



## MY BEST SHOT

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### LESSONS ON CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM FROM SAN DIEGO

Federal campaign finance reform has at last arrived, spelled Re-Form, or big money Re-PAC-Aged. That's because the McCain-Feingold campaign finance bill, creaking its way to a Presidential signature in fits and jolts, will increase the power of Political Action Committees while making political parties as quaint and effective as the Queen of England.

Reformers looking to understand the results of such well-intentioned legislation might learn from San Diego municipal politics, where tight campaign contribution limits of \$250 per person and a ban on unreported soft money and corporate contributions have been in effect for twenty years while campaign costs to pummel voters with a candidate's message skyrocketed.

The centerpiece of the McCain-Feingold bill would prevent political parties from using unregulated donations to fund so-called issue ads targeted at opposition candidates, virtually taking the donkey's and elephants out of the election end-game by slaughtering party budgets, making PAC's virtually the only source of outside help for candidates struggling to fund expensive campaigns.

While campaign finance reform efforts are sincere attempts to take ugly dollars out of American politics, most money in the campaign world is like toothpaste in a tube—if squeezed from one spot, it most certainly will amass somewhere else. And under McCain-Feingold, Political Action Committees will again be the premier and perhaps the only way for labor unions, trade organizations, corporations and ideological groups to work their influence.

This has proven to be the case in San Diego, where even PAC's with their strict reporting regulations are outlawed, but where a few dozen membership interest groups exercise their constitutional right to free expression and association by spending their members' money informing voters about the organization's endorsements, and sometimes about why the other candidate is not fit to serve, through mail, signs and phone banks.

The membership political group grope is legal as long as the money is spent independently and without direction from or coordination with the candidate's campaign. In reality, candidates know that an endorsement by a particular organization means one less mailer or fewer yard signs or one less round of phone

calls are needed in the campaign budget.

This means a lot when one piece of mail in a district city council election can cost \$14,000—Scott Peters' campaign spent over \$450,000 to win in District 1 last time out, twice as much as his predecessor spent in 1992.

In the District 6 special election for San Diego City Council, the United Food Workers Union already spent \$7,000 on a targeted mailer on behalf of activist Donna Frye, and I don't think this is because of her last name.

And so, in a once every four year demeaning ritual, candidates fall all over themselves vying for endorsements from powerful interest groups that spend money, like the San Diego Firefighters union that puts up campaign signs with cute fire hats or the Building Industry Association that can fire up a phone bank or the San Diego Democratic Club that sends its endorsement newsletter to 15,000 politically active Gay and Lesbian homes.

In other instances where an interest group's name might resonate badly with some voters, a check can be sent to some other membership group that supports the same candidate. This is usually done at the end of a campaign so that the contribution is reported after the election when no one but political junkies or a reporter from *The Reader* cares.

The influence of interest groups on local politics far eclipses that of any political party, which could be viewed as a good thing for pragmatists who view municipal government's role as a house and bookkeeping job rather than as a body representing differing ideological views.

In the end, the results of campaign finance reform lie in the eye of the office holder, whose longevity in office is almost guaranteed in San Diego because only an incumbent can attract the vast numbers of \$250 donors required to fully fund a campaign and to scare the sense out of any special interest group that might dare support someone else.

As for McCain-Feingold, I'm glad that the debate took place if only to provide a rare close-up and personal look at how the political game is won. Here in San Diego, it was lost long ago.