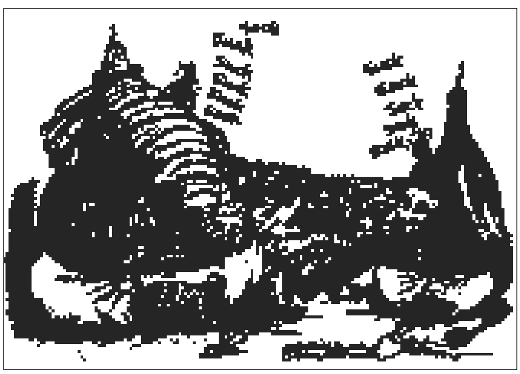
Lifeblood of the Parties

"One Cheer for Soft Money" by Steven E. Schier, in *The Washington Monthly* (July–Aug. 2000), 1611 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Almost no one this election year has a good word to say about unregulated "soft money," that supposedly corrupting sort of moolah that corporations, unions, and individuals are allowed to pour into the coffers of political parties in unlimited amounts. State and local parties then are allowed to use the money only for "election-related activities," including "issue-advocacy" ads, but not (wink, wink) to advance the victory or defeat of individual candidates. Senator John McCain (R.-Ariz.) and other campaign finance reformers urge a complete ban on soft money. But Schier, a political scientist at Carleton College, argues that that would be going too far: Mend it, don't end it.

Yes, he agrees, *unlimited* soft-money contributions to parties should not be permitted, in order to avoid the appearance of corruption. But the attack on soft money is also an attack on political parties, he argues. And these crucial, already-weakened institutions need to be well funded if their electoral role is not to be further diminished.



Unregulated "soft money" is easy to criticize, but funds are needed to strengthen the parties.

Strong political parties perform "vital services for our democracy," Schier maintains. By simplifying and clarifying the voting choice, they encourage broad electoral participation, which is needed, he says, to make those elected more inclined to serve the common interest.

As partisan allegiance to parties has decreased in recent decades, and voter turnout has declined, interest groups have gained members and multiplied, Schier notes, and lawmakers have become more responsive to them. Strong, well-funded political parties can serve as "a 'buffer' between campaign contributions and the government officials those contributions seek to influence. The trick is to keep the money from [going] in such large quantities to parties that the buffer virtually disappears, as it has at present."

He would cap currently unregulated soft-money contributions to political parties at, say, $60,000 a year per contributor. And while keeping the current low limits on "hard-money" contributions to candidates, he would raise "considerably" the limits on hard-money contributions to parties (upping, for instance, the current $20,000-a-year maximum for individuals to $50,000 a year). Doing this, Schier believes, would help "to make our elections more about parties and their philosophies and less about individual candidates and their personalities." He also favors giving national and state parties large blocks of free TV airtime to boost their candidates, and would keep issue advocacy ads by corporations and unions off the air during election seasons. If campaign finance reformers "want robust campaigns and high turnout," Schier says, "they need to learn how to love political parties, not destroy them."

Initiatives for Sale?

"Ballot Boxing" by John Maggs, in *National Journal* (July 1, 2000), 1501 M St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

Ever since Proposition 13, the controversial tax-cutting measure that California voters approved in 1978, ballot initiatives have been the rage. All sorts of hot potatoes, from affirmative action to assisted suicide, have been tossed to voters in the 24 states that allow initiatives. In