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Commentary: Anonymous campaign donations

KAI RYSSDAL, anchor: Those millions don't usually come without some expectation of political favors, but what if candidates didn't know where their money was coming from? Chile recently passed a law making it harder for political candidates there to track their campaign donations, and commentator Ian Ayres says it is high time the US did the same.

IAN AYRES:

The system of anonymous ballots, which we began just 100 years ago, stopped brazen buying of votes in its tracks. Politicians wouldn't pay because they couldn't be sure how someone voted. Now we should make political contributions anonymous, too. Just like anonymous voting makes it harder for candidates to buy votes, anonymous donations would make it harder for candidates to sell influence.

The system can work like this: We set up a blind trust that passes donated money to candidates without the list of contributors. A contributor could still claim to have given money to a particular candidate, but in a world with donation booths, talk is cheap. Candidates will probably hear lots of talk of contributions, but they'll see far fewer dollars actually coming in. Candidates would quickly figure out their influence-peddling days are over, because they wouldn't know who really donated and who didn't. Just think, politicians would have to decide issues on the merits.

Still think a system of anonymous contributions would never fly in the United States? Well, it already has. Ten states have required the judicial candidates running for election not be told the names of their contributors. Kind of a no-brainer, if you ask me.

In New Haven, this is Ian Ayres for MARKETPLACE.

RYSSDAL: Ian Ayres is professor of law at Yale University. He co-authored the book, "Voting for Dollars."