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THE POWER AND POLITICS OF PACs

Since the November election, those unhappy with the verdict of the polls have been busy explaining their losses and recommending "reforms" which presumably would assure that all the "best" candidates would be elected to office. The principal villain is alleged to be the Political Action Committees (PACs).

Time magazine claims that "the power of PACs threatens to undermine America's system of representative democracy." Newspapers feature stories headlined: "Vote-buying groups spread big bucks through Congress." Sounds terrible, doesn't it?

An article by former Congresswoman Millicent Fenwick, defeated in November in her bid to be U.S. Senator from New Jersey, is typical. She writes ominously about "powerful influences the public can only guess about," and she quotes some of her disgruntled colleagues as asking fearfully, "How long will the public put up with our bought votes?"

She labels the PACs "special-interest groups." She thinks it is deplorable that some 3,200 PACs contributed an estimated $240 million to candidates in 1982 (of which about $80 million went to U.S. Senate and House candidates).

Millicent Fenwick piously refused to accept campaign contributions from PACs. But she took $13,650 from the top executives of a Wall Street investment firm, which was far more than the legal limit imposed on that firm's PAC.

There is nothing inherently evil about PACs. They are merely campaign committees set up by like-minded individuals to donate money to the candidates of their choice. They are the best way for the average citizen to participate in the process of self-government because they enable him to "put his money where his mouth is."

The first PAC was formed in 1943 by the CIO. For three decades, the unions had a practical monopoly on PACs; unions made huge political contributions to candidates who voted for union-backed legislation. Funny thing, in those years, we didn't hear the liberals denouncing PACs as vehicles to "buy" candidates.

The proliferation of PACs in the last four elections is the direct result of the Watergate "reform" laws. When the laws about political contributions, limitations, and

disclosure were spelled out in detail, then corporations, associations, and organizations suddenly discovered that they, too, could be financially active in politics.

Today, union PACs are contributing more than ever ($20 million in 1982). The reason the liberals now complain about PACs is that union money is now only one-fourth of the PAC money that flows into Congress, instead of 90 percent. The anti-PAC argument really is: if the majority of PAC money is conservative rather than liberal, then PACs must be bad.

What's wrong with Ameriacan citizens organizing and pooling their funds to make their legislative and political choices better known and more effective? That's what self government is all about.

PACs cannot be blamed for inventing "special-interest groups." They always existed. In the pre-PAC era, their money was distributed in brown paper bags, or shoe boxes, or unmarked envelopes. By contrast, with PACs, we have full disclosure of all contributions, and extremely low limitations on contributions ($5,000 to any federal candidate in a single election). That's hardly enough to buy a 30-second TV spot.

Obviously, some PACs will be more effective than others. It's hard to see how the Associated Milk Producers can be considered effective, for example, when they gave $2 million in the 1982 elections, but can't seem to stop the airlines and restaurants from offering passengers a non-dairy product (that never saw a cow) to put in their coffee and falsely calling it "cream."

A lot of the anti-PAC rhetoric comes from the two major political parties. That's because the average candidate now gets about three times as much money from PACs as from a political party. PACs have risen in influence as the parties diminished in their effectiveness in dealing with the issues that voters really care about.

The alternative to PACs is taxpayer financing of elections. That system would force the taxpayers to finance candidates they do not agree with and would never vote for. How could that be more fair than the voluntary system of allowing individuals to spend their money for the candidates of their choice?

Let's hear no more from those who complain that other Americans are giving their own hard-earned money to PACs. How could there be a more constructive way to spend money than to try to elect candidates who will give us the kind of government we want?