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MAINE VOICES: Special-interest money poses hazard to everyone's health  
Adopting Maine's campaign finance laws at the federal level could give big money less of a say  
on health care reform.

**By NEIL ROLDE and MALORY SHAUGHNESSY**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

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A gold rush is on again in Washington, D.C.

Special-interest money flows freely into our nation's capitol, and campaign war chests overflow for key health care committee members. Health industry lobbyists have identified their targets and are using every arrow in their quivers to preserve the status quo.

Anyone who has pushed for health care reform in the last century will tell you this is nothing new. This same crowd showed up with their money in the 1930s to prevent Franklin Roosevelt from including some form of national health care in the Social Security legislation.

They stymied Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson as those presidents tried to insure all Americans against the cost of illness. Even Richard Nixon, who favored national health care, suffered their assault. And, of course, we all remember how Bill Clinton's effort to provide universal coverage to all Americans was taken down by Harry and Louise.

Faced with a serious national effort to solve America's health care problems, these staunch defenders of our health care mess are out again in frenzied force. Like a pack of famished vampires, these parasites threaten ...

Did we just say "famished vampires"? Pardon us for slipping into the over-the-top rhetoric that has so debased our national dialogue about reform. Conversation-stoppers about Hitler, "death panels" and parasites don't elevate the exchange, but they do draw attention away from the real questions. Besides cutting through this rhetoric, there is one thing we all need to keep an eye on – and that is the money.

Every American should look at who is paying whom in this debate. Spending to influence health care decisions is at the top of all lobbying expenditures. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, for the first half of this year, it was a whopping \$263.3 million. Before the year is out, the price tag could approach \$1 billion – paid for, in part, by your health care dollars.

Right now, for every lawmaker in Congress, there are six lobbyists pushing their health care priorities, according to a recent Bloomberg News report. That's about 3,300 registered health care lobbyists hoping to put a bug in the ear of 100 senators and 435 representatives.

Not surprisingly, Public Campaign Action Fund analysts found that federal lawmakers who voted against proposed reform legislation this year received 65 percent more in contributions from the health and insurance sectors than those who voted "yes" on the bills.

Will special interests and big money once again derail health care reform? Will fear-mongering ad campaigns effectively change the subject? Will targeted campaign contributions be deployed in order to tie political fortunes to the fortunes of the insurance industry?

If they do, the cost of health care and insurance will continue to climb, as will the number of uninsured. We will continue to spend twice what other developed nations spend while achieving worse outcomes by nearly every measure. Instead of using this historic opportunity to conduct a reasonable debate and enact forward-looking reforms, health care could fail because special-interest money spoke so loudly that it drowned out other voices.

It doesn't have to be that way. Here in Maine we have a fully constitutional public financing system for campaigns that has eliminated large private donations in state races, greatly reducing the influence of big money.

Eighty-five percent of the current Maine Legislature used the system in the last election. Lobbyists still lobby, but legislators don't worry about whether a particular vote could jeopardize donations to their re-election campaign. Constituents speak and are heard.

The system is popular with Maine candidates and voters – Republicans, Democrats and independents. It is a national model for congressional reform through the Fair Elections Now Act. Both Reps. Mike Michaud and Chellie Pingree have endorsed this bill to bring Maine-style reform to Washington. However, our two U.S. senators have not yet joined them.

Health care is not the only tricky issue we face. From climate change to soaring deficits, our ability to shape our collective destiny is tied to our ability to listen to one another, sort fact from fiction and make difficult decisions in the best interest of the American people.

If we have to change our campaign finance laws in order to make sound policy choices, then let's get busy on this fundamental reform.

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