

## John Yarmuth proposing bill to publicly finance campaigns

By: James R. Carroll – February 4, 2013

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Imagine a campaign for the U.S. House in which the definition of a fat-cat donor is somebody who gives the maximum — of \$100.

Imagine that same race, but with the federal government providing a 5-to-1 match for every dollar a candidate raises from state residents.

Rep. John Yarmuth, D-3rd District, not only can imagine it, he's sponsoring legislation that would make it law.

For a candidate, "your support is much more broadly based, and the odds of your being influenced by a big donor are reduced — essentially eliminated," the Louisville congressman said recently.

For a candidate's supporters, public campaign financing "gives voters a much greater opportunity to participate and feel that they're actually helping a candidate," Yarmuth said.

"We consider this to be a good government initiative," he said.

He acknowledges the odds are slim at the moment that enough of his colleagues will rally behind public financing of House campaigns. His bill, in fact, is similar to one he previously co-sponsored but was not voted on in the GOP-controlled House.

But Yarmuth and some other House members have introduced a number of campaign finance proposals this session intended to re-ignite the national discussion about the influence of money in American politics.

The Kentuckian is right to take the long view, said Fred Wertheimer, president of Democracy 21, a nonpartisan, nonprofit group seeking to reduce money's influence in politics.

"This is going to be a long-term effort, and I think we recognize it, but this is the way we win these battles," Wertheimer said.

But Bradley Smith, a former chairman of the Federal Election Commission, is critical of efforts to publicly finance campaigns. He is chairman and co-founder of the Center for Competitive Politics, a Washington-based, nonprofit group that opposes public financing and limits on campaign contributions.

“I appreciate that it is not linked to an effort to suppress or limit speech, but it usually tends not to accomplish what its supporters intended,” Smith said.

Under Yarmuth’s bill, candidates who voluntarily participate in a public financing system would qualify by raising \$50,000 in donations of \$5 to \$100 each. Those contributions would have to come from at least 1,500 donors living in the candidate’s state.

After qualifying, each candidate would receive a lump-sum grant, calculated as the average amount that winning candidates spent in the two previous elections.

Yarmuth’s measure also would provide \$5 for every \$1 dollar raised in-state, up to three times a candidate’s original grant amount. The federal money would come from the fund taxpayers already voluntarily contribute to and from appropriations.

Yarmuth’s bill so far has 52 co-sponsors — all Democrats except for Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C.

Two other measures, one by Democratic Reps. David Price of North Carolina and Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, and another by Rep. John Sarbanes, D-Md., also propose changes to the law to give small donors more leverage against outside spending and to clamp down on the power of so-called Super PACs.

All three proposals are “intended to turn our electoral process back over to the American people,” said Rep. John Larson, a Connecticut Democrat and chairman of a Democratic task force on election reform.

More broadly, Yarmuth, Larson and the others, along with 14 other Democrats, have asked the House Judiciary Committee to hold a hearing on possible constitutional fixes to address the Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, which said the First Amendment permits corporations and unions to spend unlimited sums of money to back or oppose candidates.

Yarmuth, a critic of the *Citizens United* ruling, said he remains concerned “about ... the dominance of large contributors to campaigns and their influence on members.”

Nick Nyhart, president and CEO of Public Campaign, another nonprofit, nonpartisan campaign finance reform group, said the 2012 election was “dominated by big-money donors.”

Yarmuth’s bill would “raise the voice of everyday people in the political process,” Nyhart said.

Wertheimer and Adam Skaggs, senior counsel at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, co-wrote a report last year on public funding of campaigns that noted that two-thirds of all federal campaign money in the 2010 elections came from one quarter of 1 percent of the public.

“Public disquiet is driven by the perception, held by huge majorities of voters, that elected officials serve the interests of big donors, not the public interest,” they wrote.

Wertheimer and Skaggs argued, among other things, that campaigns based on small donors would reduce that cynicism and increase voter participation in elections.

Wertheimer said in an interview that, with the massive sums spent in the 2012 campaign, “I am quite convinced scandals and corruption are on their way.”

But Smith said public financing of campaigns would fall short of what Yarmuth and his allies want to achieve.

“You can’t cut independent spending out, even if you have a government-paid system,” Smith said. “And you still could have corruption.”

He said publicly financing campaigns also would prop up “fringe” candidates in both parties who are unable to tap more traditional sources of support in their states and communities.

Public support for public funding of presidential races, a post-Watergate reform, is poor, with fewer than 10 percent of taxpayers checking the box on their tax return to give money to the program, Gene Healy, a vice president at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, pointed out last year.