



Burrus: Should it be against law to criticize Harry Reid?

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U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) has launched a campaign against the Koch brothers from the floor of the Senate. He has mentioned them approximately 140 times, and has gone so far as to call them un-American. Now Reid has gone from rhetoric to action by endorsing Sen. Tom Udall's (D-N.M.) proposed amendment that would give Congress a free hand to regulate and limit political spending.

Giving elected representatives the power to regulate the process by which they get elected is a terrifying proposition. A cursory look at history shows why.

Wars on political speech are a predictable and time-honored tradition in Washington, D.C. From the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which made it illegal to say anything that would "bring members of the government into contempt or disrepute," to the Sedition Act of 1918, which prohibited "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" about the U.S. government, to modern campaign finance laws, politicians have long tried to silence critics in the name of the "public interest."

Standing between the base motives of politicians and total censorship of dissent, however, was the First Amendment. Now, Udall's amendment hopes to give politicians the power to brush aside that inconvenient little freedom.

When the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act was first debated, senators chomped at the bit for the opportunity to squelch their critics. Apparently, anyone who criticizes a sitting senator is a public nuisance who must be stopped.

Former Sen. Jim Jeffords (I-Vt.) complained that "negative attack ads" caused a candidate's "20-percent lead to keep going down" and, although "what they are saying is totally inaccurate, you have no way to refute it."

The obvious solution is censorship, because Jim Jeffords's "20-percent lead" is more important than free speech.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) complained that political ads just "drive up an individual candidate's negative polling numbers and increase public cynicism for public service in general."

McCain's polling numbers and positive views of "public service" are certainly more important than free speech.

McCain also told his fellow senators that political ads just "demeaned and degraded all of us because people don't think very much of you when they see the kinds of attack ads that are broadcast on a routine basis." Those ads "are negative to the degree where all of our approval ratings sink to an all time low."

Protecting the approval ratings of sitting senators is definitely public issue No. 1.

Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) told a story about how he sat down in a chair to watch TV, and "somewhere between the news and "Saturday Night Live," up pops four television commercials, one after the other, and every one of them blasting me. What a treat that was to sit in the chair and get pummeled by four different commercials."

Clearly, criticizing Dick Durbin should be against the law.

The world has never seen, and never will see, a law aimed at eliminating the praise of the lawmakers. Give them a chance to silence critics, however, and there is no end to what they will do.

They will couch their blatant attempts at censorship as vital to the "public interest," but the light at the end of the tunnel will be to solidify their approval ratings and to make sure that no one can seriously challenge a sitting politician ever again.

Whatever happened to healthy cynicism when it comes to the self-interested motivations of politicians? When a sitting senator complains about people criticizing him the proper response is catcalls of derision, not support.

Reid fully demonstrated the dangers of giving elected representatives power over political spending when he made a spurious distinction between the spending of the Koch brothers, who are "in it to make money," and the spending of Las Vegas casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson, "who is not in this for money." As a former chairman of the Nevada Gaming Commission, surely Reid's impartial judgment on the matter can be trusted.

The Koch brothers, liberal billionaire Tom Steyer, Sheldon Adelson, and George Soros may all have self-interested motives when it comes to political spending, but it pales in comparison to the self-interested motives of politicians using power and censorship to keep their jobs.

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