

## New Campaign Financing Proposals - And Who They Benefit

by Susan Reefer

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Earlier this month, the New York City Campaign Finance Board released a series of proposals that would significantly reform the campaign finance system in New York City. The five-member board reviews the existing law at the end of each election cycle and then submits their proposed changes to the City Council. The council will hold hearings this month to discuss the board's recommendations, and ultimately, the council members will have the chance to vote on the resulting bill.

Of course, it's not quite as simple as it sounds. Almost immediately, the proposal was met with criticism and controversy. Mayor Michael Bloomberg objected to the package of proposals, saying the suggested changes were specifically aimed at helping Council Speaker Gifford Miller in his expected run for mayor in 2005.

The changes would result in a higher ratio of public matching funds to every dollar raised for those candidates who choose to participate in the public financing system. It is expected that Gifford Miller would participate in that system, while Mayor Bloomberg, with his vast personal fortune, will once again finance his own campaign. Bloomberg wouldn't benefit from any changes to this campaign finance law, but Miller could see his campaign war chest double overnight, to a new ceiling of \$17.2 million.

Mayor Bloomberg spent \$75 million in his self-financed campaign in 2001, in which he defeated Democrat Mark Green. Green spent roughly \$16 million, of which approximately one-fourth was publicly financed. The new law could increase the total financing for a candidate by more than half, and a special provision increases matching even further in races in which the opposing candidate doesn't agree to spending limits (that is to say, the millionaire self-financed candidates).

The law, which the board members indicated was intended to level the playing field, could be effective in doing just that, depending on what you mean by level playing field.

In order to have an equal shot in theory, both campaigns don't need the same amount of money. But they do both need enough money. And how much is enough? That's the tough question. In a city the size of New York, which also happens to be the most expensive media market in the country, the answer may be close to \$20 million. But once you have enough money, how big an advantage is it to have unlimited amounts of money?

Here's a recent example: The ballot proposal to end primary elections, which appeared on the ballot last month, was supported and heavily promoted by the mayor. He spent \$7.5 million of his personal fortune to try and ensure the passage of the nonpartisan election proposition. On the other hand, those who wanted to defend the existing system spent about one-tenth of that: \$800,000. A ten to one spending advantage for the "Yes" vote side, and yet the proposal was heavily defeated, 70 percent to 30 percent. If you work out the numbers, that means the mayor spent more than \$50 for every "Yes" vote, while the other side spent about \$2.40 for every "No" vote.

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Money is an advantage in campaigns, to be sure. Money allows you to communicate with millions of people, to employ staff to help organize and mobilize voters, to print literature and buy postage. You can't run a campaign without at least some limited resources. And to have a shot, there is a minimum amount that every campaign needs to have. Money is a necessity of a political campaign.

It is necessary. But it is not sufficient. Money in any amount is not enough to ensure victory. If both campaigns are funded to a certain threshold, if both campaigns have enough, then the playing field is even, if not exactly level.

The latest proposals, if passed into law, will help to define New York City as having some of the most far-reaching campaign financing in the country. And maybe that's a good a reason as any to support this legislation. After all, New Yorkers do like to be number one.

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