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One Victory for Reform

THE SENATE strengthened its reputation as an independent-minded place yesterday by voting to preserve the current system of public financing for presidential campaigns. It was an important victory because it means that at least one sector of the electoral system—and a very important one—will be partially insulated from the pressures of big money fund-raising. The public financing system was one of the most important reforms to grow out of the reaction to the Watergate scandal. It's a reform that has actually worked quite well, and there is no reason to repeal it. The vote was also important because it scuttled a tricky maneuver under which a huge change in the political process would have been rushed through as part of the complex budget resolution that the Senate is now considering. Yesterday's vote for an amendment offered by Sen. John F. Kerry (D-Mass.) stripped the resolution of language aimed at killing the system after the next election.

This victory could not have happened if 10 reform-minded Republicans had not joined with Democrats to save the public financing system—a sign, one hopes, that this Congress need not get mired in bitter partisan confrontation on every single issue. The crucial Republican votes came from Sens. Cohen, Campbell, Chafee, Jeffords, Kassebaum, Lugar, Snowe, Specter, Stevens and Thompson. The votes of Sens. Lugar and Specter are particularly significant because both are running for president and will be using federal matching money to help finance their

campaigns. But Bob Dole and Phil Gramm, who are also running for president and will also be looking for those public funds, voted to kill the system that they are counting on to help them this time around. Mr. Lugar and Mr. Specter have a right to ask Mr. Dole and Mr. Gramm to put their money where their votes are. If Sens. Dole and Gramm really think that using public money in campaigns is so wrong, they don't have to accept their share for the 1996 campaign.

Critics of the public financing system argued that its impact had been lessened by large loopholes that permit political parties to raise millions of dollars in "soft money" to supplement the federal funds. But the Senate wisely decided that this was not an argument for killing the existing system but rather for improving it by closing up the soft money loopholes. Doing so ought to be part of a larger effort to reform the financing of contests for the House and Senate. House and Senate races are getting ever more expensive, which only increases the impact of money on the political process. Yesterday's heartening vote suggests that in the Senate, at least, there might be the makings of a bipartisan majority for improving the system. We hope in particular that members of the Republican reform block that emerged on this vote will stick together to foil any future assaults on public financing of presidential campaigns and to urge their leaders to put broader campaign reforms on the agenda of this Congress.