



My Turn: House must take a stand against big money

Betty Tamposi

October 13, 2015

When I served in the New Hampshire House of Representatives in the 1980s, nobody gave much thought to money in politics. Few state representatives even bothered to raise money for their campaigns. State Senate races rarely cost more than a few thousand dollars. Our primary resource was time, which we had in equal measure and which we generally devoted to knocking on doors and talking with voters face-to-face.

Even New Hampshire's gubernatorial and congressional elections were small potatoes compared to today. When I sought the Republican nomination for Congress in 1988, challengers raised a measly \$271,000 on average (adjusted for inflation). Our donations came from citizens in amounts of \$1,000 or less, generally much less. Ideas mattered more than dollars.

Now, five years after the Supreme Court's Citizens United ruling unleashed a torrent of outside money in politics, it's not uncommon for gubernatorial and congressional campaigns to cost millions or even tens of millions of dollars.

To make the cut, members of Congress devote 30 to 70 percent of their time, by their own admission, dialing for dollars from wealthy donors – not representing their constituents. Those races, in turn, pale in comparison to the amount of special interest money flooding the presidential campaigns, which is projected to reach into the billions of dollars in 2016.

Making matters worse, our elected leaders live in constant fear that a single vote of conscience might cause one billionaire Super PAC or another to launch negative TV attacks that shade the truth and drive all but the most extreme voters away from the polls. Those ads are increasingly funded with secret, out-of-state money.

The result is government "solutions" to our nation's biggest problems that amount to little more than the sum of all lobbies. Take the national debt, for example, which grows bigger by the day as politicians grant special favors to special interests that fund their campaigns.

As the libertarian Cato Institute reports, America spends around \$100 billion a year in corporate welfare subsidies that squelch small business and violate the basic principles of free-market

competition. Closer to home, Northern Pass and Kinder Morgan are spending millions of dollars in lobbying and campaign donations for the right to access public lands for private gain.

That kind of crony capitalism and wasteful spending are enough to leave any small-government conservative – or any sensible American, for that matter – sick to their stomach. It is also enough to motivate the vast majority of conservatives, including 80 percent of Republican voters in the latest poll, to call for an end to the Supreme Court’s shameful Citizens United decision.

That goal may be closer than we think.

On Tuesday, the New Hampshire House Legislative Administration Committee will vote on SB 136, a bill to study the effects of Citizens United on our state elections and evaluate the various proposed constitutional amendments currently pending in Congress. Crucially, the bill also expresses the urgent need for Congress to protect the First Amendment rights of flesh-and-blood citizens by overturning the Supreme Court decision.

Already 69 New Hampshire towns and 12,000 Granite Staters have called for such a constitutional amendment, and a majority of U.S. senators are on record in support. If SB 136 passes the New Hampshire House, like it passed the state Senate unanimously in March, we will become the 17th state to officially call on Congress to overturn Citizens United and stop unlimited spending in elections. That reform, combined with full transparency and real small-donor incentives to fairly fund campaigns, will take us a long way to restoring our Founders’ vision of a government “dependent upon the people alone.”

Stopping big money in politics will not be easy. Washington special interests have too much at stake to relinquish their undue influence without a fight, and party insiders are only too happy to keep things the way they are. Only one thing will make them change: a grassroots, cross-partisan movement of citizens ready and willing to rebel against big money politics and walk the talk for reform.

That’s why I’m proud to continue the work of my political mentor, the late Republican senator Warren Rudman, and walk alongside thousands of other Granite Staters from across the political spectrum as part of the New Hampshire Rebellion. I hope our state representatives – not to mention the presidential candidates – will heed our call this week.