

Give N.Y.'s Poor What They Need Most: A Voice

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Next month, the Mayor's Commission on Economic Opportunity will release a strategy to reduce poverty in New York City. This is the first in an occasional series of outside-the-box recommendations to the group.

One of the best ways to fight poverty is to give politicians a direct monetary incentive to pay attention to the interests of ordinary New Yorkers.

The reason: for poor New Yorkers, political contributions are out of the question. If your family is taking in \$20,000 a year, it's tough to make even a small political contribution. And it doesn't make a difference that the City will match your small gift with a contribution out of its treasury - your kids still need that extra \$25 more than any candidate does.

So politicians shape their proposals accordingly, giving, for example, more attention to Manhattan than the other boroughs. That's where the money is.

The answer: Give every city voter a special credit card account containing \$10 that they can only spend on city election campaigns. Armed with their cards, registered voters could go to local ATM machines and send their "Patriot Dollars" to the candidates of their choice.

About 1.25 million New Yorkers went to the polls to vote in city elections in 2005. If they all had voted with Patriot Dollars, they would have put \$12.5 million into the system - compared to the \$9 million raised by Fernando Ferrer (Mayor Bloomberg would have been required to waive his right to use his own checkbook before he could qualify for Patriots).

This system, for the first time, would give real political power to the poor and middle class. A single mother would have the same \$10 in her Patriot account as a rich stockbroker. A block party in Bed-Stuy could earn \$2,000 Patriots in a single afternoon. A generation ago, such a system was a technical impossibility. Not today: people getting food stamps have electronic cards that could be used as the vehicle for these accounts. And it is relatively cheap to contract with the banks to expand existing ATM systems in the service of democracy.

Of course, richer New Yorkers will still have the First Amendment right to make big donations out of their own pockets. But a Patriot system will help level the playing field. And it will give the poor a piece of the action without creating a special program that breeds middle-class resentment.

You could do a whole lot worse for an initiative whose total cost - administration included - would be less than \$10 million annually.

Ackerman and Ayres are professors of law at Yale and the authors of "Voting with Dollars: A New Paradigm for Campaign Finance."

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