

US House defeats campaign finance bill

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The defeat of campaign finance reform legislation in the House of Representatives Monday puts an end, for this year at least, to the charade of the political representatives of corporate America pretending that they are outraged and sickened by the dominance of big money in American politics.

The House Republican leadership blocked any vote on the legislation introduced by Republican Christopher Shays and Democrat Martin Meehan which would have placed some restrictions on the flood of money which has driven up the cost of running in US elections to astronomical levels.

A competitive race for a seat in the House of Representatives now costs at least \$1 million, and a seat in the US Senate can require, depending on the size of the state, as much as \$30 million. In 1996 more than \$2.5 billion was expended on campaigns for the presidency, the 435 seats in the House and the 33 seats which were up for election in the US Senate.

The Shays-Meehan bill would have barred so-called soft money contributions, in which contributors give vast sums to state and national party bodies, rather than directly to the candidates themselves. This permits big donors to evade the legal \$1,000 limit on contributions to individual candidates.

Similar legislation introduced by Republican John McCain and Democrat Russ Feingold died in the Senate last month after it received only a 51-48 majority, well under the 60 votes required to overcome the filibuster organized by the Republican leadership.

Speaker Newt Gingrich and Majority Leader Richard Arney devised similar parliamentary obstacles in the House after determining that a narrow majority would support the Shays-Meehan bill. A bill was introduced by Republican Bill Thomas as a substitute for Shays-Meehan, barring any vote on the original proposal. The Thomas bill and three related bills were brought up for consideration under a procedure which barred

amendments, limited debate to 20 minutes on each side and required a two-thirds majority for passage.

The Thomas bill was voted down overwhelmingly, by 74 to 337, as well as a companion bill which would have required unions to receive written permission from members before making political contributions. Two other bills were adopted with little opposition, one of them slightly tightening the procedure for reporting campaign contributions, the other banning campaign contributions by resident aliens and legal immigrants.

The last bill, a reactionary, chauvinist measure inspired by the hue and cry over contributions to the 1996 Clinton-Gore campaign from Asian-Americans, was adopted by an overwhelming bipartisan vote, 369 to 43.

The McCain-Feingold and Shays-Meehan bills have been embraced by the Clinton administration, congressional Democrats, and the AFL-CIO, as a means of reducing the huge fundraising advantage which the Republican Party presently enjoys. For the same reason, the congressional Republicans have worked to torpedo the legislation.

The official campaign finance debate is utterly devoid of principle. Neither side advocates the genuine democratizing of American politics, which would require shattering the effective political monopoly enjoyed by the corporate interests that control both the Democrats and the Republicans.

Even a third capitalist candidate was too much for the Democrats and Republicans in 1996, when they joined forces to exclude billionaire H. Ross Perot from the presidential debates, although he had won 19 million votes in 1992. As for socialist and working class parties, the Democrats and Republicans work hand in hand to keep their left-wing opponents off the ballot, while the media monopolies systematically deny access to anyone who would challenge the corporate consensus.

Nonpartisan groups advocating campaign finance “reform,” such as Common Cause and the Center for Responsive Politics, are attacking a symptom rather than the underlying disease, seeking to restrict the power of big money in politics while accepting the domination of society as a whole by corporate wealth.

Such measures can have only the most cosmetic of effects under conditions where the entire political system is awash in money. According to a report issued earlier this month, organized lobbying groups, the overwhelming majority of them representing corporate and business interests, spent \$1.2 billion annually, or \$100 million a month, simply to lobby the 535 members of the House and Senate and the leading officials of the federal bureaucracy. This is on top of the vast sums expended on election campaigns.

Whatever the intentions of their proponents, the proposals for campaign finance “reform” have become the vehicle for new attacks on democratic rights. Reporting requirements for political campaigns, easily circumvented by corporations and big business parties with large stables of attorneys, have instead been used to harass contributors to socialist and working class campaigns.

Congressional Republicans are proposing new measures to harass Hispanic and Asian-American voters, claiming that there is an epidemic of “vote fraud” involving undocumented workers going to the polls. And the measures against the use of union money in political campaigns are aimed, not merely against the current AFL-CIO policy of all-out support for the Democrats, but against any political action by the working class outside the existing two-party system.



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