

Nixon's Call for Campaign Reform

PRESIDENT NIXON, CITING "campaign abuses recently publicized," has called upon Congress for drastic reforms in the nation's electoral process, stressing a need for limitations on campaign financing and strict prohibitions against "dirty trick" campaign practices.

While rating "broader public disclosure" as the most important element in the reformation of campaign financing, he specifically proposes that individual contributions to a presidential candidate be limited to \$15,000, and to House or Senate candidates, \$3000. No cash contribution above \$50 would be permitted, anything larger would have to be by check; donation of non-money assets such as stocks would be prohibited; and the funds for any candidate would flow through a single committee and be deposited in a single bank.

IN THE AREA OF "DIRTY tricks" his proposals for clarification and tightening of laws would prohibit disruptive and deliberately misleading campaign activities and also coercive activities such as the infiltration of hostile demonstrators into a political rally — and "election day practices, such as stuffing ballot boxes, rigging voting machines, faltering or altering ballots, or failing to count certain votes."

Though his specifics for improving the system and correcting its abuses run into thousands of words, he concedes their fallibility by concluding: "I am doubtful that any legislation can provide the panacea that some seek to guarantee absolute integrity in the electoral process."

In this respect, the President is in at least partial agreement with a study prepared for the Senate Watergate Committee by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Research, which holds in effect that too much governmental power, not too much campaign spending, is the root of the pertinent evil. "Unchecked discretion to bestow or give away economic favors permits governmental officials to wield arbitrary power," the author of the study says. "Only the imposition of controls on the exercise of that power can solve the underlying evil." He suggests that the first obvious step by Congress is to refrain from further strengthening the presidency, and the second step is to strengthen itself.

IN HIS MESSAGE TO CONGRESS, the President repeated his opposition to public financing of election campaigns, and observed that few Americans would be in favor of diverting millions away from pressing national needs "to finance some politicians' campaigns."

But even as he spoke, the Internal Revenue Service was reporting that the "dollar checkoff plan" under which taxpayers can voluntarily earmark \$1 of their income tax payments for a presidential campaign fund, has gained high public favor, and that the indicated increments will be ample to finance the 1976 presidential campaign. Returns to date indicate, the IRS says, that there will be \$25 million in the kitty this year — and \$80 million when the 1976 campaign opens.

It would therefore seem that a substantial and adequate proportion of the American public is both willing and able to support public financing of at least its most important election campaign.