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One of the unusual animals featured in the 1967 movie classic "Doctor Doolittle" was the Pushmi-Pullyu, a llama with a head on each end that wanted to walk in opposite directions at the same time. Thirty years later, the Pushmi-Pullyu has become the symbol of campaign finance reform efforts in Congress.

And unless voters across the country learn how to talk to this particular animal, the prospects of it moving toward real campaign finance reform any time soon are highly unlikely.

One head of the Push-Me/Pull-You is telling it to get big money out of the political process because as campaign spending escalates, so does the chase for special interest dollars.

The cost of running an average winning Senate campaign jumped from \$609,000 in 1976 to \$3.6 million in 1996, while the cost of running an average winning House campaign went from \$87,000 to more than \$661,000 during the same period.

Meanwhile, the White House has been accused of a series of campaign finance improprieties, as has the Republican chairman of the House committee investigating the Clinton administration's fund-raising.

There have been several serious proposals from members of both parties to reduce campaign spending. A reform plan offered by California Rep. Sam Farr, D-Monterey, which I support, would place a firm cap on campaign spending, political action committee contributions, individual donations and a candidate's use of personal funds.

It would eliminate "soft" money (i.e., open-ended contributions from corporations, labor unions and wealthy individuals to political parties) from campaigns.

Similarly, a plan offered by Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Russ Feingold, D-Wis., would ban unlimited soft money, eliminate or limit PAC contributions and offer free and discounted TV time to candidates who agree to follow voluntary spending limits.

There are efforts under way to merge these respective efforts in the House of Representatives.

On the other hand, the Push-Me/Pull-You is being beckoned by politicians who want to kill campaign finance reform altogether or make the current system even worse.

Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., went so far as to hold a news conference recently featuring special interest groups that want the money flow to continue unabated, including the Christian Coalition and the National Rifle Association.

Other opponents are trying to undermine reform by supporting legislation offered by California Rep. John Doolittle, R-Roseville, that would strengthen public disclosure requirements for contributions but repeal donation limits for individuals and PACs. This would allow big money donors to give as much as they want to candidates, parties and political committees.

As discouraging as the standoff may be, it should come as no surprise. One of Washington's dirty little secrets is that few incumbents are willing to overhaul a system that put them into office.

With a series of winks and nods, both parties have worked to keep campaign finance reform on hold. Even though reform legislation similar to the Farr plan was passed in the 101st, 102nd, and 103rd congresses, it never became law. A threatened GOP filibuster in the Senate killed reform in 1979.

President Bush vetoed reform in 1992.

House and Senate Democrats couldn't agree on a unified position in a timely manner two years later. The 104th Congress was marked by the desire of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., to get "far more money in the political system" and his failure to follow through on his promise to form a commission to reform the system.

This sad record indicates that if the process is going to be improved, reform must be demanded from outside of Washington. As one senator recently said, so many legislators have a vested interest in the fund-raising system that "you're not going to have campaign finance reform in America until Congress absolutely has to do it."

That means building pressure for change.

First, voters need to recognize that the problem of special interest money is not an abstract issue - it has a direct impact on their lives. Large contributions help determine whether or not we balance the budget, protect the environment, extend health care to children and provide our students with quality education.

Second, voters must put aside their cynicism about the political process and realize that their ballots, letters, phone calls and e-mails have an impact on the system and can help break the hold of special interest contributions.

Concerned citizens who believe the case for campaign finance reform is self-evident and will carry the day without their active participation are fooling themselves. If they have any knack for talking to political animals and want to see change, they need to make their voices heard.

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