



Congress needs Fair Elections Now

By Rep. Chellie Pingree (D-Maine) - 06/27/11

Hundreds of candidates in my home state of Maine have been able to run for office without endlessly dialing for dollars. They can serve as lawmakers without wondering whether their next vote will affect their fundraising ability. Under Clean Elections, as the system is often called, competitive candidates receive matching money to fund their campaigns after showing broad public support from their district.

On Monday, in *McComish v. Bennett*, the Supreme Court struck a blow to these systems by wrongly throwing out an important provision within these state systems that allows candidates to remain competitive against privately financed opponents and independent expenditure campaigns. I disagree with this decision that illogically equates more speech with chilling speech, but fortunately it was a narrow decision and the court left the foundations for public financing in place. Legislation that I have worked on, the Fair Elections Now Act (H.R. 1404), is not affected by Monday's decision. In fact, with a Supreme Court that appears hostile to any common-sense guidelines on spending or fundraising, voluntary non-taxpayer-funded public financing could be one of the last tools in the shed to put voters back in charge of our democracy.

The bipartisan Fair Elections Now Act works by allowing candidates for Congress to run competitive campaigns on a blend of small-dollar local contributions and a match from the Fair Elections fund. With Fair Elections, candidates can focus on their constituents—instead of wealthy lobbyists and corporate interests that we are constantly asking for money. If faced with the threat of outside spending now allowed under *Citizens United*, candidates can simply go back to their constituents to get the money to respond and have those small donations combat the big-money donations that the Roberts court has encouraged through its rulings.

In the 111th Congress, the legislation had 165 bipartisan House co-sponsors, and it has garnered 68 so far in the 112th Congress. Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) has introduced companion legislation in the Senate.

Every hour we have to spend raising cash is one hour we're not talking with constituents back home or one hour we're not focused on addressing our nation's challenges. The American people should not have to wonder for whom their elected officials are speaking in the policymaking process. Yet we are required to raise large sums of money, which often come from those interested in influencing legislation. The vast majority of our colleagues aren't influenced by these donations, but that doesn't end the public perception of corruption.

In Monday's decision, the Supreme Court once again showed it is more concerned with protecting the money over the many, but that doesn't mean we should throw up our hands and give up on efforts to make Congress more accountable to those who elected us.

As the big banks continue their efforts to block much-needed regulations of the financial industry, as Big Oil fights for its wasteful tax subsidies and as other wealthy special interests work to drown out the voice of Main Street America, the Fair Elections Now Act is necessary to ensure that our elections are truly of, by and for the people.

Pingree was elected to Congress in 2008 after serving as national president of Common Cause.

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