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Campaign Finance Cynics

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Nothing produces more finely chiseled hypocrisy than campaign politics. Consider that on the issue of campaign-finance reform, Republicans and Democrats are now on the opposite sides of where they were only four years ago. And they're both still claiming this is all a matter of high moral principle. Beautiful.

The worst chiselers are House Republicans, who opposed McCain-Feingold back in 2002 on grounds that it was a violation of free speech and wouldn't stop the flow of money in any case. They were right at the time. But this week they are going to try and do John McCain one better, or should we say worse, and vote to curb so-called 527 organizations. These are the funding vehicles that George Soros, Stephen Bing and Harold Ickes have used to (legally) evade McCain-Feingold and help elect liberal Democrats.


The GOP goal is to close these cash-raising machines, which in 2004 and heading into November of this year have been exploited with more skill by the left. Naturally, Democrats are now saying these 527s are a bulwark of free political speech and association. This time *they're* right, though you'd think that some Democrat somewhere would be red-faced about this egregious switcheroo. But politics means never having to say you're embarrassed.

The larger embarrassment here is for the cause of "campaign-finance reform," which has once again been exposed as partisan hackery posing as good government. Far from exiling big money from politics, McCain-Feingold's ban on "soft money" merely moved that cash away from political parties that could be held accountable for their sins and into the shadow world of less accountable 527s and 501(c)4s, another IRS category used by interest groups.

For example, these "shadow political action committees" are now paying for automated phone calls that deliver nasty messages about GOP incumbents to the homes of voters in swing House districts. The calls include the accusation that a Congressional recess was really a "vacation," including against one incumbent who was recuperating from lung-cancer surgery. A labor-sponsored outfit called Working America recently informed voters by phone that Ohio Republican Steve Chabot had supported the Medicare prescription drug bill and received campaign donations from drug companies. In fact, Mr. Chabot voted against the 2003 bill.

All of this is taking place under the radar of McCain-Feingold's command that candidates claim responsibility for their TV ads: "I'm John War Hero and I paid for this message." Thus can a candidate pretend to be a statesman on TV, while Working America or the like is knee-capping his opponent in other ways and unlinked to John War Hero.

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The solution here isn't to tilt at the windmill of closing this or that "loophole," because there will always be another such loophole as long as there are money and politics. If Republicans ban 527s, which at least have to disclose the names of their contributors, the money will move to 501(c)4s, which can keep their donors to themselves.

If Republicans were smart and consistent, they'd instead broadcast the failure of McCain-Feingold, exploit 527s themselves to level the playing field, and call for the entire campaign-finance system to be deregulated. This would allow unlimited donations to candidates and parties as long as they are disclosed within 24 hours on the Internet. At least then the politicians would be publicly accountable for the financial company they keep.

Believe it or not, the only folks behaving well on this subject lately have been the bureaucrats at the Federal Election Commission. Two years ago the FEC provided a blanket exemption from McCain-Feingold to all Internet activity, only to be challenged in court by the law's creators. A federal judge then ordered the FEC to write campaign-finance rules for the Internet. The ensuing outrage was instructive, as many of the same bloggers who'd praised McCain-Feingold realized that the primary effect of such regulations could be to limit the ability of pajama-clad activists like themselves to influence elections.

The FEC's response last week was to take the narrowest course, ruling unanimously that only paid political advertisements placed on Web sites would be covered by the 2002 law. The decision is especially notable because it means the Commission has in effect decreed that every blogger in the nation is a journalist and thereby eligible for the press exemptions in McCain-Feingold. Congress's attempt to further restrict donations that finance TV and newspaper ads at the same time that Internet mobilizing proliferates only underscores how futile and misguided McCain-Feingold and its progeny are.

Voters are smart, and given enough information can make up their own minds about which candidates are corrupted by money. As for Republicans, their 527 charade is further proof that in the current Congress they are behaving all too much like Democrats.

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