

# The Price of Political Fame

By Mark A. Neubauer

California prides itself on being a trendsetter. From Hollywood to the Silicon Valley, California has repeatedly given the nation new directions and thoughts. But now the latest political fad here in California threatens democracy as we know it.

Our archetypical politician is Abraham Lincoln — from log cabin to White House — from humble beginnings to political power. But that aspiration of our Republican democracy is changing dramatically. Suddenly, newly coined multi-millionaires, armed with hundreds of millions of dollars from stock options, are increasingly buying political fame by personally funding their own campaigns.



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Nowhere is this trend more apparent than the media buying frenzy between Republican gubernatorial candidates Meg Whitman and Steven Poizner. Poizner rose from political obscurity to a serious contender by spending nearly \$18 million in his ad campaign. His chief adversary, eBay's Meg Whitman, has spent \$47 million to maintain her lead in the polls, notwithstanding her lack of prior political experience. Local airwaves — both radio and television — are saturated with their paid media messages.

Nor is the gubernatorial race the only one where money talks. In the state Attorney General race, Democrat candidate Mike Kelly wrote himself and his campaign a personal check for \$10 million, using cash from his Facebook options to finance a campaign, again notwithstanding his lack of political history.

Armed with this surplusage of cash, politics becomes the new hobby for these sudden millionaires.

As California's political legend Jesse Unruh once warned, "Money is the mothers' milk of politics." As a result of these tremendous personal self-funding of campaigns, the only way to become a successful politician in today's latest California trend appears either to have your own millions fund your campaign or to sell your soul to a series of special interest groups who supply the missing financial muscle.

This presents a threat to democracy as we know it. Only the wealthy will survive.

Nor is this a danger that legislation can control. As the U.S. Supreme Court made clear in this year's decision, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, attempts to regulate conventional political campaign funding violate the First Amendment. For the Supreme Court, the market will control the elections, but unfortunately that market is dominated by a few wealthy individuals, corporations and unions.

One equalizing control on this new political trend of buying votes with cash is the Internet. It is a low cost means of combating the media frenzy of these new super-wealthy candidates. As President Barack Obama's campaign showed, the Internet can be a valuable tool to both spreading the political message and, indeed, to garnishing cash in small contributions. Rapidly growing Internet social networks such as Twitter and Kelly's own Facebook also provide a means of "spreading the word" and campaigning on a small budget.

And, ironically, there may be a limit to cash's advantage in saturating the airwaves, especially local television, with campaign ads. Recent studies show that audience viewing of local television news (where many political advertisements are run) is dropping as most viewers now get their news from the Internet Web sites and choose to use the local news timeslots to replay their favorite programs from the digital video recorder such TiVo. Likewise, advertisements placed in popular entertainment programs have diminished effectiveness as people race through the ads on their TiVo.

In addition to the Internet, one other possible source of equalizing the unfair advantage the millionaire candidates obtain is reforming the Federal Equal Time Doctrine and apply it not just

to traditional broadcast media, such as over the air television and radio, but also cable and satellite transmissions. Free access of all candidates to equal time would benefit our democracy. It would provide an opportunity to hear each candidate's message yet not give an unfair advantage to one wealthy individual over our next Abe Lincoln. We have seen the success and interest in such presentations of candidates' views through the national presidential debates. Mandating similar exposure of candidates in state and local races would take away at least part of the advantage that now belongs only to the wealthy.

But there is no easy solution. The recent trend here in California of vast cash financing campaigns for heretofore unknown millionaires casts a dark cloud over our democracy. It is time for us to let the sun of political debate shine through and keep the playing field equal for all candidates — rich or poor.



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