

Discipline Campaign Financing in Texas

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You know state campaign finance laws are obscenely indulgent when:

- A single contribution to a legislator weighs in at \$120,000;
- A legislator takes almost half his entire war chest from one special-interest group's Political Action Committee (PAC);
- The state's biggest PAC takes almost half its money from just 18 fabulously wealthy families whose interests have little in common with those of regular Texans.

The corrupt excesses described above are the handiwork of Texas' biggest PAC, Texans for Lawsuit Reform (TLR). These abuses were identified in our organization's new report, "Tort Dodgers: Business Money Tips the Scales of Justice." The report found that this leader of the PACs contributed 27 percent of the \$3.1 million that sitting members of the Texas Legislature took from "tort reform" PACs in the last election cycle. TLR gave the bulk of its money to Republican challengers or other Republicans who ran in tight races.

As far as campaign financing is concerned, it is irrelevant whether or not TLR favors Democrats or Republicans. What should be of concern, however, is the sheer size of such contributions from a single special interest. For example, TLR:

- Contributed \$123,000 to Rep. Ron Clark, R-Sherman, or 44 percent of his entire war chest;
- Gave Sen. Troy Fraser, R-Horseshoe Bay, more than \$120,000;
- Provided an astounding \$40,000 or more to six current legislators.

No common-sense observer could argue that politicians who rely on such big donations are not beholden to the contributor in some way. Moreover, like most PACs, TLR does not simply pool money from lots of regular folks. Almost half of TLR's money came from the families of just 18 of Texas' wealthiest tycoons.

The amounts of money—which swell with each passing campaign season—are flooding out the most basic democratic principle: one person, one vote. Texas is one of only six states that imposes absolutely no campaign contribution limits. Like the federal government, which imposed a \$1,000 limit on individual contributions to congressional candidates in 1974, most states impose a cap on contributions. In fact, voters in seven states recently took reform into their own hands, voting to impose contribution caps as low as \$100.

Needless to say, such limits are anathema to the beneficiaries of the existing unbridled system. One of TLR's top contributors, Dallas corporate raider Harold Simmons, was fined almost

\$20,000 four years ago. Simmons had violated federal campaign contribution limits two years in a row. In a recent Dallas lawsuit, two of his daughters accused Simmons of further mocking federal limits by improperly making campaign contributions in their names without their permission.

Unfortunately, the problem is perpetrated equally by the givers and the takers. Cleaning up the political system is an historically tough job for politicians to undertake. Texas leaders suffer a profound lack of will when it comes to campaign finance reform. Reform proposals now before the Legislature flunk the litmus test because they would not impose any limits on Texas' indulgent system.

If Texas is to do more than pay lip service to that old-fashioned ideal of one Texan, one vote, we are going to have to force our legislators to legally insulate themselves from the corrupt influence of money in politics. This requires that they impose reasonable and strict limits on how much cash tycoons can pump into their coffers.

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