

Campaign finance reform: A liberal fig leaf for the decay of American democracy

Patrick Martin
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The passage of legislation banning large “soft-money” contributions to US political campaigns has been hailed in certain quarters as a political new Jerusalem. After the 60-40 Senate vote March 19 that sent the legislation on to President Bush, the *New York Times* gushed that advocates of campaign finance reform had won “an extraordinary victory.”

The legislation was sponsored in the Senate by Republican John McCain and Democrat Russell Feingold, in the House of Representatives by Republican Christopher Shays and Democrat Martin Meehan. It passed each house with near-unanimous support from Democrats, joined by a relative handful of Republicans. President Bush has agreed to sign rather than veto the bill—a fact that, in and of itself, demonstrates that the legislation cannot be a threat to the domination of Washington by moneyed corporate interests.

The McCain-Feingold or Shays-Meehan bill will have a relatively small effect on the actual conduct of US election campaigns, which have developed, especially over the past two decades, into gargantuan exercises in saturation television advertising, together with stage-managed events whose purpose is to produce free advertising in the guise of news coverage.

In the 2000 election cycle, more than \$3 billion was expended for or against the candidates of the Democratic and Republican parties for state and federal office, including the presidency. The ban on soft-money contributions would eliminate \$500 million in spending, about one sixth of the total, if one assumes—though no one does—that those who supply the soft-money donations will not find another route to buying political influence.

The other major provision of the legislation is to restrict so-called “issue ads,” thinly disguised campaign advertising purchased by corporations, unions and lobbying groups, during the final 60 days of the general election campaign. Such ads have become notorious in recent years, saturating the airwaves with last-minute smears against targeted candidates, sponsored by groups whose donors frequently remain anonymous and unaccountable.

This type of political pollution, however, is a symptom rather than a cause of the decay of American democracy, as the Democrats and Republicans shift further to the right, and the two officially recognized parties become more and more divorced from the interests of the great majority of working people.

The campaign finance bill was a centerpiece in McCain’s unsuccessful bid for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000, and the McCain-Feingold bill passed the Senate nearly a year ago. Its House equivalent, Shays-Meehan, was bottled up by the Republican leadership for six months, until an unusual procedure known as a discharge petition, signed by a majority of the House of Representatives, forced an up-or-down vote last month. Shays-Meehan passed the lower house by a comfortable margin, and this version of the bill, which differs slightly from McCain-Feingold, was adopted by the Senate last week.

In the course of a ferocious struggle over the legislation, both sides engaged in demagogic posturing. The Republican right—enthusiastic supporters of gag rules when it comes to abortion rights advocates, gays and lesbians, opponents of US militarism, etc.—wrapped themselves in the First Amendment. They portrayed any restriction on campaign spending by corporations and right-wing forces as an attack on democratic rights, and suggested that the restriction on issue ads was aimed at protecting incumbent officeholders from political criticism.

Supporters of the legislation made equally sweeping claims of an opposite character. Passage of campaign finance reform, they declared, was the first step in revitalizing American democracy by freeing the political system from the domination of big-money interests. This despite the fact that McCain-Feingold and Shays-Meehan had the support of hundreds of major corporations, including much of the corporate-controlled media.

The leading US daily newspapers, especially the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, made passage of campaign finance reform their number one political priority, devoting an extraordinary degree of attention to the issue. The *Times*

alone ran 10 editorials on campaign finance reform during the eight-week period, from January 25 through March 21, when the bill was making its way through the House and Senate. The *Post* ran eight such editorials. Every twist and turn in the tortuous process sparked further comments, in which the editorial writers prescribed specific legislative tactics.

Nothing in recent political history has attracted such intense pressure from the two leading US newspapers, an interest out of all proportion to the objective significance of the legislation. While repeatedly hailing the Shays-Meehan bill as a turning point in the struggle for democracy, the *Times* did not even comment editorially on the revelation that the Bush administration has established a “shadow government” in the aftermath of September 11, while the *Post* downplayed the significance of reports that the Bush administration has ordered a Pentagon strategy review aimed at targeting seven countries for preemptive attack with nuclear weapons.

In other words, both newspapers threw themselves into the struggle for the fig leaf of political “reform,” while ignoring or downplaying the moves by the Bush administration to establish dictatorial rule and prepare for military aggression all over the world.

During the same period, moreover, both newspapers made only the most muted protests over such sweeping attacks on democratic rights as the mass roundup and secret detention of immigrants from the Middle East and Central Asia, the defiance of international law in the treatment of Afghan War POWs held at Guantanamo naval base, and the refusal of the Bush administration to release information on contacts between Enron and other big corporations and the White House task force on energy.

Despite the remarkable display of hypocrisy all around, it would be wrong to dismiss the conflict over campaign finance reform as “sound and fury, signifying nothing.” There are real political issues, even if not those publicly espoused by both sides.

The main concern of the Republican congressional leadership is that their political position is so fragile, it could collapse under the impact of any measure, no matter how timid, which restricts the influence of corporate lobbyists and the wealthy. The leaders of the far right are well aware that their policies—slashing taxes for the wealthy and big business at the expense of working people, implementing the agenda of the Christian fundamentalists on abortion and other social issues—are deeply unpopular.

The concern of McCain, Feingold and their supporters, particularly in the elite editorial boards, is that the US political system has become so corrupt—and so openly, shamelessly, flagrantly corrupt—that it has been discredited

in the eyes of tens of millions of people.

The danger, as far as this section of the ruling elite is concerned, is that political movements will arise outside the confines of the existing system and beyond its control. In the event of political convulsions arising from the deepening social and economic crisis of the profit system, the old structure of two big business parties alternating in office may be blown apart.

As the *Post* wrote in its editorial celebrating final Senate passage, “The changes won’t flush all the soft money out of the system, but they will take federal candidates out of the business of soliciting that money for political parties. Breaking that link to big money may help reduce public cynicism about politics and elected officials.”

As for the *Times*, far from advocating greater democracy during the 2000 election, the newspaper waged a vitriolic campaign against Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader, demanding that he be excluded from the televised debates and urging that he withdraw his candidacy rather than take votes away from Democratic candidate Al Gore. When the election culminated in the conflict over Florida’s electoral votes, the *Times* denounced Gore for pursuing legal action to force the counting of disputed ballots and called for acceptance of the Supreme Court’s unprecedented intervention to suppress the vote-counting and award the presidency to Bush, despite the fact that Bush had lost the popular vote.

The concern of the *Times* has not been the defense of democratic rights, let alone the expansion of the political choices available to the American people. It has been to preserve the existing two-party system, through which the American ruling class maintains its political monopoly and blocks any political alternative that challenges the profit system and corporate domination.



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