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COMMENTARY »

Removing contribution limits will improve the system

The current General Assembly has inherited a system of reporting and ethics laws that need to be updated. Today's contribution caps have failed in controlling the cost of elections on all levels in the state of Missouri. Regardless of the \$1,275 limit for statewide candidates, a governor's race has grown to costing millions of dollars today. Even more alarming is that in 2004, more than \$34 million was funneled into political party and legislative committees in Missouri.

These incredible amounts of money are being collected and spent, but we find it disheartening and unscrupulous that no one knows where all this money is coming from.

Every Missourian has the right to know how much money candidates are raising and where it's coming from. Democratic state Sen. Tim Green of St. Louis offered an amendment to remove the campaign contribution limits. Republicans and Democrats voted together to remove the limits to bring transparency to campaign financing, not to line their campaign pockets.

Removing the contribution limits, which will not take effect until 2007, will greatly diminish the role of these third-party committees. These committees currently funnel money to candidates in a legal form of money laundering. Millions of dollars are donated and directed to specific candidates and campaigns by moving through these committees, all behind the scenes. Now, candidates will be held accountable by the public, their opponents and the media when they accept any contributions, no matter the size, because it must be made to them directly.

Some have complained of a perceived loophole in the new law that would allow these committees to continue to support candidates through the use of in-kind donations. Some have said these in-kind contributions that could range from catering to advertising will be exploited. But the transparency put in place by ending the caps on campaign contribution limits will help prevent candidates from exploiting anything, including in-kind donations. If a candidate can raise an unlimited amount of money and instead has the majority of their campaign paid for by political party committees through in-kind donations, the media and public will know. They will ask questions. They will ask what the candidate is trying to hide and demand to know where the money is coming from.

The voter's right to know is the key to creating a campaign environment where the idea of candidates being bought will disappear. A "for sale" sign has not been put on the Capitol. We have given voters and the media the most important tool in helping voters determine the true character of a candidate. We have given them transparency and put the public's right to know whom a candidate accepts money from first. The candidate will be held accountable for taking large sums from people, companies or organizations that their constituents may not approve of. They will also be held accountable for accepting in-kind donations when they have a campaign account funded with unlimited contributions.

People believe, and they are right, that in the days before an election a lot of money is moving around and changing hands. The measure, House Bill 1900, requires candidates to file full disclosure reports electronically to end delays in uploading the information to the State Ethics

Commission's public Web site. In the 12 days leading up to an election, candidates will have to file campaign money reports every day listing any donations or expenses more than \$250. This way, the public will be able to follow that movement and know where campaign donations are coming from rather than reading about it in the paper after they have already cast their vote.

Candidates will also be banned from accepting contributions while the legislature is in session from January to May each year.

The measure also eliminates candidate leadership funds as well as puts an end to caucus spending that totaled more than \$300,000 last year.

This bill passed because it is a step in the right direction to reigning in the legal forms of campaign money laundering and hidden transactions that plague our elections today.

By combining the use of technology, the media's focus and the public's attention, it will bring transparency and accountability to every political race in Missouri.

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Senator Charlie Shields, R-St. Joseph, is majority floor leader in the Missouri Senate. This essay was co-written by Tom Dempsey, R-St. Charles, majority floor leader in the Missouri House of Representatives.