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## Cure for the ill effects of money in our politics?

Everybody talks about how special-interest money corrupts the political process. A handful of states already have done something about that, and now the U.S. House has the chance to do its part.

The Fair Elections Now Act would provide \$4 in public money for each dollar a candidate raised in contributions of \$100 or less, provided the candidate already has raised at least \$50,000 from at least 1,500 such donations.

Candidates who participate — the program would be voluntary — would be banned from accepting any contributions of more than \$200. In addition, participating candidates would have to debate their opponents.

Maine and Connecticut already have similar systems and the results are impressive, speakers told the Committee on House Administration during hearings Thursday.

These systems “have been credited with ... expanding the pool of candidates ... The bill also encourages a more diverse pool of campaign contributors,” said committee chairman Robert Brady, D-Pa.

In Connecticut, Republican Christopher Coutu credits that state's program with helping him upset a long-time Democratic incumbent, according to Jeffrey Garfield of the state's Elections Enforcement Commission. The “program has created a more level playing field,” Coutu said in a New York Times article.

In Maine, state House Speaker Hannah Pingree said, she ran under the state financing system at the same time as her mother, now U.S. Rep. Chellie Pingree, ran for the U.S. Senate. The contrasts were dramatic.

“Whereas I could conduct my own campaign by knocking on doors, attending public functions and stopping to speak with voters,” Hannah Pingree said, “my mother was forced to pass up forums and cut short conversations so she could get back to the phone and dial for dollars.”

The Connecticut example shows how public financing gives an unknown the chance to be heard. Even John Samples of the CATO Institute, who opposes public financing on principle, conceded to the committee that “this legislation may foster more challengers in some House districts than ... under the status quo.”

Nowhere is the corrosive effect of campaign money more obvious than in the matter of health care.

This year alone, the health-care industry has given almost \$20 million to federal candidates and parties, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. How can this not affect the debate?

Consider U.S. Rep. Heath Shuler, D-Waynesville. With the election season nearly a year off, he has more than \$1.1 million on hand, CRP says.

Shuler has 47 contributions that exceed the Fair Elections limit, 22 of them from political action committees.

At least five of those PACs are in the health-care field, and they gave a total of \$14,500.

Whether or not a member of Congress is influenced by these donations — and he has at least to be aware of them — there is a public perception that we have a Congress for sale. Congress can take down the “For Sale” sign by enacting the Fair Elections Now Act. Shuler, who is not one of the 70 sponsors, should add his voice and vote to the effort.

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