

May the Loudest Bullhorn Win!

Written by Alex Baer

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Unlike mega-rich civilian consumers, political winners are not declared by virtue of having the most toys at the end of the game. The winners of political contests are the ones who have won and scraped up the most mountains of money, enabling them to buy the loudest-possible doomsday-bullhorns that money can buy. The winners are those who can blow out the most voter-eardrums, banging away at the message they choose to endless flay and beat out on their campaign war drums.

So, yes, strictly speaking: We manage to get the best politicians money can buy, via candidates who can bide their time long enough, then make the most media purchases and advertising air-time buys. Money poisons anything and everyone it touches throughout politics, and it's amazing anyone lives long enough to actually serve in office, to live through the poisonous process of simply getting the job.

Before trying to solve any problem, it's first helpful to be somewhat aware, up on the details of the actual problem, plus, it saves the embarrassment of bringing swim fins to a rugby match, or hauling a home-made birthday cake to -- *oops!* -- someone's baby shower.

NPR has done a stellar job of explaining the real rules of the game in which we all find ourselves, bringing a level-headed clarity to our communal urge to playfully strangle something, having been constantly reminded of the endlessly long road in current election cycles, enduring a passel of right-wing, talking-point cheerleaders who are far more interested in their uniform tassels than in the hassle of discussing actual topics and ideas.

The time it takes to run through NPR's overview is pretty minimal, especially if you consider it a small down-payment on understanding **anything** that happens in America at any time in the future. It's enjoyable listening and reading and scanning, too -- everything is explained simply and confidently -- with a couple of NPR teams combining forces.

One of the teams is from "Planet Money," the people who helped provide sane, clear explanations when the economy was teetering no so long ago, able to tell us what was happening, and what would or might happen next. The main team is from "This American Life," and their episode, available online, free, is called, "Take the Money and Run for Office."

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You won't believe what you will hear. It is balanced with interviews from, yes, *both sides of the aisle*, and includes Senators John McCain and Russ Feingold, to name just two of the speakers. It's best to forget everything you think you know about how this stuff works, running for office, and just plug in to this show. It is solid reporting from these guides, taking us through some eye-opening days, showing the ways the game is actually played.

It is sure-footed, solid, informational, even entertaining -- a confident companion for these times, like having Einstein along for your big test on the multiplication tables. These snippets are sleepers in the sense they will unexpectedly *wow* you, not in the sense they will let you drift off for a snooze. If anything, after hearing the reports, you may be up all night, wondering why we put candidates and voters through this incredibly tortured process.

You, like me, are probably not a defender of politicians, but you may be on their side before we are done. You will want to be on your own side, too -- wanting to get this crazy merry-go-round fixed, make it stop dragging voters and candidates on the ground, around and around, caught by their hands and their heels.

Example: Your representatives moonlight as telemarketers, NPR notes, making pleas for donations to possible supporters, just so they can afford to stay politically alive, maybe run again.

Take a moment to be thunderstruck: In whatever work it is that you do, a question for you here: How would you enjoy adding on three extra hours every day -- seven days a week -- trying to raise thousands of dollars, again, every day, *just so you could stay in that job that you already have?*

That monetary pressure is also added on to the opportunity cost, a real loss -- every hour a politician must be on the phone shaking the money tree to afford staying in the job, is an hour that same politician is *not able to tend to official business representing you and me*. Guess which task wins, more often than not.

You'll also hear about politicians chasing lobbyists around, not vice-versa, and how the "Citizens United" decision affects the gushing geysers of money sloshing around in the system,

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and how the decision has scarred and permanently changed the political landscape.

There are stunning statistics along the way, too -- stuff that will cause calluses on your forehead from slapping it so much in stunned disbelief. *Here's one:* In a world where your savings account is lucky to get one percent interest, and where scammer Bernie Madoff promised his suckers ten percent, lobbyists get a de facto return on "investment dollars" spent with politicians of about *22-thousand percent.*

You will also hear about the power of not spending even one cent -- simply by being a mega-bully in the political playground, strutting around, making end-of-recess threats to politicians. It's an interesting twist on the old insurance scam: *It would be a real shame to see anything happen to such a nice campaign you got here, know what I mean?*

Even closer to home, it's a twist on politicians who threaten filibuster obstruction -- then are left to go about their business, no need to back up that threat: somehow, just the threat is enough.

Since we are all stuck in this crazed quagmire and oozing swamp together, it is an excellent time to learn more about the nature of our trauma, *to see what condition our condition is in.*

And, good luck explaining to yourself, or to anyone else, why it is we put up with a system that demands constant poisoning by money, demands live sacrifice until everyone's brain-dead, demands Colosseum-style battles promising all participants a pummeling and poleaxing -- no escapees allowed, and, no prisoners taken.

Episode: <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/461/take-the-money-and-run-for-office>

Abridged tale, plus, a bunch of amazing charts: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2012/03/26/149390968/take-the-money-and-run-for-office>

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Telemarketers-by-night: <http://www.npr.org/blogs/money/2012/03/30/149648666/senator-by-day-telemarketer-by-night>