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Today's debate: Politics and special interests

Favor-seeking donors score with convention 'hosts'

Our view:

Law fails to limit corporate donations to local committees.

When Republicans launch the political-convention season this weekend in Philadelphia, the big-money interests will be out in force, as they will for the Democrats in Los Angeles two weeks later.

Major corporations such as AT&T, General Motors and Microsoft are each contributing \$2 million or more to help defray costs at the conventions. Dozens of other big names are writing six-figure checks ostensibly to help smooth the way of democracy and make sure the delegates have a good time.

In return, they get access to political decision makers, from whom they hope to extract favors: tax breaks, subsidies, a sweetheart program to sell more of their products, or a special regulatory break. It's a moment when the seaminess of the nation's campaign-finance system is put on public display.

Less visible are the potential payoffs:

► GM and other automakers, for example, want to reverse the House's vote to take away half of their \$250-million subsidy for working on fuel-efficient cars they can sell.

► Microsoft Corp., hit by two costly antitrust cases in recent years for its unfair business tactics, would dearly love to get Washington to call off the dogs.

► AT&T, reinventing itself as a telecommunications and cable giant, is anxious to get the new electronic playing field tilted in its direction and against competitors.

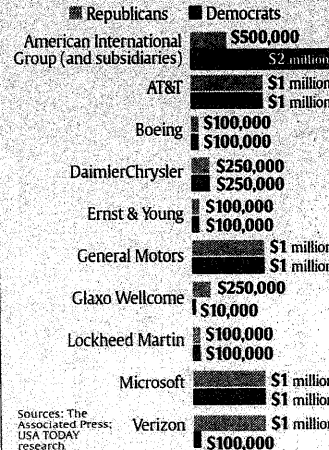
► American International Group, which profits handsomely from a questionable program of government insurance for U.S. businesses abroad, is throwing \$2 million at the Democrats alone, plus \$500,000 for the GOP.

The high-priced convention game represents another end run around the laws designed to keep special-interest money out of politics. Direct corporate contributions to political campaigns were outlawed in 1907; union contributions in 1947.

Among the reforms after the Watergate scandals, which were fueled with tainted money, Congress voted to pay for the nominating conventions with public funds. Each party is getting \$13.5 million in tax dollars this year, which sounds like more than enough to rent a hall and hire a band, even

Firms invest in political clout

Among the major donors to the national party convention host committees:



Sources: The Associated Press; USA TODAY research

By Quan Tian, USA TODAY

for a national convention.

But the Federal Election Commission, controlled by party appointees, allows an exception for donations to convention "host committees." The idea: Locals will help underwrite events to boost the city's image.

With no controls on what host committees can collect, their donor lists are studded with national and international corporations. Atlanta-based United Parcel Service is one of the top contributors to the Los Angeles convention; Nebraska-based Union Pacific is among the biggies at Philadelphia.

Like the "soft money" loophole created to pay for party posters and get-out-the-vote calls, the "host committee" gimmick has become one more shameless way for special interests to purchase favor — and for politicians to milk those over whom they have power.

Instead of repealing the laws making corporate and union contributions illegal, politicians have just rendered them unenforceable. Until an outraged public demands anti-corruption laws that work — particularly public financing of campaigns — the conventions will remain one more unseemly element in the sad public image of a democratic process up for auction to the highest bidders.

Give delegates a break

Opposing view:

Corporations merely spread goodwill among convention loyalists.

By William Hamilton

Under the First Amendment, corporations and their shareholders have a perfect right to help make our national party conventions more interesting, more enjoyable for the delegates and more likely to attract media attention. So, where's the harm when corporate donors give to support the national conventions of both major political parties?

There was a time when our national political conventions held the nation in thrall

coverage. The delegates would get more sleep. C-SPAN would provide its usual outstanding coverage, but the national audience would shrink even more than it has already.

Some people are being paid off: the unpaid party workers. When I was executive director of a state political party, I marveled that party activists, most of them of modest means, would pay their own travel, hotel and lodging and give up entire weekends to attend meetings of our state central committee. Mostly, they did it out of patriotism. But they also stood a chance of being elected to attend the national party convention.

Oh, to be wined and dined and treated like royalty! Maybe Mabel from Milwaukee will choose to buy a Chevy because the company



Hispanics wei

USA TODAY's article, "Bush battles GOP image in Calif.," reveals the crucial role the fast-growing Hispanic population will play in this country's upcoming elections (News, July 6).

Both Vice President Gore and Gov. George W. Bush have gone to great lengths to "reach out" to the Latino population by way of advertisements spoken in Spanish, the odd Spanish phrase dropped by each candidate before a Latino audience, proposed platform provisions and a slew of campaign promises targeting this potential, crucial swing vote.

Bush and Gore may be engaging in the

Quit coddling military recruits

It's imperative that U.S. military leaders hold the line on tough recruiting and training standards. The Army's new policy of "insist and assist" must "desist" before we transform our forces into an ineffective paramilitary employment agency ("This isn't your father's boot camp anymore," Cover Story, News, Wednesday).

In my 12 years of active service, I have found that most of the young men and women whom we deride as lazy "gen-Xers" generally yearn for the discipline, values and ethics the military offers — principles they may have been denied while growing up in our self-gratifying society.

They need to be challenged, not only because most secretly want to be, but also because combat won't grant them the opportunity to "train at a gentler pace." The technical schools they will attend following basic training are expensive, further validating the requirement to screen subpar performers early on.

The key to recruiting and retaining quality people in an all-volunteer force is to increase basic pay and reduce time away from home — not to lower training standards. "Effort" alone is not good enough during boot camp — the stakes are too high after graduation.

We need results.

Maj. Matt Green
U.S. Marine Corps
Oceanside, Calif.

Bring back the draft

So, the military is finally moving into the 21st century and giving these kids a chance to complete basic training satisfactorily at their own pace rather than the

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