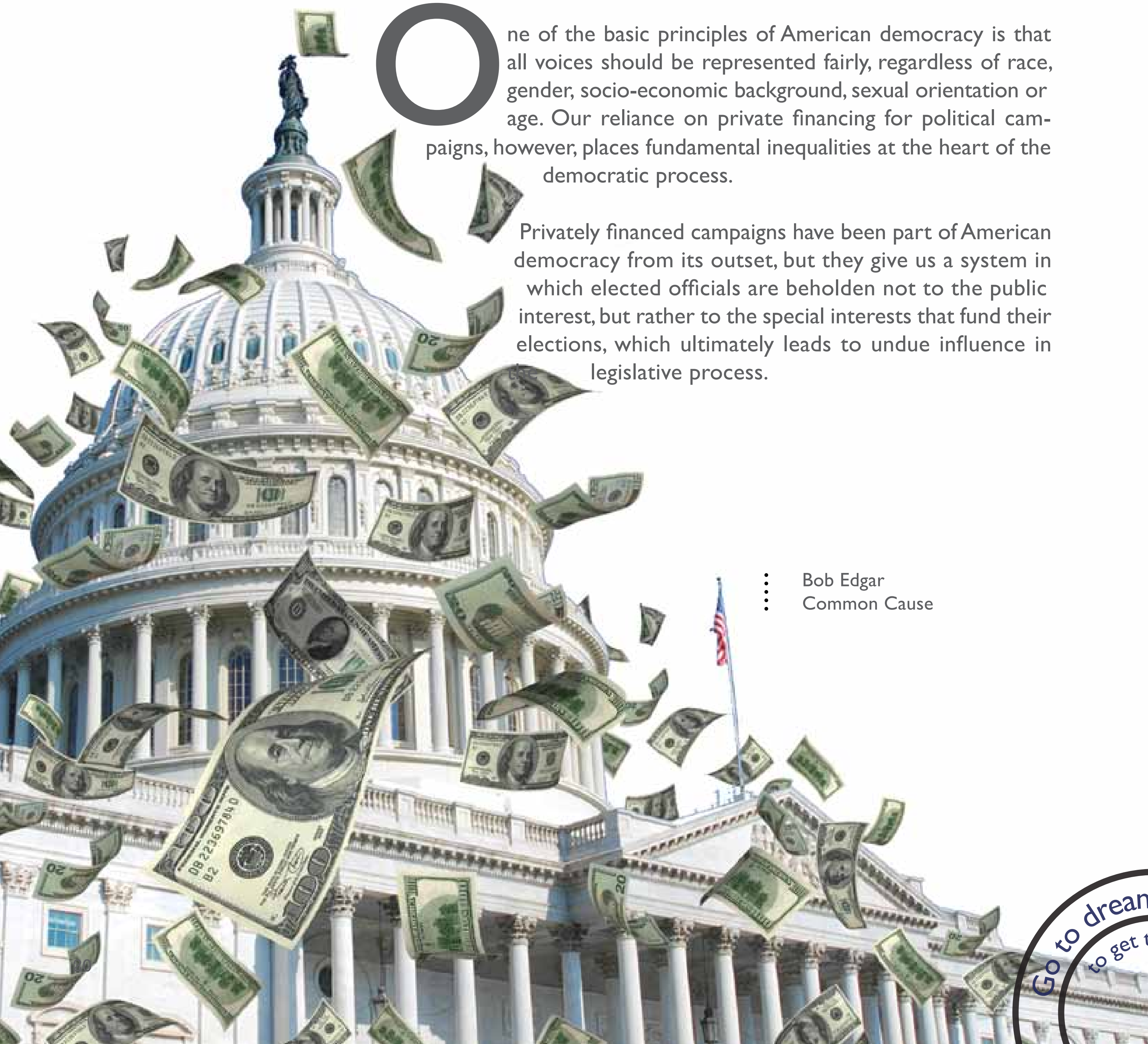
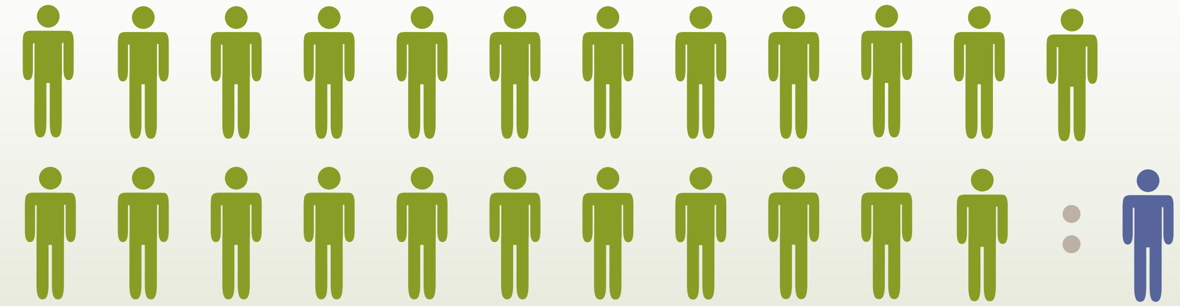
Getting Money Out of Politics:
Putting the Public First



One of the basic principles of American democracy is that all voices should be represented fairly, regardless of race, gender, socio-economic background, sexual orientation or age. Our reliance on private financing for political campaigns, however, places fundamental inequalities at the heart of the democratic process.

Privately financed campaigns have been part of American democracy from its outset, but they give us a system in which elected officials are beholden not to the public interest, but rather to the special interests that fund their elections, which ultimately leads to undue influence in legislative process.

Bob Edgar
Common Cause



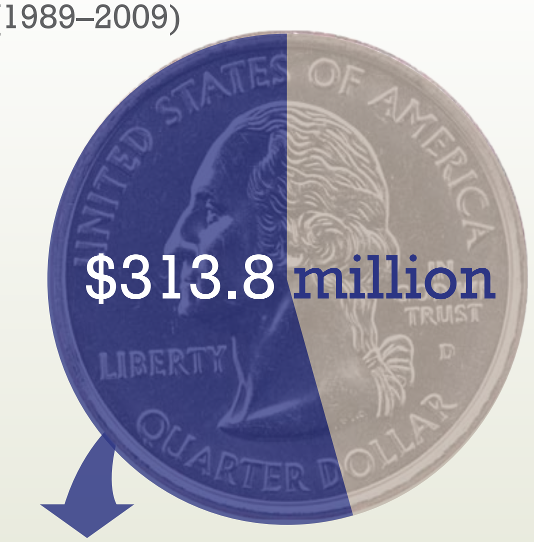
In the US, the ratio of lobbyists to legislators is 23:1.

A Core Problem: Elections Dominated by Money

First, private financing of political campaigns magnifies the power of large donors in the political process. When members of Congress rely on big checks from corporations, industry lobbyists, special interests or wealthy individuals to get elected, those donors expect—and often get—something in return. Under one-half of one percent (0.36 percent) of the American population currently donates over $200 to political campaigns. This small, wealthy minority provides around 90 percent of the money that funds political campaigns and, in exchange, receives more access to candidates and more influence in shaping policies and legislation.[1] This dynamic can be seen in a number of issues; healthcare and climate change are two examples.

It is hard to know the exact influence of special-interest money on the legislation passed by Congress, but we know it has a huge role—often hindering progress and innovation. Between 1989 and 2009, the healthcare industry gave $313.8 million in campaign contributions to members of Congress. Of that, $166.7 million, or 53 percent, went to members of the House and Senate who sit on one of the five committees with jurisdiction over healthcare reform, according to data from the Center for Responsive Politics.[2]

Campaign Contributions from Healthcare Industry (1989–2009)



$166.7 million (53%)

Given to members of Congress with jurisdiction over health reform

Despite a worldwide consensus on the harmful effects of carbon emissions, Congress only recently passed legislation to limit the discharge of greenhouse gases. The energy industry spent lavishly on lobbying and campaign contributions to fight any proposal.

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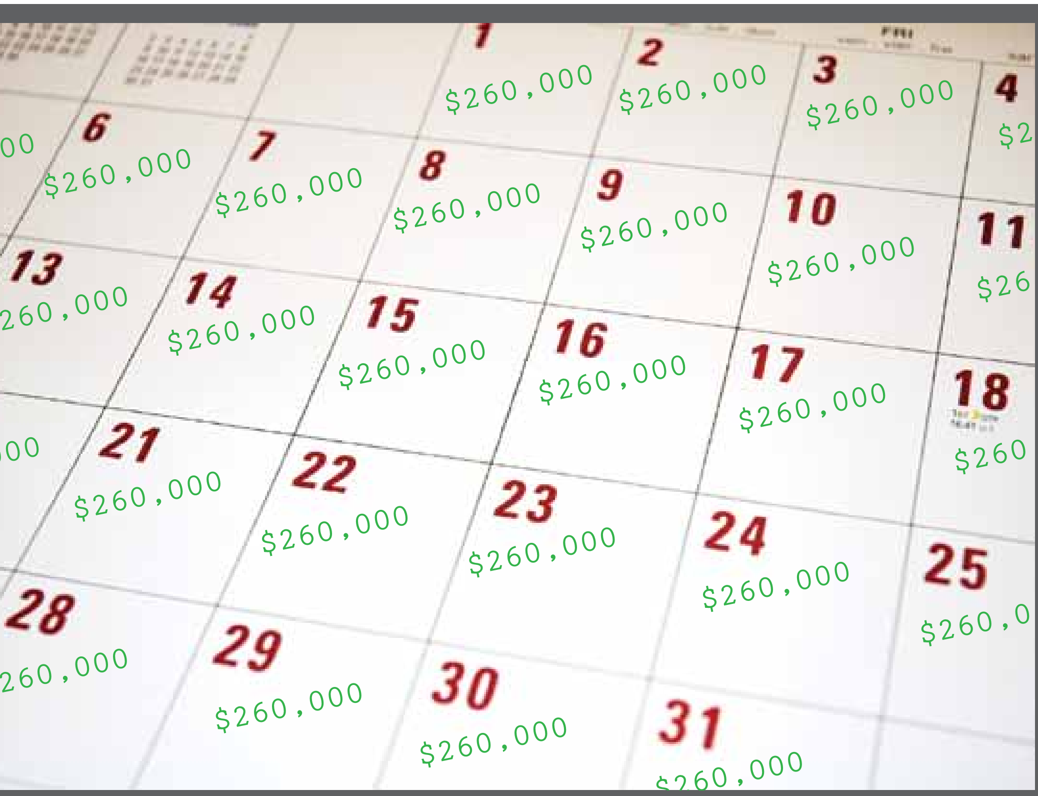
The energy industry is betting millions that they can buy influence in Congress and protect their profits.

According to lobby disclosure reports, 34 energy companies registered in the first quarter of 2009 to lobby Congress on legislation to limit greenhouse gases, known as the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009. These companies spent $23.7 million—or $260,000 per day—lobbying members of Congress in January, February and March of 2009. Many of these companies also made large contributions to members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which had jurisdiction over the legislation. Oil and gas companies, mining companies and electric utilities combined gave more than $2 million to the 19 members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee from 2007 to 2009.[3]

The energy industry is betting millions that it can buy influence in Congress and protect its profits, even if that means blocking an important step toward clean, renewable energy and a healthier planet. Tackling problems like global warming must start by ending the flow of the industry's "Black Gold" of campaign contributions and lobbying cash to the most influential members of Congress.

It is impossible to say how each of these issues and many others would have been resolved in Congress if members were not dependent on these same companies for campaign contributions. What is clear, however, is that money and their willingness to invest it in campaigns gives these companies undue influence in the process of addressing national problems.

Second, private financing of political campaigns limits opportunities for qualified but unconventional candidates to run for and win elected office. Nine out of ten campaigns are won by the candidate who spends the most money. That drives candidates to focus more on fundraising and large donors than on mobilizing voters around ideas and issues. In 2010, the average winning House candidate spent $1.3 million, and the average winning Senate candidate spent $8.3 million.[4] The astronomical cost of campaigns has made it increasingly difficult for citizens who are not independently wealthy and whose platforms do not appeal to wealthy donors to mount competitive campaigns against well-funded incumbents or well-connected political insiders. The



Thirty-four energy companies registered in the first quarter of 2009 to lobby Congress on the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009 to limit greenhouse gases.

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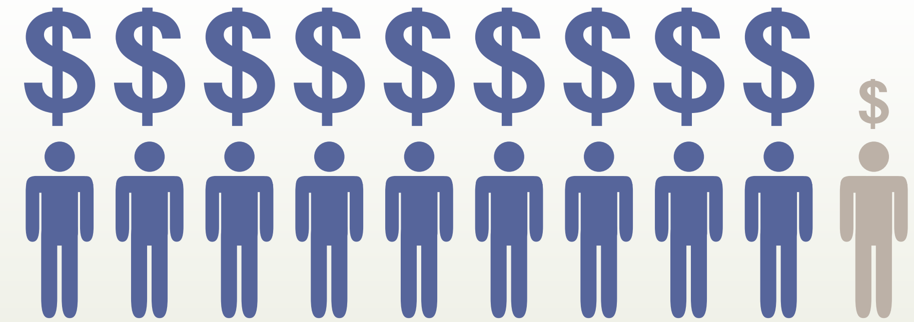

In 2010: Average winning **House** candidate spent: **$1.3 million**

Average winning **Senate** candidate spent: **$8.3 million**

need to raise enormous amounts of campaign cash creates barriers for huge segments of the population.

Third, private financing of campaigns forces members of Congress to spend too much time on fundraising, and not enough time on serving their constituents. US Representatives in contested elections spend 34 percent of their time, while in office, raising money for their next campaign rather than reading bills, responding to constituent concerns and meeting with voters to discuss legislative issues. And fundraising doesn't end with a successful election; when new members of Congress and Senators enter the world of Washington politics, they are immediately asked to set fundraising goals not only for their future campaigns, but for their party's fundraising arm as well.

For these reasons, many citizens feel locked out of their democracy and are cynical about the political process. America has one of the lowest voter turnout rates among the world's democracies—54 percent during presidential elections and roughly 40 percent in off-year elections—because people simply don't believe voting will change anything. They can see that their elected officials are more beholden to campaign contributors than to their constituents. In order for a democracy to thrive and for the political process to produce outcomes that advance the interests of the public, citizens must have faith that the system works and adheres to the ideals under which their democracy was founded.

One Solution: Fair Elections

The key to strengthening America's democratic process is to reform the campaign financing system by implementing Fair Elections, a voluntary system of public financing for campaigns. This plan gives participating candidates $4 from a special public fund for each $1 they raise in private gifts of $100 or less. Candidates using this system are not allowed to spend any of their personal wealth or to accept any donations greater than $100. By creating a system that prioritizes small donors, Fair Elections levels the playing field, provides opportunities for citizens to have their voices heard and allows elected officials to better serve the public interest. A candidate elected under a Fair Elections system won't be beholden to a set of large campaign

With the costs of campaigns skyrocketing, it has become difficult for citizens who are not independently wealthy and whose platforms do not appeal to wealthy donors to mount a competitive campaign.

Photo courtesy Bill Koplitz, FEMA

Janet Napolitano, former Arizona governor and now Secretary of Homeland Security, is one of the most outspoken supporters of Fair Elections.

To qualify for public funds, she gathered **4,000 contributions of $5 each** from Arizona residents. She sought and won Arizona's governorship twice using a Fair Elections–style public finance system.

Voters like public funding because it makes elected officials more accountable to them, reduces conflicts of interest and gives them more choice at the polls.

contributors, but rather to the general public, as America's founders intended.

Fair Elections has a proven track record of success and enjoys bipartisan support. Several states and cities have successfully implemented Fair Elections–style public financing. They have created an accountable government and restored confidence in the political process. Maine, Connecticut and Arizona all have Fair Elections at the statewide level. Eighty-five percent of Maine's legislature—Democrats and Republicans—was elected using a Fair Elections system of public financing. A recent poll found that 74 percent of Maine voters surveyed wanted candidates for governor to use the system, and 55 percent said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who did.

In 2008, Connecticut became the first state to have Fair Elections public financing passed by its legislature rather than through a voter referendum. Within two years, 81 percent of the Connecticut legislature was made up of politicians who used the system. By large margins, Connecticut voters believed that the influence of money on elected officials needed to be limited (82 percent) and that state politicians were more concerned with the needs of their campaign donors than the needs of the general public (62 percent).

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Photo courtesy Dina Lydia, citizen-artiste.org

Roger Fulton, member of Washington Public Campaigns, stands with the Backbone Campaign's backbone puppet in front of Washington's state government building in Olympia rallying for clean elections.

Our problem with campaign finance is not so much the amount we spend, as it is who provides the money, what those donors get in return and how that distorts public policy and spending priorities. Keeping our elected officials dependent on the same wealthy, special interests they are supposed to regulate undermines public confidence in government and its ability to tackle the tough issues that face the nation. It's time to get our leaders out of the fundraising game and let them do the jobs we've elected them to do. Fair Elections is one possible solution. If your Representative supports Fair Elections, please thank him or her; if your Representative has not yet signed on, please ask him or her to do so.

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Bob Edgar is the president and CEO of Common Cause (www.commoncause.org). Edgar arrived at Common Cause with a long history of leadership and public service that included 12 years in Congress. There, he led efforts to improve public transportation, fought wasteful water projects and authored the community Right to Know provision of Super Fund legislation. He also served on the House Select Committee on Assassinations that investigated the deaths of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and President John F. Kennedy. Edgar was the general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the US for seven years immediately before arriving at Common Cause.

Common Cause is a national nonpartisan, non-profit citizens' lobby working to make government at all levels more honest, open and accountable, and to connect citizens with their democracy.