WXPost JUL 1 1 1973

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'Incumbents' Re-Election Act of 1973'

The only thing more dangerous to democracy than corrupt politicians may be politicians hell-bent on reform. We have had a large dose of corruption in Watergate and now, by God, they mean to make us take our medicine.

Waving the banner of reform, they have already pushed through the Senate, with a minimum of debate or public attention, a bill that would basically alter the American political calendar. A companion measure, with similarly sweeping changes in the financing of federal campaigns, is scheduled for Senate action before the end of the month and—barring public protest—will also probably gain easy passage.

Both of them are described in the noblest, most altruistic rhetoric as measures to purify politics. Both have some provisions that may be very desirable. But make both bills law and it becomes virtually impossible ever again to defeat an incumbent for Federal office. If that is not the intention of the sponsors, it is the kind of coincidence that makes one suspicious.

The first bill, already passed by the Senate at the urging of its powerful Democratic whip, Sen. Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, has as its ostensible purpose the shortening of election campaigns.

It prevents any congressional or senatorial primary being held before the first Tuesday in August and says that no presidential nominating convention may begin before the third Monday of that month.

Byrd says that by shortening the general election campaign period to about two months, his bill would "reduce campaign expenditures and renew the waning interest of citizens in the electoral process."

Noble and desirable, right? The only problem is that there is precious little reason to think that any challenger, limited to an eight-week campaign, would stand a snowball's chance in hell of defeating an incumbent representative, president or senator who has had two years, four years or six years to gain name recognition and familiarity, to propagandize his constituents at public expense and to organize his re-election campaign.

Hubert Humphrey knows from bitter personal experience in 1968 what it is like to try to heal intra-party wounds and organize a general election campaign after a nominating convention as late as that required by this bill. But Humphrey, the incumbent senator of 1973, did not raise the objections once loudly voiced by Humphrey the frustrated presidential contender.

Conceivably, an occasional challenger could overcome the disadvantages of the short campaign period by mounting a real blitz in those few weeks. But the companion measure, now awaiting Senate action, is carefully contrived to eliminate even that slight danger to incumbents.

Along with some quite desirable changes in other aspects of election law, it includes an overall spending limit of 20 cents per eligible voter for the general election. For House races, where that limit would be most restrictive, a minimum of $90,000 per district is specified.

That, too, sounds just dandy. But what is the effect of limiting a challenger to $90,000 and a short campaign when his incumbent opponent has had two years or more of federally-financed newsletters, television reports, trips home, and district office staff members to propagandize his constituents? The effect is to re-elect incumbents.

Indeed, even Common Cause, the reform-minded citizens group that is pushing for new election laws, concluded a study of the financing of last year's Senate races with the observation that "the consistently disproportionate distribution of funds between challengers and incumbents is a far more serious problem today than the total amounts being spent."

If the "reformers" in Congress wanted to address themselves to that real problem, they could easily do so. They could vote government-subsidized mailings for all federal candidates or provide public financing, equally, for the campaigns of incumbents and challengers alike.

But, for some strange reason, they are not doing that. Instead, the bill awaiting action (S 372) moves in the opposite direction, by weakening the existing statutory ban on contributions from people in companies and unions engaged in government contract work —contributions which, inevitably, would increase the incumbents' already intimidating campaign treasuries.

What these two bills amount to is the Incumbents' Guaranteed Re-Election Act of 1973. Since it is in the incumbent senators' and representatives' power to vote themselves this boon, there is no reason to doubt they will do so.

Lord save us from such reformers.