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The Washington Times

Bid to curb campaign donors challenged

GOP, business groups call Obama's contractor disclosure plan one-sided

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President Obama's plan to require government contractors to disclose campaign contributions is receiving a rocky reception from Republicans and even some advocates of transparency.

GOP lawmakers have joined the nation's leading business groups in condemning the move as a federal overreach and a backdoor way to hinder Republican fundraising efforts — and punish the corporations that support them.

Many transparency groups say it's a step in the right direction, but they aren't satisfied because Mr. Obama's plan doesn't go far enough.

"The White House has floated a trial balloon to see what the political response would be," said John Samples, director of the Center for Representative Government at the Cato Institute. He thinks the president is willing to consider changes.

Campaign-finance rules altered course in January 2010, when the Supreme Court opened the door for corporations and unions to contribute "independent spending" to the election process. That might include paying for a television commercial that favors, but is not endorsed by, a candidate.

Later that year, Democrats in the House and Senate introduced the Disclose Act, which would have limited the effect of the court's ruling by restricting government contractors and corporations with certain levels of foreign management or ownership from "independent spending." Other companies would be allowed to use "independent spending" to support a campaign, but would be subject to transparency regulations. Congress never passed it.

Now, it is "coming back on the president's will alone," Mr. Samples said. In its present form, the draft executive order would require government agencies to collect political-contribution information from contractors but not prevent them from donating.

Republicans and business groups say it isn't about transparency. They fear the party in charge of the White House at the time will make it more difficult for certain companies to win federal contracts.

"You have to think about politics as a war," Mr. Samples said. "This campaign-finance regulation in general is really about taking ammunition away from the other side."

On Tuesday, 25 congressional Republicans, including Sen. Susan Collins of Maine and Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, wrote a letter to the president addressing those concerns.

"Political activity would obviously be threatened if the causes they support are disfavored by the Administration," they said. "No White House should be able to review your political party affiliation or the causes you support before deciding if you are worthy of a government contract. And no Americans should have to worry about whether their political activities or support will affect their ability to get or keep a federal contract or their job."

The Business Roundtable, a group of CEOs, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce would also like the president rethink his strategy.

It might be difficult for the president to make friends on this issue, Mr. Samples indicated, because some transparency groups will see this as a "sellout."

"The executive order is weaker than the Disclose Act," Mr. Samples said. "It's possible that their coalition could see it as an ineffective response. If everyone's going to be against it, including their allies, then it's pointless."

The Project on Government Oversight, which has not yet taken sides on the executive order, is in favor of more transparency in the campaign process. But the group admits there are "holes" in the president's plan that "raise some questions." They would rather see it extended beyond contractors.

"I think what the president's executive order would do is just take a piece of that," POGO spokesman Joe Newman explained. "It's just going to address a small part of the problem with the lack of transparency and political giving."

Other transparency groups are ready to support the president's plan. Public Citizen is "quite delighted," but even it would like government contractors banned from contributing altogether.

"The president is doing what the president can," said Craig Holman, government-affairs lobbyist at Public Citizen.

Gary Bass, executive director at OMB Watch, is just happy that something is being done to "get money out of politics." He realizes it would be asking too much for the president to make any more changes to the plan.

"If he were king for a day, that's what he would do," Mr. Bass said. "The problem is, he isn't king."