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Election Panel in Limbo

Washington

With a plodding Congress unable to meet a Supreme Court deadline, the Federal Election Commission will lose its fund-disbursing, rulemaking and enforcement powers Monday for perhaps a month — while Congress and President Ford fight over a restoration bill.

The Supreme Court held January 30 that the makeup of the commission's membership was unconstitutional because four of six members were appointed by Congress in violation of the separation-of-powers doctrine.

The court gave Congress 30 days to reconstitute the commission, but when it took Congress that long just to get started on a bill, the justices agreed to extend the deadline to March 22.

No one is asking for another extension because "we want to keep the heat on Congress," said an official for Common Cause, the election-reform group which helped obtain the earlier reprieve.

The main sticking point is a union-backed proposal to knock down a commission ruling that permitted corporations to solicit campaign contributions not only from stockholders and executives but also from all other employees, including union members.

Despite losing its major powers at least for the time being, the commission will continue to receive and publish reports on contributions and expenditures by candidates and political committees. And it will continue to audit candidates' claims for federal matching funds.

Disbursement of funds will resume immediately after the commission's powers are restored.

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