

'Money-in-Politics' Amendment Ignored

A few right-wing pundits like George Will are livid over the prospect of curbing the power of billionaires to buy U.S. elections, but mostly the debate over a proposed constitutional amendment to allow regulation of money in politics is just being ignored, as Nat Parry notes.

By Nat Parry

An important debate is underway in the United States Senate this week, but if you are, like most, a casual consumer of the news, you probably wouldn't have heard about it. This is no indictment of your news-gathering habits, but rather of what passes for mass communication in modern America, in other words, the mainstream media's systematic suppression of important information.

Then again, perhaps that is too harsh. In a week dominated by saturation coverage of leaked video of NFL player Ray Rice's domestic violence, the iPhone 6 hitting the market and a possible new war being launched by President Obama, in-depth coverage of an arcane debate in the Senate might be too much to ask.

The problem is though, it's not just in-depth coverage that is lacking, but rather, any coverage at all, and it's not an arcane debate, but a highly relevant one in which the American people have a vested interest and have demonstrated a keen awareness.

The ignored debate is on a proposed amendment to the United States Constitution the 28th in its history that would empower Congress to restrict campaign financing and spending in an effort to rein in the deep-pocketed oligarchs who have been spending billions of dollars in recent years to influence electoral outcomes.

In a 79-18 procedural vote on Monday, the Senate agreed to consider the amendment, which is expressly intended as a response to Supreme Court decisions such as *Citizens United* and *McCutcheon* that have overturned campaign finance laws on constitutional grounds, severely limiting the ability of Congress to impose regulations on the raising and spending of money in elections.

Despite the media blackout, there appears to be widespread public support for the measure. According to a recent survey of likely voters in 12 states with close Senate races, a constitutional amendment to overturn *Citizens United* is supported by an overwhelming majority of 73 percent to 24 percent, support that cuts across party lines.

Americans nearly unanimously agree that there is far too much corporate money in

politics and that it corrupts America's democratic institutions. A 2012 poll commissioned by the Corporate Reform Coalition found nearly nine in 10 Americans (89 percent) agreeing with that view, and more recently, a poll commissioned by Democracy Corps found that a majority of Democrats (75 percent), independents (64 percent) and Republicans (54 percent) see the wave of spending by Super PACs in the current election cycle as "wrong and leads to our elected officials representing the views of wealthy donors."

The proposed amendment under consideration in the Senate this week seeks to redress these widespread concerns. Although many observers believe the amendment is almost certain to fail and may be part of the Democrats' electoral strategy moving into the midterm election season, it is nevertheless a rare example of grassroots democracy in action.

This week's Senate debate is the culmination of four years of grassroots organizing and mobilizing by established organizations such as Common Cause and Public Citizen, as well as relative newcomers such as Move to Amend, a coalition of hundreds of local and national organizations committed to social and economic justice.

As Public Citizen explained the protracted campaign in an email to supporters this week, the movement for amending the Constitution began the very day that the Supreme Court handed down its *Citizens United* decision in 2010. "Many in Washington, D.C.," Public Citizen's president Robert Weissman noted, "dismissed the effort as chimerical. Sure, they said, an amendment was right on the merits, but it would never be taken seriously."

But by organizing and showing that the issue could capture the imagination of the public, good-government groups forced congressional leaders to take heed.

"With each additional petition signature," Weissman wrote, "with each additional email to a member of Congress, with each additional demonstrator or attendee at a public forum, with each additional organization endorsing an amendment, with each additional meeting with representatives and senators, with each additional news story, with each additional city passing a resolution calling for an amendment, with each state passing a resolution, we showed the passion for an amendment, we educated more of the public and we quieted the doubters."

Earlier this week, three million petition signatures were delivered to Congress calling for a constitutional amendment. The petition signers joined 16 states and nearly 500 local governments that had already registered their support for a constitutional amendment. Despite this groundswell of support and the fact that not only President Barack Obama but also key leaders of the House and Senate have expressed support for amending the Constitution, the issue is still treated

as something of a pariah among the media.

As Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont) said on Monday, “Now you may not know it if you watch TV lately or if you read the newspapers because this issue gets very little coverage, but the truth of the matter is that the issue that we will be debating this week is the most important issue that we have discussed in a number of years.”

“The major issue of our time,” he said, “is whether the United States of America retains its democratic foundation or whether we devolve into an oligarchic form of society where a handful of billionaires are able to control our political process by spending hundreds of millions of dollars to elect candidates who represent their interests.”

In 2012, just 32 donors gave more to Super PACs than 3.7 million average Americans who donated amounts under \$200 to presidential candidates Mitt Romney or Barack Obama. In the 2014 election cycle, federal candidates and political parties have already raised more than \$1.8 billion. Independent Super PACs and others have spent an additional \$190 million to support or oppose individual candidates.

The entire campaign this year is expected to cost more than \$4 billion a record for a midterm election and of course most of that money will end up going directly into the coffers of the media companies that will be inundating voters with advertisements, mostly negative and largely misleading, in the weeks leading up to the election.

It is this massive gravy train of cash that the media is loath to give up, and perhaps it is for this reason that we’re not hearing a peep about the historic debate in the Senate this week to amend the Constitution.

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