

## **Politicians in Congress should serve you, not rich contributors**

'Fair Elections' reform would allow public servants like those in Congress to focus on policy, not fundraising.

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Concord, N.H.; and Washington —

Call us old-fashioned sentimentalists.

We used to think of the United States Senate as a place where sober-minded men and women with a hankering for public service came together to listen to different points of view and forge common solutions to the nation's tough problems.

The fact that each of us represented a different political party did not diminish our mutual respect and readiness to work together. On the campaign trail, we tried to help our parties win, but in the Congress, we and many others sought to reach bipartisan legislative outcomes in the national interest.

But nowadays in Washington, the bridge-builders are heading for the hills.

The recent announcement by Sen. Evan Bayh (D) of Indiana that he would leave the Senate in 2010 was just the latest in a stream of moderate senators who are too fed up to seek another term. His fellow Midwesterner, Sen. George Voinovich (R) of Ohio, paved the way a year ago. Unless the ways of Washington change, we doubt these two senators will be the last to quit.

### **Big money's corrosive effect**

If there's one reason for leaving that both Senators Voinovich and Bayh – and ourselves in our time – share in common, it's money. Congress is stuck in the mud of strident partisanship, excessive ideology, never-ending campaigns, and – at the heart of it all – a corrosive system of private campaign funding and the constant fundraising it demands.

We predict the recent Supreme Court ruling to permit unlimited corporate and union spending on campaign ads will only make matters worse.

For years, big money has quietly undermined the integrity of our representative government.

Members of Congress now report spending a third of their time or more raising money for their next campaign, most of it coming from out-of-state interests instead of their own constituents.

Wealthy contributors, in turn, expect – and too often receive – a return on their investment in the form of earmarks and legislative favors.

And while we do not believe that most members of Congress are corrupt, few can deny that the appearance of corruption has dramatically undermined the public's trust in government.

To help bring statesmanship back to Washington, it's time we put an end to the race for campaign cash and the countless compromises it demands.

The best way to fundamentally change the dysfunctional dynamic in Washington is to restore political purchasing power to the American people by incentivizing broad-based small donations from ordinary constituents through matching federal funds.

By providing qualified candidates a way out of the chase for big special-interest money, such a program would make citizens the true stakeholders in our government.

## **The Fair Elections Now Act**

The good news is that a bipartisan proposal to do just that is gaining momentum in Washington. The "Fair Elections Now Act" has gained the support of at least 170 members of Congress. Under such reform, candidates who reach a reasonable threshold of small constituent donations would qualify for federal matching funds to run competitive campaigns, regardless of wealth and connections.

At less than \$6 per citizen per year, this approach could save billions in public funds over the long-term as incumbents no longer feel the pressure to approve wasteful spending programs backed by their contributors.

We need not start from scratch. First proposed by President Theodore Roosevelt over a century ago, "Fair Elections" programs are at work in eight states and more than a dozen cities, from Maine to Los Angeles.

The documented results include a steady rise in voter turnout, small contributions, electoral competition, and candidates from diverse backgrounds seeking office.

Legislators are being elected without compromising ties to wealthy special interests. Arizona, Connecticut, and Maine are the three states that have Fair Elections for all state offices. And about 75 percent of winning candidates there voluntarily chose to take part in the Fair Elections system, replacing special-interest money with small donations and matching public funds.

Partial "fixes" abound in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's decision this year on Citizens United v. FEC, which allows corporations and unions to spend unlimited sums on political ads.

Some of these measures, such as increased disclosure requirements and limits on foreign influence in campaigns recently introduced by Sen. Chuck Schumer (D) of New York and Rep. Chris Van Hollen (D) of Maryland, are deserving of support. But they do not go far enough.

## **Better financing = better laws**

Only Fair Elections reform can get to the root of the problem by changing the source of campaign cash.

Before Congress can truly meet the challenges of energy and climate change, unemployment, and financial regulation, it must address the perverse incentives that mire each and every one of its members in a perpetual race for private campaign funds.

Bayh and Voinovich, we thank you for your service and for drawing attention to a broken pay-to-play system of funding political campaigns.

In the old-fashioned spirit of bipartisanship, we urge our former colleagues in Congress to come together and take up the fight for citizen-funded elections.

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