



YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLICY PRIORITIES

Democracy Done Right

You probably know who the president is, and it's easy enough to figure out what's happening in the United States Congress or in national politics. It's usually all over the news or people are talking about it. That's not true for our local governments though, even though our local governments actually have a lot more control over our day to day lives. How you get to work and school, whether you can find an affordable place to live, the safety of your community, the quality of your school and how we will respond to rising sea levels isn't decided in Washington DC, but in our Miami-Dade County Commission or by the governments of one of the 34 cities we have in the County.

That's why it's important to make sure that our local democracy is done right – that our elected officials are representing us all equally, that we all have a chance to participate in the process and that corruption, nepotism and abuse are stamped out. That's what it means to have a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

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At Engage, we've seen a pattern of corruption and abuse in our local democracy. Some of the stuff is pretty obviously, embarrassingly bad. In a saga labeled "paella-gate," it seems like one City of Miami Commissioner used public city money to buy food for campaign events for a candidate for another Miami Commission seat. This happened in one of what are called "comedores," eating halls for seniors. Unfortunately, candidates exploit access to these "comedores" to have exclusive access to voters and use giveaways like paella to sway them to vote for them, often timing the giveaways right around when vote by mail ballots arrive. An aide for the Miami Commissioner has come out and said he saw his boss engage in a felony, and claims he was subsequently fired for collaborating with law enforcement. In another



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instance involving the same candidate, leaked WhatsApp messages showed a group associated with his campaign discussing destroying or stealing absentee ballots from voters who voted to his opponent, again at a residence for elderly folks.

Some of the corruption and fault in our local democracy is less obvious and part of a bigger picture. Our local politics are dominated by the same few families and the same few industries that dominate their campaigns. Right now, the mayor of the City of Miami is the son of a Miami Dade County Commissioner, who is currently running to be County Mayor and is a former mayor of the City of Miami. The Mayor of Miami Beach is also the son of a previous mayor of Miami Beach. One family, the Diaz de la Portillas, has three brothers in local politics who have served a combined 35 years between the City of Miami Commission, Miami-Dade County Commission, Miami-Dade County Schoolboard, Florida Senate and Florida House. Some families – the Regalados, Barreiros, Carollos, and Suarez’s, for example – have been battling each other for positions since the 90’s.

As one pollster, Fernand Amando, put it, “Optically and on the surface, it’s the same-old, same-old. For a lot of Miamians, that’s part of the frustration they have: For a city that’s constantly reinventing itself and re-branding itself, we seem to have the same names recirculating in the political and civic leadership.” And these same names might have been successful in protecting their power, but not in addressing our problems.

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While there isn’t anything necessarily wrong with multiple members of a family being involved in politics, the pattern we see in Miami is a problem. Surely the best candidates and leaders don’t all come from the same few families. Other candidates who do not have families in politics complain about how easy it is for these candidates with famous last names to get media attention, and their last names come with name recognition that is valuable when some voters know less about the candidates. Most troubling, with shared last names also comes shared relationships with special interests and shared campaign donors, who

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tend to have an unfair influence in our local elections. These dynastic candidates tend to have a much easier time raising money than others – in the 2017 elections, three candidates with the last names Regalado, Barreiro and Carollo combined raised \$700,000, five times more than all their opponents combined.

This gets to our biggest hurdle of truly having a local government that is of the people, for the people and by the people – the unjust influence and compromised priorities that come from the influence of money in politics. One study in 2016 found that donors to local political campaigns were overwhelmingly white, wealthy and male. Further, almost a third of all campaign donations were from parts of the development industry, such as real estate and construction. In the 2016 elections, six out of the ten top campaign donors were developers. Specific local sectors such as development, construction, police unions, utilities and those with government contracts give big cash to local campaigns.

And guess what? Whatever you think about a politician, they want to keep their job. Unfortunately, their ability to get re-elected depends in part on how much money their campaigns have to spend on events, mailers, ads and staff. It can even make it so people who aren't rich or have connections to rich people don't even run in the first place. The Miami Herald estimates that to compete in a mayoral election, a candidate must raise over \$1 million dollars. Campaign donations makes it difficult for candidates and politicians to be unbiased if they think upsetting their donors could hurt their re-election chances.

For instance, after one Commissioner helped a housing developer secure a \$9 million affordable housing grant funded by property taxes in 2011, that developer gave the Commissioner \$80,000 in 2016. We're not saying this is always corruption, but the incentives and conflicts it creates are clearly not good for a healthy democracy.

But we, as voters, are the ones who can hire and fire politicians, and we can also all fight to regain a right to an equal voice and fair, representative democracy. This is actually how our organization was started. In 2015, one City Commissioner was term-limited and his wife was running to replace him, and expected to win on the back of over



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\$1 million in donations from special interests. A group of young people thought that wasn't how our local democracy should work, raised awareness around the election, mobilized other young people and hosted a candidate forum, and a community activist for a local park who had been an unknown actually won the election.

We've also come close to breaking the influence of money in politics. In 2016, a group of local organizers, activists and organizations under the banner of Accountable Miami-Dade tried to bring fairness to our local campaign finance system by making it more difficult for special interests, lobbyists and contractors with the County to donate huge amounts of money to local politicians. They collected over 120,000 petitions to put a Campaign Finance Reform amendment on the ballot that would have capped contributions to County Mayoral, County Commission and School Board candidates at \$250 from a person or corporation, and major county vendors and lobbyists would be barred from contributing to candidates. They also sought to set up a system that would provide candidates with matching public contributions of donations up to \$100 from County residents. They not only wanted to make it harder for special interests and those seeking government contracts to influence our elected officials, but make it easier for regular, non-wealthy people to run for office and be competitive. Although the campaign collected the required amount of petitions, the County did not place the amendment on the ballot, arguing there were legal problems with how it was written.

Millennials and Gen Z are two of the largest generations ever. Young people under 35 are almost 30% of registered voters in Miami-Dade. With a unified vote, we can make sure our mayors, commissioners, states attorneys and school board members – and governors, congresspeople and presidents if you think about Florida and the whole United States – represent and answer to us. Around the country, we've seen young people step and run for office themselves, and be taken into power by a wave of young voters. At the local level, elections are often decided by very low margins – in 2017, Joe Carollo beat Alfie Leon by only 252 votes in an election with only 15% turnout. This year, and every year going forward, at Engage Miami we're going to make sure young people in our city know where the candidates stand, make sure candidates know they need to stand up for young people, and make sure we all vote like it. We hope you'll do the same.

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Norman Braman

You know how you can read Braman Motors on half the cars on the Palmetto or I-95? Well, unfortunately that money goes far, and Braman might be just as big a name in politics as it is in cars. In 2016, billionaire car dealer Norman Braman gave over \$200,000 to his preferred mayoral candidate, and in 2012 he gave over \$440,000 to a slate of candidates challenging incumbent County Commissioners. The supposed reason was because these incumbents had supported the Marlins Park deal (which was one of the worst deals in the history of cities helping paying for sports teams' stadiums). Miami Dade County paid \$500 million to help build Marlins Park, though the total bill could come out to over \$2 billion thanks to the debt payments. Stadium interests donated over \$4.6 million to Miami Dade local politics in the 5 years studied. However, Braman may not have been fighting these shenanigans, but carrying out his own – some people say the real reason was in response to an attempt to increase property taxes by these incumbent commissioners. You want to know the real reason? I don't know it TBH, but I do know wealthy campaign donors and those with business connections to the County shouldn't have this much influence.