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## Why Honorable People Avoid Politics

Supporters of campaign-finance "reform"—meaning, supporters of greater government financing and central planning of electoral campaigns—routinely lament the fact that politicians must raise large sums of money to run for office. This requirement not only risks making elected officials indebted to the interest groups that fund their campaigns, but it also is said to dissuade honorable people from pursuing political office. Even George Melloan of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote (in the August 4, 1998, edition of that newspaper) that "[s]ome very capable persons who would make admirable public servants are turned off by this requirement" to "spend a great deal of time with begging bowl in hand."

Melloan is wrong.

First and least importantly, describing politicians as public servants is inaccurate. Does anyone really believe that the typical politician seeks office, not to enjoy the fame and career opportunities afforded by elected office, but mainly to help the public? Call me cynical, but I rank such a belief on an intellectual par with belief in levitating swamis and in messages sent from the beyond by Princess Di.

Second, politicians don't beg for money; they sell a service—namely, use of govern-

ment's coercive power to achieve for interest groups what these groups cannot or will not achieve peacefully on the market. A politician seeking office gets his funds by begging no more than an accountant or an architect gets *his* funds by begging. Like the accountant and architect, the politician offers a *quid pro quo* in exchange for campaign contributions. The difference, of course, is that the *quid pro quo* supplied by the accountant or architect—unlike that supplied by most politicians—isn't a promise to reduce the liberties or confiscate the wealth of innocent third parties.

Third, and very importantly, raising funds is commonplace in reality and not (as proponents of campaign-finance "reform" insinuate) unique to electoral politics. As FEE's president, I raise funds by convincing contributors that monies given to FEE will be used wisely to promote a free society. The same is true for fund-raisers at the Cato Institute, the Reason Foundation, and other free-market organizations. The president of General Motors raises funds whenever his firm borrows money, issues new stock, or sells any of its automobiles. Banks raise funds by offering attractive interest rates to depositors. Novell raises funds by developing and selling software.

In a very real way, the entire commercial

society is one immense fund-raising enterprise. The particular *means* of fund raising differ from enterprise to enterprise, just as the specific purposes for which these funds are raised differ from enterprise to enterprise. But everyone who makes a living in the market must persuade others voluntarily to part with some of their money.

Politicians, however, don't make their livings in the market. They are in the coercion business and, as such, are unaccustomed to the voluntary nature of peaceful market relationships. Their salaries are paid out of funds forcibly extracted from taxpayers, and their careers are spent drafting and debating prospective statutes that diminish the freedoms of innocent people.

In general, the kinds of men and women attracted to politics are precisely the kinds of men and women who disdain the reciprocities required for success in the market. Market relationships are inherently co-equal: Because I can buy my car from Toyota or Ford, General Motors has no power over me. When I walk into an automobile dealership (or a supermarket, or a department store, or a restaurant, or a bank, or a brokerage firm, or a hardware store, or *any* private firm that enjoys no government privileges) I walk into an establishment that has no power to coerce me. The consequence is that the owners of that establishment treat me with respect, for if they don't, I spend my money elsewhere.

In contrast, I have no real choice but to obey whatever commands are dictated to me by politicians. Any class of people accustomed to issuing commands that are enforced with threats of coercion is a class of people who regard as degrading any need on their part to resort to persuasion rather than force as a means of getting what they want.

The need to raise campaign funds is one of the few areas of a politician's life where he must actually persuade others *voluntarily* to give to him; he cannot (yet) steal these funds. Is it any wonder, then, that many in the political class are attempting to use government to spare them the necessity of hawking for campaign funds?

I am, therefore, unpersuaded by the argument that honorable people are dis-

suaded from pursuing political office because of the need to raise campaign funds. Again, honorable people raise funds *all the time*. More likely, honorable people steer clear of politics for the following two reasons. The first is that honorable people have no taste for minding other people's business or for living off of the fruits of other people's earnings. Nor do honorable people enjoy the kinds of public attention given to politicians.

H.L. Mencken was exactly correct when he observed that "[t]he typical politician is not only a rascal but also a jackass, so he greatly values the puerile notoriety and adulation that sensible men try to avoid."

The second reason that honorable people avoid politics is that they could not stomach having to utter all that politicians must utter to win office. Judging from modern American practice, successful pursuit and maintenance of political office require the utterance of an unending stream of statements that are silly, vapid, or false. No honorable man or woman would say to an audience of millions "I feel your pain" or "I didn't inhale" or any of the countless other lunacies that spew daily from the mouths of politicians of every party.

Honorable people value their reputations and their integrity too highly to sacrifice these for the dubious distinction of elected office. Again, Mencken saw matters clearly.

He is willing to embrace any issue, however idiotic, that will get him votes, and he is willing to sacrifice any principle, however sound, that will lose them for him. I do not describe the democratic politician at his inordinate worst; I describe him as he is encountered in the full sunshine of normalcy.

Honorable people avoid political careers not because of the need to raise funds. Rather, honorable people avoid politics because they are revolted by the prospect of behaving indecently.



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