

Money trail: Donors' influence on candidates' views

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 20, 2007](#) issue

Former Iowa governor Tom Vilsack has abandoned his quest for the presidency because he could not raise sufficient funds. His departure is yet another strong argument for campaign finance reform.

Usually governors do well in early primaries. But this year, with large and expensive-to-run-in states like Florida, California and Illinois moving their primaries to February 2008, private donors and special-interest money will control the outcome. Leading Democratic candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are both expected to reject public funding in order to be able to raise and spend unlimited private money.

Senators have an advantage over governors in fund-raising because they are in a better position to build a national base. But dependence on that base has its disadvantages. Senators cast many votes on national and international issues, and special-interest donors monitor every vote, from subcommittee to committee through to final legislation or resolution.

The 2002 Iraq war vote was especially difficult for senators contemplating a future presidential run. Senator Clinton, as the most visible example, had to balance demands from constituents who opposed the war with demands from those who supported it, including pro-Israel groups that backed the war because they saw Iraq as a threat to Israel's security. Antiwar forces have a passion for peace, but they don't have deep pockets.

Now Senator Clinton's pro-war vote is haunting her. She is constantly asked to apologize for it. The political problem she faces is that an apology would offend a major funding source. "Knowing what we know now, I would never have voted for it" is a reasonable explanation, but it does not fit on a bumper sticker.

Both Obama and Clinton are in hot pursuit of special-interest money, and the race has prompted a nasty public spat. Three cofounders of Dreamworks, a film industry

giant, surprised the Clinton camp by holding a fund-raiser for Obama, who is a new senator with a short voting record, but also a charismatic speaker who's emerged as a "rock star" in the political firmament.

Dreamworks executives Steven Spielberg, David Geffen and Jeffrey Katzenberg, all previous supporters of both Bill and Hillary Clinton, raised \$1.3 million for Obama one night in mid-February. This was more than Tom Vilsack raised in his entire campaign.

Geffen, who had previously raised \$18 million for the Clintons, has not only abandoned the Clintons, he has trashed them. In an interview with *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, Geffen said: "God knows, is there anybody more ambitious than Hillary Clinton? . . . Obama is inspirational, and he's not from the Bush royal family or the Clinton royal family."

The Clinton camp fired back: "If Senator Obama is indeed sincere about his repeated claims to change the tone of our politics, he should immediately denounce these remarks, remove Mr. Geffen from his campaign and return his money."

Both Obama and Clinton are competing for financial support from Jewish donors, who, according to the Jewish publication *Forward*, will provide "about half the donations given to national Democratic candidates" in this election campaign. The *Forward* also reports that Senator Clinton expects to retain her support from that community.

Senator Clinton has worked hard to earn it. On a November 2005 trip to Israel, for example, she stood inside the Israeli settlement of Gilo and said that the "fence" (her word) "is not against the Palestinian people," it is only against the terrorists. In photos she is gazing at the 25-foot wall, as if she either does not know or does not care that the wall is an object of scorn around the world, clearly illegal and a terrible burden for all Palestinians.

On the home funding front, insurance and pharmaceutical companies are able to exert heavy influence on presidential politics. In an essay attacking that community's grip on Congress and the White House, Kevin Drum called on Democratic politicians to work for a simple single-payer national health care plan as both fair and economical (*Washington Monthly* blog, March 7, 2006.)

Drum suspects that Democratic candidates with White House aspirations know “that a simple single-payer national health care plan is the best policy. But for tactical political reasons, they think it’s more effective to talk about incremental solutions.” Representative Dennis Kucinich (D., Ohio) is the only presidential candidate supporting the single-payer plan.

On April 15, presidential candidates will file their campaign financial reports with the Federal Election Commission. That is also Tax Day, and it would be a good time to “vote” for public financing of presidential elections by shifting \$3 of one’s tax money from the general budget to the federal election fund. In 1976, 28 percent of tax submitters checked the election box; in recent years the total has dropped to 11 percent. With privately funded presidential campaigns expected to raise \$100 million, this is a good year to reverse that trend.