

Why the GOP should support publicly funded campaigns

By Alan Simpson, Thursday, May , 7:50 PM

Memo to George Will: I was there.

I was proud to testify at the April 12 hearing on Sen. Dick Durbin's [campaign finance bill](#) about which Will [wrote last week](#). I spoke in support of reform that has everything to do with values he has long espoused: free speech, citizen participation and accountable government.

Will was correct that only Democratic members of the Senate attended the hearing. But I am not alone. Former Senate colleagues who also support this long-overdue reform include Republicans Warren Rudman, Bill Cohen, Bill Brock and Frank Murkowski, as well as dozens of other former senators, representatives and governors from our side of the aisle. In fact, we owe the concept of publicly funded elections to a great Republican president, Teddy Roosevelt, who proposed a similar reform in his [1905 State of the Union address](#).

Yes, Durbin's bill has won more support from Democrats than Republicans in Congress in recent years, and frankly that makes me sad. The Republican Party I represented proudly for 18 years did not shy away from taking on special-interest money when it conflicted with constituents' needs. And Tea Party adherents express a healthy indignation at what they and millions of others perceive is a government captured by and beholden to wealthy interests.

The real question, however, is not who but why. Why should Republicans in Congress support a campaign finance overhaul that would replace large donations from a tiny sliver of Americans with broad-based small donations and matching public funds?

To answer, I'll borrow three values that Will holds dear:

First, the First Amendment. America's Founders were committed to a wide-open public forum in which all voices and perspectives could have a chance of being heard. Today, the Supreme Court passionately defends the rights of a wealthy few to speak — and I say let 'em speak — but seems oddly uninterested in allowing ordinary Americans the same opportunity.

Voluntary public funding of elections solves the free speech “problem” with more speech instead of more regulation: by giving qualified candidates who show broad-based constituent support enough matching public funds to mount a credible campaign.

Second, citizen participation. Contrary to Will's vision of campaign finance as a kind of open participatory domain, less than one-quarter of 1 percent of Americans made itemized contributions to political campaigns in 2010 — yet they accounted for more than 90 percent of the money raised. Lobbyists and other contributors from Washington accounted for almost \$300 million in campaign money — more than the bottom 32 states combined.

The Fair Elections Now Act, by contrast, would challenge candidates to go to their constituents and collect thousands of individual checks of \$100 or less in-state. Matching those donations with public funds would provide a powerful incentive for candidates and their constituents to rewrite the rules of the

game. Instead of relying on bundled \$2,500 checks from a wealthy few, campaigns would be funded from the ground up in small chunks.

Third, Americans of all philosophies agree that government must be accountable to the people — as two-thirds or more have [consistently supported this reform](#) in polls. Even a cursory glance at campaign finance disclosures shows that the lion's share of campaign money comes from individuals and groups with vested tax-and-spending interests before Congress.

Look at who benefits from the \$1.1 trillion in annual tax expenditures, or the nearly [\\$100 billion in corporate welfare subsidies](#) identified by the Cato Institute, and at who funds campaigns. This bipartisan problem demands a bipartisan response: Congress must end special-interest funding of campaigns to prevent such conflicts of interest once and for all.

As I observed in [my testimony](#) before the Senate, the Fair Elections Now Act is not your granddaddy's campaign reform. For decades, reform has meant limits and restrictions on private campaign spending, which the Supreme Court has now all but taken off the table. In its [Citizens United decision](#), the court ruled last year that unions and corporations are free to spend unlimited sums to influence elections, asserting a remarkable right of corporate personhood that I have yet to find in the Constitution.

But *Citizens United* need not end the debate on reform. To the contrary, it can help us focus on the root of the problem: changing not so much the amounts but, rather, the source of private money that funds campaigns. By providing qualified candidates with enough matching funds to run energetic campaigns, we can ensure that character, experience and ideas — not money — determine who gets to compete for public office.

Now those are criteria I'm sure Will agrees should count for more than the depths of one's wallet in the public forum.

The writer, a former senator from Wyoming, is a co-chair of Americans for Campaign Reform.