Campaign Finance Reforms Don't Work

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This selection first appeared in the *New York Times*, February 1, 1997, p. 17. Strother, a Democratic political consultant, argues that limiting the spending of candidates for public office increases the influence of special interest groups. Strother favors increased disclosure and raising the amounts that can be contributed to campaigns by individuals and political action committees.

As good-government groups display indignation that would make a Southern revival preacher proud, Congress is nearly hysterical about reforming campaign finance laws, regardless of the consequences. If lawmakers are not careful, they may get what they're asking for.

Limiting candidates' spending usually succeeds only in giving special interests even more clout. Consider recent "reform" efforts in Kentucky and the District of Columbia.

In 1994, Kentucky limited spending in its gubernatorial race to $1.8 million per candidate ($1.2 million of which came from the state) and set a maximum $500 contribution per donor. The problem was that the Supreme Court has ruled repeatedly that an organization or person cannot be stopped from spending money as long as the donation is not coordinated with a candidate's efforts.

In Kentucky, no other special interest could match the labor union money spent on behalf of Paul Patton in the Democratic primary. In the general election, Mr. Patton's labor supporters triumphed over his opponent's business supporters in a battle of independent campaigns. How can this be considered reform?

In 1993, Washington limited contributions in mayoral races to $100, down from $2,000 per election cycle. Some candidates struggled mightily to raise even $30,000, and couldn't get their messages to the public. I lived in the District then, and didn't receive a single political flier or piece of mail. Some do-gooders would find this an improvement, but information is the basis of an educated vote.

Special interests filled the vacuum. Unions and big business set up independent campaigns to help the candidates of their liking, while politicians were reduced to begging them for support. After the election, the City Council returned to the old system.

Now, in the aftermath of the Democratic National Committee's fiasco with Asian money, Senators Russ Feingold, Democrat of Wisconsin, and John McCain, Republican of Arizona, are getting tremendous support for their legislation calling for voluntary spending limits, bans on so-called soft money, and a requirement that broadcasters provide free air time.

These ideas may sound good. But limiting spending requires candidates to "hope" that outside interest will aid their cause. As for free air time, not many voters are likely to tune in to a TV station at an appointed hour to hear candidates speak. Besides, political professionals know that a voter must see the same 30-second spot some ten times before the message sinks in. Campaigns inundate voters with mail, phone calls, and TV and radio ads because, in an age when the media are increasingly less interested in covering campaign issues, such strategies are often the only reliable ways to inform voters.

Consider last year's Senate Democratic primary in Texas. Partly because of a lack of news coverage, confused voters selected an unknown small-town schoolteacher largely because he had the same surname as the state attorney general. The two Democratic members of the House who ran against him could not raise enough money to reach voters in all of Texas's seventeen media markets.

The current system, which limits individual contributions to $1,000 an election, is a joke. A rich person who wants to gain influence calls other rich friends to send over $1,000 checks and then delivers all the checks to the candidate at once.

So instead of lowering spending caps, we should raise the individual limit to $10,000 but require campaigns and parties to notify the Federal

Election Commission of every contribution the day it is received. Current law requires disclosure only every ninety days until the very end of a campaign. Thus the media and a candidate's opponents would be able to get the word out quickly if a notorious polluter or rich union gave the candidate an enormous sum.

Under the same disclosure rules, we should also allow donations up to $20,000 from political action committees—still the best way for working people to pool together and ensure that their views are heard. Direct corporate contributions to candidates, currently banned, should also be allowed but under the same disclosure rules, so we'll know if a candidate intends to become the senator from Texaco or Microsoft.

George Will recently said that more money is spent annually on antacids in this country than on a presidential race. But judging by the uproar over campaign financing, you would think that our very democracy is at stake. Unfortunately, it just may be the reformers who weaken it.