P.S. to the NEWS
by PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY

Box 618, Alton, Illinois 62002
Phone: 618-462-5415

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TAXPAYER FINANCING OF ELECTIONS

It would seem that a fundamental First Amendment right would be the right to contribute to any political candidate of your choice and, conversely, to refuse to contribute to every candidate you don't want elected. But the push is on in the new Congress to carve an immense slice out of both rights through Taxpayer Financing of Congressional elections.

The argument runs like this: (a) The cost of running for Congress has skyrocketed. (b) Special interest political action committees (PACs) are contributing too much to candidates. (c) Therefore, in order to put the lid on (a) and (b), the federal government should impose strict spending limits on Congressional elections and require taxpayers to finance them instead. In other words, you should be restricted in your right to contribute to candidates you like, but compelled to contribute your tax dollars to finance candidates you don't like.

Quite apart from First Amendment objections, the argument for taxpayer financing doesn't hold up under a cost analysis.

The taxpayer financing bill introduced on the opening day of Congress with the blessing of Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr., would impose a spending ceiling of $150,000 on each House candidate and permit those who accept it to receive $60,000 in federal matching funds. Assuming the bill would apply only to general elections and not to primaries, this would cost the taxpayers more than $50 million, not counting the greater cost of the bureaucracy necessary to dole out the matching funds.

But in 1978, the average House candidate spent only $108,000. Only about one out of seven House candidates spent more than $200,000. Of those, only one out of eighteen spent more than $300,000.

The taxpayer financing bill would not reduce the amount of money spent in all Congressional campaigns. It would simply prohibit the voluntary spending of their own $50 million by some individuals to support candidates of their choice, and instead

(more)

force all taxpayers involuntarily to spend a like amount on candidates they do not choose.

Congressional campaigns would still cost just as much as ever, but the taxpayers would be footing a large part of the bill so that funds could be more evenly distributed among candidates whom the voters do not voluntarily support.

The second purpose of the taxpayer financing of Congressional elections is to cut down or cut out the contributions made by political action committees. In 1978, PACs donated $35 million to Congressional candidates. Looking at the matter from this direction, the taxpayers would be forced to pay $50 million in order to prevent PACs from contributing $35 million.

Political action committees are not subversive organizations out to destroy the democratic process, despite the way that advocacy journalists are lacing their news stories with ominous innuendoes such as "special-interest money" and "the influence its acceptance carries." PACs are voluntary associations of individual Americans who contribute to a fund to back candidates whose ideology and voting records they support. PACs enable individuals to pool their small contributions in order to do a better job of electing candidates who reflect the views of the donors.

Political action committees are opposed by those who have a vested interest in inducing voters to make their candidate choices on political party or personality rather than on ideology. It makes many politicians and government officials nervous, for example, to know that voters are deliberately supporting candidates who will vote for tax reduction, regardless of party or personality.

Yet it makes much more sense to contribute to a conservative PAC or to a labor PAC, which will support only candidates of your point of view, than to contribute to a Republican or a Democratic Party PAC which will dole out funds to candidates ranging in ideology from Ted Kennedy to John Stennis. Besides there isn't any special interest money that carries such far-reaching influence as a federal subsidy. We don't need this influence in political campaigns.

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