

ROLL CALL

Vermont Case Offers Chance to Embrace Spending Limits

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Today is Election Day and a good time to assess the state of our democracy. American political campaigns are no longer about the citizens who go to the polls. Instead, they're about how much money you can raise. It's tempting to call this one of the dirty little secrets of our politics, but that would be misleading - it hasn't been a secret for quite a while. It's time we get serious and turn the situation upside down.

While half a million Americans are still homeless in the hurricane-stricken Gulf Coast, our Members of Congress are spending time engaged in light chitchat with lobbyists at Washington, D.C., fundraising events to pay for re-election contests still a year away. Given our current system, you can't blame them.

Every politician I know would much prefer to spend their time doing the job they signed up for, talking with voters, learning about their lives and trying to find real solutions to the problems they face. But the cost of running for public office, largely driven by the expense of the broadcast ads that are the bread and butter of modern campaigns, is so high that fundraising for the next race must begin virtually the day after they win the last one.

We may soon have the chance to turn the tables. The hottest case on the Supreme Court's docket this term will come when the justices consider whether Vermont's first-in-the-nation mandatory limits on campaign spending are constitutional. With any luck, the case will spark a badly needed national conversation about the undeniable ways in which the demands of fundraising are undermining core democratic principles.

I feel strongly that candidates should be allowed to raise and spend enough money to run effective campaigns and get their message out to voters. But it's clear that unlimited campaign spending - and the fundraising necessary to feed that beast - is doing far more harm than good.

To run a competitive campaign, the average House Member has to raise more than \$2,000 a day, every day, from the day they are seated until the next Election Day. And that's nothing compared to the expense of a Senate or presidential campaign. When I ran former Vice President Al Gore's campaign in 2000, easily 80 percent of my time was spent dealing with the demands of fundraising. It was a daily occurrence for us to reject an opportunity to meet with real voters, much to Gore's irritation, in order to schedule yet another grip-and-grin session with the big donors who provide the vast majority of the resources of any modern campaign.

The alternative - recruiting wealthy candidates to bankroll their own campaigns - presents its own problems. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (R) is once again in the process of spending tens of millions of his own fortune and drowning out the voice of another candidate of ordinary means. And in New Jersey, an exceedingly nasty race for governor between two self-funders is likely to set a \$72 million spending record in the state while proving that more money doesn't mean better or more enlightening campaigns.

In the Vermont case, the 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals found that the demands of fundraising in most races are so great that corruption is the inevitable result - the banal, insidious kind that happens every day, in every campaign. In typical testimony, Cheryl Rivers, a Vermont legislator who introduced a bill requiring the labeling of genetically engineered food, recalled her inability to get support from the Senate leadership because the pharmaceutical industry was already withholding campaign donations based on her party's legislative proposals relating to drug companies. The Senate president told her, "We've already lost the drug money, and I don't need to lose the food manufacturer money, too. So I'm not going to sign the bill." That's the kind of trade-off that occurs every minute in politics, as campaign positions and legislative priorities are perverted to suit the needs of the biggest contributors.

The court also stated the obvious: With only 24 hours in the day, even the most principled candidate has little choice but to give the bulk of their time and attention almost exclusively to big donor, the special interest with the deepest pockets. Lost in the shuffle are ordinary citizens who can't afford to pay the price of entry, the maximum allowable contribution. Raising money simply takes so much time and energy that, as a practical matter, officeholders don't have the bandwidth to do their real job of listening to voters and making policy decisions based on their merits, rather than some trade association's latest cri de coeur.

What's wrong with reasonable spending limits that leave plenty of cash to run great campaigns but also level the playing field and allow plenty of time for the real work of campaigns and governance?

There's nothing wrong with that, and a lot that's right. Opponents will raise the constitutional issues they always do on the topic, but if we truly want our democracy to remain a representative, responsive and honest one, we desperately need a conversation about our current campaign finance system. That's why seasoned politicians from across the partisan divide - from former Sens. Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) to Alan Simpson (R-Wyo.) - support campaign spending caps. It's long past time to put this good idea on the table.

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