

Editorial: How ‘street money’ tilts playing field

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How political machine cash tilts the playing field

Just to be clear, we’re far from shocked — shocked! — to discover that so-called street money almost certainly is altering some Dallas election outcomes. It has been thus for about as long as popular votes have decided who holds power in this town.

By its nature, street money moves stealthily, hand to hand, exerting its powerful influence in the quiet shadows. Get too overt and someone might start asking legal questions. Keep it to yourself. Everyone knows, and no one knows.

Think of it this way: When you hear the term “political machine,” understand that street money — also known by its alias, “walking-around money” — is the grease for the gears. It’s how votes are delivered, turnout juiced and elections won — or lost.

So it’s rare to have it shoved in our faces as blatantly as it was last week at a raucous Coalition of Black Democrats meeting at a Cedars neighborhood watering hole.

The coalition, which had withered until younger members pumped in new life, gathered to consider a slate of endorsements, including one in the hotly contested 33rd Congressional District primary, a new seat with lines drawn to favor a black or Hispanic candidate.

At issue was whether new coalition members could vote on the endorsements upon paying \$30 membership fees. Street-money operatives showed up with pockets stuffed with envelopes, some holding more than \$30 — “the membership fee and a little extra,” as our political columnist Gromer Jeffers Jr. reported.

Every little bit helps, right? Except the coalition board stuck to its bylaws and ruled that newcomers could join but not vote. Not surprisingly, much of the new “membership money” slipped back out the door.

As Jeffers noted, this scene was a typical use of street money, loose cash that political campaigns funnel to operatives to line up support in neighborhoods and churches and on the street. It’s the way things get done in machine-driven cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland and, yes, Dallas.

Is it against the law to throw a little extra into an offering plate or hand out a few bucks “to get out the vote?” Maybe yes, maybe no, but it depends what a determined law enforcement agency could prove. When does a contribution become a bribe? When does time-honored tradition stray into election law violation?

A receipt for that expenditure? Sorry, no.

It's important to note that most candidates at the Coalition of Black Democrats meeting came without bonus envelopes and played it straight. The ones who didn't are the ones doing so much to undermine voters' confidence in the system. Are there victims? Yes, our electoral integrity.

The sad part, of course, is that the abusers see nothing wrong with the way things are and don't even have a Capt. Renault to close their doors in mock horror.