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# *The Campaign Against Campaign Reform*

THE CAUSE OF political reform suffered a setback but not a total defeat at the hands of Senate filibusterers this week. There were three useful consequences of the unsuccessful move to use the debt ceiling bill as a vehicle for public financing of campaigns. First, the effort brought about a broad consensus among its champions. Second, reformers managed to obtain commitments of action early next year from the chairmen of both the Senate Rules and House Administration Committees. Finally, the drive laid bare the hypocrisy and self-interest which play such large roles in the opposition to campaign finance reform.

Consider, for example, the administration's role. On November 17, President Nixon told the Associated Press Managing Editors at Disney World that it is his hope to be remembered as "one who did his best, when his own campaign got out of hand, to do everything possible to see that other campaigns didn't get out of hand in the future." Yet two weeks later, White House lobbyists were doing everything they could to keep the public financing bill from reaching the President's desk. In their most brazen move, Mr. Nixon's men even provided a government jet to bring two friendly Senators back to Washington from a quail hunt in Oklahoma to vote against cloture. So much for the fuel shortage.

Such all-out hostility to public financing might be justifiable if the President had advanced any serious reform proposals of his own. But Mr. Nixon should not be ranked among those opponents of the measure who did openly press respectable, detailed arguments against the bill. Over the months that Congress has been grappling with the issue, Mr. Nixon has made only two contributions. Seizing on a time-honored dodge, he has repeatedly proposed that the whole matter be assigned to a commission. Simultaneously, he has provided—through the gross abuses of his own re-election drive—the best illustration of exactly how a campaign can "get out of hand," and why big money should be purged from politics now.

To be fair, the President is not the only person in a leadership role who has failed to respond to the public hunger for basic reforms. The Democratic leaders of the House have approached the whole subject with roughly the enthusiasm of men facing dental surgery. Last week, for instance, it took a frenzied lobbying campaign by advocates of public finance to convince the House leadership that simply killing the Senate-passed reforms would be politically unwise. Even then, the leaders of the House would consider only a measure limited to *presidential* elections—leaving their own carefully out of reach.

There is no mystery about the cause of such resistance in the House. It is simply the fear that public financing, extended to congressional campaigns, would fuel effective challenges to the incumbents who now, as Common Cause has documented, are able to raise and spend about twice as much as their opponents and thus enjoy an almost insurmountable advantage in campaigns. Last week's maneuvering at least smoked out this fear. Rep. Al Ullman (D-Ore.), for one, protested that public financing could "destroy every member of the House" by enmeshing them all in "day-to-day local politics." This amounts to equating the safety of incumbents with the health of the House, and suggesting that representative government can be threatened by a little more contact between the governed and their governers. Actually, the lack of competition in many districts is a major source of stagnation in the House.

It is harder to see why so many Senate Republicans encouraged the filibuster against public finance. If nothing else, their instincts for self-preservation should have informed them by this time that political safety lies in detachment from anything smacking of business-as-usual influence-peddling, funny money and secret deals. Instead, by joining Sen. James Allen's obstructive maneuver, the bulk of the Senate's Republicans helped to foster the impression, already quite widespread, that their party is hostile to reforms and all too comfortable with the existing, exploitative ways of compaign finance.

The fact is that Watergate has made the old arguments against public finance, especially of presidential campaigns, doubly untenable. Consider the charge that public financing would cost too much. The rockbottom consensus plan—an enlargement of the existing dollar check-off for presidential general elections alone—could involve public outlays of $45 or $50 million every four years. That is about what Mr. Nixon's money men extracted by their strong-arm methods last year. And it looks like a blue-chip investment compared with the enormous cost in public confidence and trust involved in perpetuating the influence of big-spending private interests.

In a similar vein, there is little to be said for the argument that public finance would give decisive and undue advantage to those candidates who can mobilize large squads of volunteers—which to many usually means organized labor's support. But grass-roots organization is no longer the monopoly of labor or any other single force, as environmentalists and conservative groups have shown. Those who object to greater citizen involvement in campaigns are either insecure in office, or so jaded that they have forgotten what republican—or should we say, democratic?—government is all about.

Like every battle for political reform, the fight over public finance is rapidly coming down to a contest bewteen the self-interest of those who now enjoy power and the larger national interest in electoral vitality and openness. The Senate filibuster and the House recalcitrance have at least served to identify the figures and forces on both sides. By the time the two committees return to the issue next month, in accord with their chairmen's public promises, the issues and the stakes should be even more clear to all members of Congress—and to their constituents.