

Rob Roper's partisan rant notwithstanding, Vermont legislators deserve credit for doing their homework, listening to their constituents and passing a bill to re-establish reasonable limits on campaign donations from individuals, corporations, PACs and political parties this year.

It's unfortunate that Mr. Roper resorted to personal attack and political distortion in his defense of Governor Douglas' veto of the bill. To be fair, it would be difficult for anyone to defend the governor's position on the merits. To understand why, it's useful to know what the legislation would have done.

First, legislators determined that it was important for Vermont to have some limits on the size of political contributions so that no one could gain inordinate influence over our elected leaders. They understood that contribution limits also help to ensure that the voices of the majority of Vermonters who give no money at all to candidates are not drowned out by the few who can afford to give large contributions.

The Vermont bill vetoed by Douglas would have allowed primary and general election contributions to total \$2,000 for gubernatorial candidates; \$1,500 for other statewide candidates; \$1,000 for state Senate candidates; and \$500 for House candidates.

An analysis of some of the most hotly contested House and Senate races in 2006 found that even when the contribution limits were considerably higher than those that would be allowed under the vetoed bill very few people actually gave more than \$500 to a House candidate or \$1,000 to a Senate candidate. This shows that few people would be inconvenienced by these reasonable limits and that they allow challengers to mount competitive races.

Indeed, data from Vermont and around the country prove that contribution limits make elections more competitive, which is a good thing for folks who enjoy having a real choice when they enter the voting booth. For instance, more incumbents lost in Vermont House races run under the strict contribution limits in place from 2000 to 2004 than in races run before or since.

A national study of 57 gubernatorial election cycles from 1990 to 2000 in 41 states released last year provides further support for contribution limits. The data show not only that contribution limits do not hurt challengers but that they actually benefit them by decreasing the influence of PACs, corporations and labor unions that are most likely to give in order to gain political influence over whomever is elected.

Unfortunately, Gov. Douglas was either unaware of these facts when he vetoed the bill, or he intentionally misrepresented the truth. In his veto message he incorrectly stated that "The proposed individual and party contribution limits extend a form of political protection to incumbents, establish an unfair and nearly insurmountable obstacle for challengers and would be a particular

disadvantage to those of modest means who are unable to fund their own campaigns.”

Why would Douglas and Roper want to stand up for special interest influence in this way? One answer might be that they believe the best defense is a good offense.

With a roster board of scandals reading like a who’s who list of Republican power brokers in Washington – Jack Abramoff, Duke Cunningham, Bob Ney, Ted Stevens, etc. – perhaps the governor felt it best to go on the offense against a simple plan to help prevent such corruption here.

More likely, however, the governor was merely looking out for his own self interest. In his 2002 race for governor against Doug Racine, Jim Douglas collected more than \$630,000 from one source – the Republican Party. That was over half of what Douglas spent to get elected that year.

The bill that the governor vetoed this summer would have limited the state and national Republican Party to giving no more than \$60,000 to his next gubernatorial campaign. This struck most members of the Legislature as a reasonable level of influence for political parties to have in Vermont.

After all, who is it that gives those huge contributions to the political parties so that they can spread it around to their favorite candidates? The Center for Responsive Politics reports that in 2002, the year the national Republican Party gave so much money to Jim Douglas, they took in more than \$14 million from the pharmaceutical industry, another \$14 million from the insurance industry, more than \$10 million from the oil and gas lobby, almost \$7 million from electric utilities and \$5 million from casinos and gambling interests. Is this who we want influencing the outcome of elections in Vermont?

It’s worth noting that VPIRG did support the legislation that passed in 1997 that limited not only contributions but also candidate expenditures in Vermont. We still believe that that’s the best way to ensure that elections are decided based on the merit of the candidates’ ideas rather than the size of their wallets. And recent national surveys suggest that nearly 9 out of 10 people support spending limits.

But in a huge victory for special interest lobbyists across the land, the Supreme Court decided the public’s opinion does not matter and they sided with the Republican Party and the Vermont Right to Life Committee, among others. The Court did not, however, say that states are prohibited from establishing limits on contributions. They even gave some guidelines on how to do it. And Vermont legislators followed those guidelines every step of the way in crafting this year’s bill.

So, will the Party of Douglas and Roper sue Vermont once again to protect special interests and the very rich if the Legislature passes new limits next year? If they do, they will almost certainly lose, but they will have no one but themselves to blame.