on his behalf.

Moreover, the purpose of contribution limits is to reduce the corruptive influence of money on public policy decisions. But every politician knows who's bankrolling the independent committees. And it's naive to think they don't feel some obligation to return the favors.

So what to do? There are just two options, it seems to me.

It's time to stop mucking around with half-step, loophole-ridden "reforms." Either scrub the whole effort — cancel all the contribution limits — or move all the way to public financing of state campaigns, with enough funding for common candidates to compete with the fortunate rich.

In the no-limits system, there'd be 24-hour, online disclosure of all donations exceeding \$1,000. Let the voters decide who's trying to corrupt whom.

Problem is, the very people who advocate this idea usually are the last to support full, rapid disclosure when it counts.

My preference is taxpayer financing — the politicians being bought by the public rather than the special interests.

Two public financing measures — called "Clean Money" and modeled after a successful system in Arizona — currently are being considered in the state. One is a proposed ballot initiative sponsored by the California Nurses Assn. The other is a bill by Assemblyman Loni Hancock (D-Berkeley). The annual cost would be around \$150 million.

The bill has passed the Assembly and is stuck in the Senate Elections Committee, where the chairwoman — Sen. Debra Bowen (D-Marina del Rey) — so far is the lone supporter. "I expect it to get out of the committee," she says confidently.

In a Clean Money system, candidates can opt to let the public pay for their campaigns if they agree to tight spending limits. There are exceptions for candidates outgunned by independent committees or the self-funding super-rich.

For example, Angelides would be guaranteed \$10 million, then get enough to match Westly up to \$40 million. He wouldn't need to be rescued by an "independent" sugar daddy.

This would be a nice air freshener.

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