



The Cash Ceiling

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Could you raise \$650,000 by next summer?

If your answer is "probably not," you probably won't be running for the House of Representatives in 2014. Last year, House candidates had to raise [an average of \\$650,000](#) to finance their campaigns.

They aren't alone. In the Senate, the average was almost \$3 million. The 16 major candidates for the presidency raised an average of \$85 million. Even state and local races have become high-dollar affairs. Here in North Carolina, the average candidate for our state's "citizen legislature" had to raise \$57,000 to run in 2012.

As election costs shoot into the stratosphere, a new glass ceiling has emerged in politics: a Cash Ceiling. Running for office is too expensive — and therefore off-limits — for the vast majority of Americans. The space on our ballots is becoming the exclusive turf of the wealthy and the well-connected.

People who care about money in politics pay a lot of attention to how big money influences the outcomes of elections and [the choices politicians make](#). They should also be asking how big money influences *who runs* in elections and *who becomes* a politician.

Today, millionaires control [all three branches](#) of the federal government: they have a majority in the House, a filibuster-proof supermajority in the Senate, a 5-4 majority on the Supreme Court, and a man in the White House. Meanwhile, working-class jobs — manual labor and service-industry positions — make up a majority of our labor force, but people from those kinds of jobs make up less than 2% of Congress. The [effects on economic policy](#) are enormous. As I show in [my forthcoming book](#), social safety net programs are stingier, business regulations are flimsier, protections for workers are weaker, and tax policies are better for the rich when we let wealthy professionals call the shots.

Of course, [even back when elections were cheap](#) by today's standards, there still weren't many working-class people in office. But skyrocketing campaign costs have added another serious hurdle. When [Edward P. Beard](#) — the house-painter-turned-congressman who founded the short-lived [House Blue Collar Caucus](#) — first ran for Congress in 1974, he struggled to raise the \$900 he spent on his campaign. If elections back then had cost what they do now, he wouldn't have stood a chance. Big money is making the path to political office — which was always difficult for most citizens — virtually impossible.

But the Cash Ceiling isn't invincible. In the last decade, reformers have started developing models to recruit middle- and working-class candidates and to help them raise the money to campaign. In New Jersey, the AFL-CIO runs a [Labor Candidates School](#); its graduates have won more than 700 state and local races. In Oregon, unions and activists recently founded a similar program. More are in the works in places like New York and Las Vegas.

Programs like these are some of the most promising new directions in the fight for political equality. If we're ever going to get a handle on money in politics, we have to start thinking about more than just how money can influence the outcome of an election or how campaign donors can sway politicians. The rich aren't just financing our campaigns, they're *running* in them; the wealthy aren't just lobbying politicians, they *are* the politicians. If we want our government to be more responsive to the needs of middle- and working-class Americans, we're going to have to break this Cash Ceiling.