

Let's End the Secret Money Arms Race

Katrina vanden Heuvel | May 15, 2011

The post-*Citizens United* drive for secret money is now a veritable arms race.

As a [New York Times editorial](#) [1] recently noted, Bill Burton, former White House deputy press secretary, is leading a group called Priorities USA to “raise unlimited money from undisclosed sources to aid in the president’s re-election campaign.

While I’m sympathetic to the notion that Democrats cannot afford to cede ground in these exorbitant, no-holds-barred campaigns—as one colleague put it, “You don’t fight with one hand tied behind your back”—this isn’t news to be welcomed by pro-democracy reformers. By accepting the same opaque money they are arguing against, the Democrats’ case for campaign finance reform becomes morally ambiguous at best.

Instead, Democrats could use this moment to seize the overwhelming bipartisan sentiment across this country that we need to [curb the influence of money](#) [2] in our elections—even [62 percent of Republican](#) [3] voters and 60 percent of Tea Partiers agree!

Democrats are already on record—unlike nearly every Republican—to make campaigns cleaner and more democratic. Whether supporting the [DISCLOSE Act](#) [4], [Fair Elections Now Act](#) [5], or [state clean election laws](#) [6], Democrats have demonstrated their commitment in rhetoric and votes. Some are even speaking out for a [constitutional amendment](#) [7] to overturn the *Citizens United* decision granting corporations the “right” to spend unlimited money influencing elections.

Yet leadership on public financing and clean elections needs to begin at the top. President Obama’s rhetoric has been tremendous on occasion—his campaign language, response to the *Citizens United* decision, statements on the DISCLOSE Act—but he could also do more to [forcibly push for the Fair Elections Now Act](#) [8], a [Presidential public financing fix](#) [9], and passing the DISCLOSE Act which was defeated by a Republican filibuster.

He could immediately draw a stark contrast between the parties by signing his [draft executive order](#) [10] requiring any company vying for a government contract to disclose details of its political giving. Not surprisingly, [the GOP](#) [11] and its gravy train (aka [Chamber of Commerce](#) [12]) have already [gone bonkers](#) [13] over this little bit of sunlight, calling it “pay-to-play”

politics, according to the Baltimore Sun. Seriously, let's keep those political gifts in the dark, that way everyone will know that corporations aren't receiving any favors in return. Say what?

This represents a canyon-wide opening for President Obama to drive home his original campaign message—remember that one—about changing the culture of Washington. Indeed the need and political opportunity for all Democrats to step up couldn't be clearer.

Across the nation, conservative courts, Republican legislatures, and corporate front groups are attempting to reverse hard-fought [pro-democracy gains](#) [14]. In Arizona, GOP legislative leaders and the Chamber of Commerce are pressing for a repeal of that state's effective clean elections law, despite the fact that [79 percent of Arizonans support it](#) [15]. In Maine, Republican Governor Paul LePage has gone after his state's [clean election law](#) [16]—attempting to defund it, repeal its use in gubernatorial races, and more than tripling the private contribution limit for gubernatorial candidates. (Here's hoping the 80 percent of Mainers who support the law have the last word.)

“The bottom line is that people want a political system that is responsive to their needs,” says Nick Nyhart, president and CEO of [Public Campaign](#) [17]. “Elected officials who stand in the way of that could pay a price down the line.”

The fight for campaign finance reform can't be separated from the fight to preserve collective bargaining rights, prevent restrictive voter ID laws, and protect an already tattered safety net from an onslaught of [pro-rich/anti-everyone else budgets](#) [18]. These fights are all about [power and voice](#) [19] in our democracy.

“Our country's biggest problems won't be solved for the many if the process is fixed by the money,” says Nyhart.

Instead of traveling down the worn path of pay-to-play politics with Republicans, Democrats—led by President Obama—should double-down on the high road. Most Americans are already there waiting for them.