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## **D.C. campaign finance reform, or cynical politics?**

**By Bradley A. Smith**

*Washington Examiner*

Published August 30, 2012

D.C. Mayor Vincent Gray, as he rolls out his long-promised campaign finance reform plan this week, exemplifies why so many outside the beltway distrust D.C. politicians. The cynicism in the timing of such a plan is hard to miss, coming shortly after three members of Gray's 2010 campaign against Adrian Fenty pleaded guilty to federal charges that they ran a \$650,000-plus illegal shadow campaign to guarantee Gray's win over Fenty in 2010.

It's no wonder citizens view D.C. through much the same lens as they view Chicago and New Orleans: rank with corruption. And the oldest trick in the professional pol's playbook is to call for reform after being caught up in a corruption scandal.

It is suspected that Gray, for example, employed campaign staffers who destroyed evidence and made illegal campaign contributions to a mayoral candidate simply so that candidate would remain in the race and attack Gray's rival, former Mayor Adrian Fenty. Other charges include the Gray campaign's acceptance of illegal in-kind help and campaign paraphernalia from a shadow campaign, allegedly funded by a local businessman who feared Fenty's policy direction. Gray's campaign treasurer is the latest former staffer to plead guilty.

After Gray's aides were found guilty of violating campaign laws on the books, Gray produced a reform package that would prohibit previously lawful political activity by citizens. Perhaps most galling is that all of this will be done to restore public trust in the very electoral process that Gray's campaign dishonored.

Allison Hayward, of the Center for Competitive Politics, suggests that reformers like Gray, rather than repeating the old canard that the "progress" of reform is what really matters, should bring up the novel question of whether or not these reforms actually work. Do they clean up the political process? Do they create better governance that tangibly benefits the citizenry? Or do they simply further empower the politicians who enact them by making it harder for ordinary citizens to participate in politics? In fact, there is no evidence that these laws lead to better government. There is plenty of evidence that they entrench incumbents in office and benefit the powerful and elite who can hire the lawyers, accountants and lobbyists to navigate them.

This type of cynical politics -- claiming redemption for the scandals of one's own administration by adopting the mantle of "reform" -- was already tiresome long ago. Yet for nearly four decades now, it has often worked, perhaps because a credulous press is always prepared to give the benefit of a doubt to "campaign finance reform" -- reform, which, not coincidentally, increases the political influence not only of politicians but of the press by restricting the rights of others to participate directly in political debate.

But if it is bad for politicians to behave cynically, it might be good for citizens to view with just as much cynicism such proposals to increase government power over political debate. Mayor Gray of the great transgressing campaign has donned the mantle of reform to save us all from himself. So which side will win -- the politicians' cynical view of the electorate as dullards, or the healthy cynicism of the public regarding the "ethics" and "reform" proposals of a scandal-plagued incumbent?

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