

Commentary

GOP Moves Toward an Imperial Congress

■ **Washington:** From proposed limits on advocacy by nonprofits to stifling of debate, Republicans seek a monopoly on power.

By HENRY A. WAXMAN

Republicans have been in control of the House for less than a year, but it's already clear that they aren't satisfied with just winning legislative victories. Their ultimate goal seems to be to create an Imperial Congress—permanently eliminating any meaningful opposition to their ideological agenda.

This week, House and Senate conferees are considering a House-passed gag rule that would make it nearly impossible for the American Lung Assn., the National Council of Senior Citizens, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops or any other nonprofit group that receives federal funds to petition Congress. This House legislation prohibits organizations that receive even \$1 in federal grants from using more than 5% of their own private funds in "political advocacy."

The gag rule is the first time Congress has attempted to restrict political expression paid for with private donations. The nonprofit organizations aren't being harassed because they lobby with federal funds; we already have laws making this illegal. Rather, these organizations are being targeted because they don't pass the new majority's "political correctness" test.

There's not even a pretense of even-handedness. Huge corporations that receive millions in federal grants—and, incidentally, make generous campaign contributions to the Republican Party—are not affected by the gag rule. General Electric, which received more than \$6 million in federal grants in 1994, can continue to lobby for rollbacks in federal environmental laws, but the Sierra Club, which received only \$5,000 in federal grants, would be prohibited from opposing these efforts.

Unfortunately, the gag rule is just the latest development in a systematic effort to silence and coerce dissenting voices.

In April, Richard Armev, the House

majority leader, sent a letter to 82 large companies to protest their contributions to "liberal advocacy groups." He wrote that stopping these contributions would "reinforce the work ethic and rebuild a prosperous America."

In May, Rep. Bill Paxon, the chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee, began compiling a list of Democratic-leaning lobbyists. Paxon's reasoning was blunt: "We want our members to know that and to get our message out that we need change." He later distributed to freshman Republicans a list of "unfriendly" groups who gave to Democratic candidates.

In June, Rep. Tom DeLay, the majority whip, threatened groups that gave to Republican Rep. Randy Tate's Democratic opponent in the 1994 election, warning that "to work toward a positive future relationship" with the Republican leadership, the organizations must give Tate "immediate support."

Throughout the year, the Republican leadership has tried to muzzle federal officials. In March, Republicans charged EPA Administrator Carol Browner with a criminal violation of the Anti-Lobbying Act. Her offense: distributing a fact sheet critical of Republican efforts to weaken federal environmental laws. A month later, Armev tried to silence Labor Secretary Robert Reich and officials of the Department of Health and Human Services with similar unfounded accusations.

Even the Republican leadership's approach to Medicare and Medicaid reflects their aversion to public debate. Unprecedented changes to these programs are being proposed by the Republicans, but when the Democrats asked for hearings and an opportunity to air their concerns, Speaker Gingrich said, "I don't have any interest in playing debate games."

While I recognize that I have deep substantive disagreements with the Republican majority, I accept their right to their views. Civil debate, waged fairly and openly, is what politics in a democracy is all about.

But no one who values democracy should accept the new majority's efforts to quash debate, intimidate those who disagree with them and railroad major policy changes into law without hearings. That crosses the line

that separates a legitimate policy dispute from an abuse of political power—and it is dangerous.

Consider the implications if the Republicans can dictate which candidates contributors give to, if they can control which public-interest groups corporations support, if they can prohibit private citizens who have joined together from expressing their views and if they can even deny members of Congress the chance for hearings and debate on major legislations.

The battle in Washington is moving beyond any one issue; it's ultimately going to be a fight over a monopoly of power. And right now, hardly anyone even realizes the fight has begun.

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