Does the Public Have to Fund Elections to Achieve Campaign Finance Reform?

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Bill Samuels, head of the New Roosevelt Initiative, wants campaign finance reform, and he wants it bad.

While other good government groups have their hopes set on a publicly funded campaign finance system that would be similar to New York City's, Samuels is a bit more flexible.

He notes that some legislators have objected to such a system because they don't think the state can afford to use tax revenues in that manner, others have objected that taxpayers won't want to see their money being used to finance the candidacies of people they don't agree with. (The Albany Times-Union reported last month that recent scandals may have derailed plans to push full public financing of state elections in a special session this year).

Samuels says that although he doesn't agree with them, he respects their opinion and thinks it may be time people stop harping on the 'public' part of campaign financing.

His New Roosevelt Institute is exploring a number of ways to alternatively fund campaigns so that candidates will be on equal ground.

So where else could the state get the cash to fund campaign finance system? "What about casino gambling?" asks Samuels.

He notes that the state constitution specifies how funds from the lottery and horse betting will be spent â€" lottery funds go to education while funds from horse racing will be spent on government operations. But, so far, the governor and legislative leaders have not said how proceeds from casino gambling that they are in the

process of legalizing
will be allocated.

Samuels has been pushing Gov. Andrew Cuomo to act on his long-expressed support for campaign finance reform. In July this year Samuels called on Cuomo to stop accepting corporate donations as a sign of his commitment to the issue but Cuomo did not.

"He is the captain, he gets to decide how it is done," Samuels said of Cuomo. "I'm the idea guy, I'm just giving him options." But Samuels says he think Cuomo could become a national hero if he achieves major campaign finance reform in New York.

After the bluster of the election season blows over, you can expect that a number of New York State legislators will be focused on campaign finance reform. A number of bills may be addressed in a long-rumored special session this winter.

While a complete overhaul of the state's campaign finance system may not be right around the bend, other fixes are described by a number of legislators as 'likely.' Such changes include lowering the maximum allowable donation from individuals to candidates for state-wide office and closing a loophole in the law that allows unlimited donations to party's housekeeping accounts â€" like Bloomberg's recently reported $1 million donation to Senate Republicans.

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