



I logged on to an interesting new website a week or so ago. It had only been up for a day, but was already making news. Check it out - <http://unfluence.primate.net/index.html>. Or just Google it.

A Los Angeles Times poll reported that 53 percent of Californians believe their legislators are "taking bribes," two-thirds think "most state legislators are for sale to their largest campaign contributors," a large percentage believes "state government is pretty much run by a few big interests rather than for the benefit of all the people," and the average respondent thinks that nearly one-third of legislative and executive branch members attained their positions "by using unethical or illegal methods." And that doesn't even touch on national politicians.

Now we have a simple way to find out who's padding what politician's bankrolls. Some people call it bribery, but it's been made legal by those same folks, so I guess it's "legal bribery" of politicians.

Try it. Go to "UNFLUENCE" (that's like "non-influence"). Type in the name of any politician, and see where their funding comes from. Or check on a senate race, and see who paid which candidate's campaign costs (and maybe a little extra). It's a slick and easy way to follow the money, and understand why, when you talked to your senator or representative, they were unresponsive on certain issues, or why the legislature doesn't cut out the overlay of private insurance firms that double healthcare costs. And it makes it real clear why we need free candidate access to our airwaves. Almost every country in the world, except the USA, provides that to candidates.

In a political system set up so candidates have to pay huge fees to use the public airwaves (yes, remember, they ARE public), politicians can't get elected unless they sell their votes to folks with lots of money and lots to gain from favorable legislation. Candidates without big funding (now where would that come from?) don't have a chance. Which means we don't have a choice of candidates to vote on that can represent us. We get barraged for two years before an election on Presidential candidates, but local elections get virtually no coverage. Isn't it time to clean things up so we can have real elections and government instead of puppets for the greedy?

More than \$1.6 billion was spent on TV ads in 2004 by candidates, parties, and independent groups - double that spent in the 2000 elections. The pressure to raise money to pay for TV ads gives the playing field to "influenced" candidates, blocking entry to candidates just representing their communities. Broadcasters receive free licenses to operate on our publicly owned airwaves in exchange for a pledge to serve the public interest. Fair elections are a vital part of public interest. But, of course, the Feds have repealed the Fairness Doctrine, so media conglomerates can now pitch any of their buddies without equal time for others.

What control does a community or state have over use of public media? Our coastal TV comes from publicly licensed private repeaters in the State Park on Neahkahnie Mountain, from cable, and from satellite systems. The first two, at least, are supposedly under public control and a community can establish conditions for contracts requiring public candidate access and use of a "Fairness Doctrine".

Check out your local cable television franchise agreement, ordinances, and compliance. First, go to city hall and get a copy of the cable television franchise agreement. The critical information to look for is whether (1) the original franchise agreement included PEG (public, educational and governmental) access; (2) the terms or conditions for establishing PEG access; and (3) the expiration date of the current franchise agreement. See if any ordinances dealing with cable television or telecommunications have been approved since the agreement was signed. Are there any reports on how well the cable television operator has complied with the terms of the agreement?

Then it's time to start talking with local government officials about conditions for franchise renewal. WE can require we have the means to elect a truly representative government.

Oh, and about Unfluence. It received an award within a week of being set up, from the Sunshine Foundation, for making political finance information more visible and accessible. And one of the two designers graduated from Neahkahnie High School. Yep, and he grew up in our house.