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**\$15 mil. push for 'Fair Elections,' critics say bill would hand lawmakers political suicide**

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**From CNN Political Producer Shannon Travis**

**Washington (CNN)** - Congressional lawmakers are staring at the chance, as some groups believe, to free themselves from the mad dash for campaign cash and to elevate the voices of everyday Americans over special interests. Yet others believe that a congressional bill involves something so despised by Americans that, if enacted, lawmakers would be committing an act of political suicide.

On Thursday, the Public Campaign and Common Cause, two non-profits focused on campaign finance reform, are leading the launch a \$15 million campaign for passage of the Fair Elections Now Act. In March of last year, the legislation was introduced by the Senate's second most powerful Democrat, Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, five-term Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, and House Democratic Caucus Chairman John Larson, the fourth ranking Democrat in that chamber.

Yet even with such high-power backing, the legislation has not advanced far in Congress. The Public Campaign's new \$15 million push hopes to change that. It will feature a television **ad** released Thursday, that will run in key areas. The groups are also working with organizations in 24 states to pressure on key lawmakers. The goal: a successful vote in the next few weeks on the Fair Elections Now Act.

The legislation would allow qualified candidates for federal office to receive large sums of money in the form of grants and matching funds. Supporters argue it would allow candidates to be competitive in campaigns that have increasingly grown more expensive and caused candidates to spend countless hours going after campaign funds.

"Americans would be shocked if they knew how much time Members of Congress and candidates seeking office must spend dialing for dollars and attending fundraisers," Durbin said when the bill was first introduced in 2009. "Our bipartisan bill will give candidates the opportunity to focus on dealing with our nation's problems and not chasing after campaign cash."

Supporters also believe the legislation will free candidates from relying on donations from special interests - and elevate the voices of everyday Americans over those interests.

"[Candidates] would only have to listen to their constituents when it comes to getting elected, as opposed to the special interests, the big lobbyists...in Washington," Nick Nyhart, president of The Public Campaign, told CNN.

The fair election funding system would be entirely voluntary. In order to qualify, candidates would need to raise a minimum amount: \$50,000 for a House candidate and varying amounts, based on a formula, for Senate candidates. Qualified candidates would receive fair election funds for both the primary and general election, with amounts varying for House and Senate races.

Those candidates would also be eligible to receive matching funds if they continued to raise small donations from constituents in their state. For every dollar raised from those in-state contributors, the candidate would receive four dollars. There would be a cap on the amount a candidate could receive from the fair election fund. Candidates would not be allowed to accept contributions, fundraising, or bundling from PACs.

Nyhart told CNN that, along with Larson, the bill has 156 co-sponsors, which include 3 Republicans. "This bill expands free speech," Nyhart said.

The bill's detractors believe otherwise.

Congressman Dan Lungren, R-California, told CNN the Fair Elections Now Act would essentially force upon Americans something they, increasingly, do not want. Lungren is the ranking Republican on the Committee on House Administration, where the bill sits in that chamber.

"Everyday Americans have already indicated their feelings on taxpayer funding of elections. When they have had that opportunity, when it comes to presidential elections, and we have seen a precipitous drop in their support for that idea."

Lungren referred to the option for individual Americans to contribute \$3 of their federal tax to the Presidential Election Campaign fund that appears on income tax return forms.

The congressman also warned of another potential problem with a fair election fund.

"How do you stop extremists, who couldn't stand on their own two feet with respect to elections, from benefitting from this kind of a program?" Lungren told CNN. "Someone would have to show me how this would not encourage that."

As an example, he cited Lyndon LaRouche, a perennial candidate for president.

"The one thing that public funding of presidential campaigns has done has encourage this guy, LaRouche, to be a presidential candidate - year after year after year after year, even when he was in prison," Lungren said.

Lungren believes the current contribution system accomplishes one goal of the proposed fair election fund.

"There are means by which people can participate, at low dollar values, and there are direct contributions to campaigns at low dollars," he said.

John Samples directs the Cato Institute's Center for Representative Government. He echoes concerns about the proposed fund, telling CNN its costs would outweigh its benefits.

"At the national levels, since this plan spends a lot of money, they've got to tax to do it. And they kind of obscure the way they get the taxes. But the taxes end up falling on taxpayers," Samples said.

He referred to the proposed funding for a fair election fund: for Senate races, a fee on large government contractors. And "for House races...ten percent of revenues generated through the auction of unused broadcast spectrum," according to the Public Campaign's website.

"In the end, the taxpayer gets the bill," Samples told CNN.

And Samples criticized the new, multi-million dollar push by the Public Campaign to convince lawmakers to pass the legislation.

Samples claimed the group is spending \$15 million dollars "to get public opinion to force [lawmakers] to do something they don't want to do."

Samples noted the challenging political environment for incumbents. "These members will be voting for a system... that gives their challengers even more money."

And Samples offered his thoughts on how effective the bill's supporters will be in convincing lawmakers to vote for it.

"I suspect they're going to have a very hard time rallying public opinion to get [lawmakers] to do something that's pretty suicidal."