

"Federation Corner" column
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"Government by the people" starts with voting

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For decades now, media pundits have bemoaned the influence of special interests over elections, as well as the functioning of government in general. No sooner had Congress approved the McCain-Feingold Act to close Federal election finance loopholes, and the President signed the bill into law, than special interests invented a creative new way to circumvent the law and funnel soft money to their chosen candidates for elected office.

Here in Montgomery County, however, the Council recently approved Public Campaign Financing legislation that holds promise to lessen the influence that special interests exert over elections, the two primary special interests being unions and the development industry. The legislation, which will take effect beginning with the 2018 county races, did not outlaw special interest or corporate contributions to candidates. But it made it easier for newcomers to the political arena to be financially competitive with special interest financed rivals.

Without weighing the reader down with detail, the county's new Public Campaign Financing system will provide public funds to match small contributions, received by candidates for County Executive or County Council, from individuals residing in the county. Contributions from corporations and those living outside the county do not qualify for the match. If a candidate gets a certain funding total from a specified minimum of small contributors in the year leading up to the elections, then they qualify to receive matching public campaign funding.

A candidate who opts to seek public funding can still take contributions from corporations and those living outside the county, but they are put in a separate account not used for campaign expenditures. And since the process sets one year as the period for receipt of qualifying contributions, it might herald the end of the four year begging cycle

While the new law is a huge step in the right direction, it will not prevent donations from special interest groups or corporations. Their contributions will be critically important to candidates who chose not to seek the public campaign financing match. They can still solicit as much money as they can from whomever they want.

In addition to special interest groups pushing their members to vote for selected candidates, the money they contribute to candidates' campaigns has a two-fold impact. It funds the marketing of candidates by paying for mailers and ads, and it later helps open the door for those interests to meet with and lobby their supported candidates, if elected to office.

In other words, the game of special interest influence peddling will still be alive and well come the 2018 county elections. But the financial playing field will be leveled a bit for political newcomers, especially minority candidates and young people, to try their hand at running for office. And that should increase diversity in the officials we elect to the most important offices in the county's executive and legislative branches.

Aside from corporations (e.g.; small businesses, some biomedical research and development companies, and mega companies like Marriott and Lockheed Martin), the special interest groups in Montgomery County fall in two categories: unions and the development industry.

Union influence is exerted by two types of unions: labor unions composed of employees working in private industry; and public employee unions.

The data showing campaign contributions from unions illustrates the significant impact of union money in county elections. It seems clear that the unions expect to benefit from helping to elect certain candidates because they move so much money into the campaign war-chests of their favorites. By making candidates dependent on their support, unions hope to exercise influence over the Council and County Executive when it comes time to negotiate collective bargaining agreements and approve the budget to pay the salaries of union members.

Is it a conflict of interest for unions to effectively choose the people who sit on both sides of the bargaining table when contracts are negotiated? Is it appropriate for candidates to allow unions to fill their campaign coffers? Are taxpayers' interests being sacrificed by elected officials who are intent on re-election and willing to appease their funders at budget time?

The development industry also exerts its influence in county elections, specifically Council elections, since that is the body with authority to approve zoning laws and growth plans that can either increase or diminish the profitability of the industry.

In the 2010 elections, the debate over county growth policy took a back seat to concern over the effect of the national economic crisis on the county. But the debate over aggressive county growth versus a more reasonable rate of growth supported by adequate infrastructure is still one that can generate huge amounts of development industry influence in elections. It is not unusual for some Council candidates to receive more than 20 percent of their campaign funding from the development industry.

Is this why residents and impacted neighborhoods are relegated to a back seat when seeking to be involved in decisions about community growth plans? Is it a conflict of interest for a Council member to vote on a land use issue that would benefit a developer who has contributed richly to that Council member's campaign war-chest? Can we really believe Council members' indignant assertions that their votes on land use matters are not influenced by the development industry campaign contributions they have received?

In a democracy, the voting public is not considered a special interest. And participation in the electoral process is the surest way for citizens to negate the influence of special interests over elections and the functioning of government.

In this year's primary, an extremely low percentage of registered Montgomery voters cast ballots. It is entirely possible for unions and special interests to sway the results in an election with such a poor turn out, even without contributing much financial support to candidates.

The solution to taking back government for the people involves each voter deciding for themselves the issues of importance, evaluating candidates' platforms, making their choice, and then voting. So get out and vote on November 4.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com