**Strengthening The People’s Voice**

In order to create a fair campaign finance system in which elections are contests of ideas and wealthy donors cannot drown out the voices of ordinary citizens, we must:

**Provide Clean Resources**
- Provide free media for qualified candidates. Providing free TV, radio, and mail to candidates who demonstrate public support would give grassroots candidates a chance to reach voters.
- Provide clean money options for candidates. Giving candidates the option of forgoing all private contributions and receiving limited amounts of full public financing will help them run without depending upon big money. We should start providing full public financing for the presidential elections and eventually extend this program to include congressional elections.
- Offer vouchers, refunds or tax credits for small political contributions. Encouraging more small contributors would magnify the voices of average Americans, enable candidates to run campaigns geared towards non-wealthy citizens, and provide a counterweight to large contributions.

**Level The Playing Field**
- Limit campaign spending. Elections should be contests of ideas, not battles for dollars. The use of personal wealth and large contributions in campaigns should be limited through mandatory spending caps so that no candidate has an unfair financial advantage.
- Lower contribution limits. Contribution limits should be set at a level that average Americans can afford. Given that only 0.09 percent of voting age Americans made a $1,000 contribution to a 2002 congressional candidate, we should dramatically lower contribution limits, not increase them as Congress did in the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act.
- Require in-district fundraising. Candidates should be required to raise all or most of their funds from the constituents they seek to represent.

The Campaign Finance Project

Large hard money contributions—only a fraction of the public can afford to make—unduly influence who runs for office and who wins elections in the U.S. As a result, successful candidates are more accountable to an elite donor pool than to the majority of their constituents.

The state PIRGs are working to reinvigorate our representative democracy by ensuring that ordinary citizens have equal opportunities for political participation.

By providing candidates with clean resources and leveling the playing field through limits on contributions and spending, we can create a system in which wealthy donors cannot drown out the voices of average Americans, and candidates win or lose elections on the strength of their ideas, not the power of their pocketbooks.

For more information, or to take action on this issue, visit www.pirg.org/democracy or call (202) 546-9707.

www.pirg.org/democracy
We pride ourselves on the idea that anyone can grow up to be president, or a member of Congress. But lately we’ve strayed far from Abraham Lincoln’s vision of a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” Aspiring federal candidates must either be wealthy themselves or appeal to the handful of wealthy donors who can afford to give large sums to their campaigns. Unfortunately, this emphasis on wealth means that a handful of contributors have undue influence over who runs for office and who wins elections. And that means that the candidates who make it to the Oval Office or the halls of Congress don’t necessarily represent the interests of average people. It’s little surprise, then, that public policy is often out of step with the needs and views of the American public.

### Wealthy Donors Decide Who Runs And Who Wins

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### The Biggest Fundraisers Win Elections

The candidate who raised the most money won his or her 2002 congressional election 94 percent of the time. The graph below shows the average amount raised by winning and losing candidates in the 2002 election cycle.

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<tr>
<th>Winning Candidates</th>
<th>Losing Candidates</th>
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<td>$1,308,270</td>
<td>$330,852</td>
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### But Fundraising Does Not Reflect Local Popular Support

If candidates were raising most of their money from average constituents, fundraising might not be such a corrupting influence on campaigns. The candidate with the most local grassroots support would tend to raise the most money—and win most elections.

In reality, however, most candidates depend upon the support of a small number of wealthy individuals who can afford to give large sums (see chart at left). A survey of 1996 congressional donors revealed that these wealthy donors held different political views than average Americans.

In addition, much of candidates’ financial support currently comes from outside the districts they intend to represent. Nearly two-thirds of 2002 House candidates’ fundraising came from outside their districts.

### The Wealth Primary

Through a “wealth primary,” candidates who cannot or will not appeal to wealthy donors are filtered from the field. Ultimately, the biggest fundraiser or spender usually wins the day.

“The first question I was asked was not about my experience or position on the issues, but ‘how much money do you have; how much money can you raise?’”

Victor Morales, schoolteacher, Crandall, Tex. city councilman—lost the 2002 U.S. Senate Democratic primary in a run-off. Morales forced the run-off and then lost 40 percent to 60 percent in spite of raising only $10,000 compared with his opponent’s $2.5 million.

“I was endorsed by the New York Times, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Star Ledger, every paper . . . I was ahead in virtually every poll until about five to six weeks out . . . by then his amazingly intense spending started to catch up. He outspent me eight-to-one.”

Diane Allen, New Jersey State Senator—lost 2002 U.S. Senate Republican primary to Doug Forrester, 44 percent to 37 percent.

### Large Hard Money Contributions Distort Our Democracy

The large donors responsible for much of the money raised by congressional candidates are not representative of the general population of the United States.

- A quarter of Congress are millionaires, compared with one percent of the U.S. population.
- Qualified, credible candidates are shut out of office; countless others choose not to run.
- Members of Congress are more accountable to a narrow pool of well-heeled donors than to the majority of their constituents.
- Voters and small contributors perceive their lack of meaningful influence on the process, and turn away.

More than half of all the funds that 2002 congressional candidates raised from individuals came in contributions of at least $1,000—from less than one-tenth of one percent of the voting age population.