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Campaign reform loophole

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WASHINGTON — Despite a new federal election law that was supposed to have reduced their dependency on big money, members of Congress are out passing the hat as if nothing had happened. The wealthy special interests are pitching in gladly.

The latest filings with the Federal Elections Commission show that most candidates already have started socking the dough away a year in advance of next year's election. Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., for instance, has raised \$224,708 and Sen. James Buckley, Con.-R-N.Y., has collected \$326,220.

The lists of contributors on file at the commission seem little different from the pre-Watergate years — mostly wealthy corporate executives and entrepreneurs. And the means of raising the money — at dinners and cocktail parties for small groups of wealthy patrons — has not changed. There simply are more dinners and more rich contributors.

The new reform law puts a limit of \$1,000 on individual contributions to a candidate and sets a spending ceiling of \$70,000 for House elections and an amount equal to 12 cents for each person of voting age in Senate contests.

These restrictions, coupled with a strengthened law against corporate and union contributions, were designed to dampen the influence of special interests on American government. But the major change it has produced is to get prospective candidates into the money game far earlier than usual — in some cases even before they have decided to run.

Prospective 1976 Senate contenders like Reps. Paul Sarbanes, D-Md., Alan Steelman, R-Conn., Donald Riegle, D-Mich., James Symington, D-Mo., and James O'Hara, D-Mich., former Sen. Joseph Tydings, D-Md., and former U.S. Atty. Gen. Ramsey

—Turn to Page 23, Col. 1

Starting early on slush funds

—From Page 22

Clark, now of New York, have been forced to tip their hands far earlier than usual. All have filed with the FEC to set up fund-raising committees for their Senate candidacies. Steelman said his was an "exploratory committee," and Riegle said it was "not an announcement of candidacy and solely for the purpose of complying with the law."

Even Kennedy, with a campaign war chest in six figures, told the commission "no decision has been made regarding a declaration of my candidacy for re-election."

The law may have had an effect on candidates like Kennedy who are independently wealthy. It bars any senator from contributing more than \$35,000 to his own campaign. The limit is \$25,000 for House members. Thus they are forced to search for campaign benefactors like everyone else.

Kennedy has collected more than some of the Democratic presidential candidates. But he has concentrated primarily on Massachusetts money so far and does not seem to be competing

with any of the presidential contenders for revenue — at least, not now.

Unlike Kennedy, who has spent only \$25,482 from his campaign kitty, many candidates — such as Buckley — seem to be spending it almost as fast as they take it in.

The Friends of Jim Buckley already has spent \$262,978 of the \$326,220 raised this year.

In fact, private fund-raising has become such a year-round occupation with incumbent members of Congress that it is difficult, from looking at the figures, to tell which senators are running in 1976 and which aren't.

Sen. John Tower, R-Tex., has a \$106,108 treasury maintained by the Tower Senate Club and his term does not expire until 1978. That figure was left even after the club spent \$20,576, including \$1,159 for Tower's unspecified travel expenses.

Sen. John Glenn, D-Ohio, has raised \$96,541 and spent \$103,738 this year — even though it will be 1980 before he runs again. Glenn raised \$10,000 in one day at the

home of Hood Bassett of Miami, chairman of the Southeast 1st National Bank. Ten fatcats, including the owner of the Holiday Inns., chipped in \$1,000 apiece.

The Senate Democratic Campaign Committee has raised \$224,943 this year, mainly from such groups as the steelworkers union political action fund, but it has spent \$259,243 on such non-campaign activities as staff salaries, lunches at the Senate restaurant and "office tickets" to Washington Redskins football games. Only \$1,000 — that earmarked for Sen. Hubert Humphrey by General Electric employes — has been forwarded to a candidate.

Ray Madden, chairman of the House Rules committee, raised \$47,161 but has spent much of it on items he lists as "entertainment," including dinner bills at a Washington restaurant.

Expenses like these are being chalked off as campaign expenditures by some members, as "office funds" or "constituent services funds." No one actually calls his own a "slush fund," although others do.