With this year’s chaotic presidential campaign in full swing, it would be easy to neglect what is truly a crucial political test when it comes to protecting civil justice in the Golden State. I’m talking about the down-ballot contests for state Assembly and Senate.

Sacramento is where decisions are made that most directly govern how we practice law, shape the legal rights of our clients and dictate whether courthouse doors remain open. Sacramento is often where the worst of our tort wars are fought, where we’ve seen an endless parade of legislation threatening clients and consumer attorneys alike.

Yes, today we have a Legislature that is dominated by Democrats. But party designation can sometimes be deceiving when it comes to a lawmaker’s devotion to civil justice. Since the early 2000s, CalChamber’s lobbying efforts have grown and so have the ranks of “Corporate Democrats.” In many ways, these are Democrats in name only, hiding behind the ruse of fiscal moderation as they vote with Republicans to side with insurance, oil, tobacco or other big businesses – and against the best interests of everyday constituents.

We can only defeat that deadly combination of political power and deceit if we as trial lawyers enlist for the frontlines each campaign season. That means all of us, from the biggest of firms to the most solo of practitioners, committing time and money to help send good people to California’s statehouse.

This election year, such support is needed like few times before. With the state’s new term limits rules giving lawmakers a dozen years in either house, both the Assembly and Senate are set to see nearly every seat locked up in incumbency for a decade to come. If we want lawmakers who understand the importance of civil justice, 2016 is the year to make our mark.

After this November, election opportunities will be scant. It’ll be the mid-2020s before a sizable block of legislative seats begin to open up again.

The Assembly is particularly in play this year. As the larger and unrulier of our state’s two legislative bodies, it has been a fertile ground for the growth of the corporate caucus. This year, 17 Assembly seats are open. After the 2016 election, it will be another decade before we see any significant turnover, making this a truly pivotal election year.

Think elections don’t matter? Look at last year’s successful legislative year for CAOC. We not only defeated attempts to limit rights, we also created mandatory expedited jury trials, made it harder to file delay-causing demurrers and created a standardized form to order medical records. None of those steps would have happened without the campaign-year clout CAOC exhibits each election season. To continue our legislative success, we must flex our political muscle during the upcoming 2016 election season.

We are determined not only to work to elect leaders on civil justice issues, but also to hold those elected officials accountable when they heed the corporate lobby rather than their consumer constituents. Most Californians who cast a vote on Election Day pay little attention to what happens in Sacramento the rest of the year. One way we can begin to break the hold of the corporate caucus is to keep voters better informed about their elected officials – especially when they put corporate interests above people. To accomplish that, we will be working with allied organizations to use new, highly effective tools to educate voters at a grassroots level. And in districts where elected officials have consistently betrayed their constituents, we will look for replacement candidates this year and beyond.

As Consumer Attorneys, we are in a unique position to attack the corporate alliance of big oil, insurance and tobacco. The best way for each of us to accomplish this is by contributing to CAOC’s political action committee or giving directly to candidates endorsed by CAOC.

We cannot do it without your help. I hope you will join us.

Learn more about CAOC’s 2016 Political Program and DONATE ONLINE NOW! www.caoc.org/16election

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