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Money And Politics

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, Nov. 7—When Jimmy Carter takes the oath next January, his situation will differ from that of other recent newly-elected Presidents in one interesting respect: He will not be obligated to a single large campaign contributor.

Of course he owes a good deal, in human and political terms, to individuals whose support influenced large blocs of voters. To take one outstanding example, Representative Andrew Young of Georgia gave Mr. Carter *bona fides* not only in the black community but among northern liberals. But there is no significant obligation in terms of money.

Most of the funds for this year's Presidential campaign came from the Federal Treasury, and private contributors could not give more than $1,000 to any one candidate. The statute that created the new system, the Campaign

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Reform Act of 1974, has been widely criticized, and for some good reasons. But it has gone a long way toward a highly desirable end—reducing the influence of money on politics.

Political professions complain that the statute is too rigid in the spending ceilings it fixes. By accepting Federal funds, President Ford and Mr. Carter limited themselves under the law to total spending of about $22 million each after they were nominated. And that did turn out to be a stringent limit.

So much of the permitted money went for advertising, especially on television, that there was almost nothing left for basic political organization. State Democratic committees, for example, are accustomed to getting money from the national campaign. This year California, the most populous state, got only about $200,000. Result: no free buttons or bumper-stickers, and very little professional organizing.

Volunteers become more important under the new law. But even volunteers cost money. They cannot be used without office space and telephones and desks and copying machines and stamps—and a professional here and there. Auditors and lawyers are essential to keep in track with the intricate new law.

There is a point, then, to the complaints about the expediture limits that go with public financing of Presidential campaigns. The one that seems most compelling is the difficulty of organizing. The candidates themselves ended up, this year, trying to arouse local constituencies to get to the polls: That was a major object of both Mr. Carter and Mr. Ford as they dashed around the country in the last week.

Congress would be wise to reflect on this first experience under the new law and amend it for greater flexibility. Before long we should have the figures on what the candidates actually spent for advertising, travel, staff and so on. It should be possible to relate future spending ceilings to the particular needs demonstrated in 1976. But ceilings remain essential; without them we would have had an even more commercialized campaign this year.

The 1974 law needs amending, or more accurately re-stating, in another respect. It originally provided that no candidate could spend more than $50,000 of his own or his immediate family's money in a campaign for President, $35,000 for the Senate, $25,000 for most House seats. But the Supreme Court struck that provision down last January as an unconstitutional limit on freedom of speech.

The Supreme Court decision was criticized then as ill-considered, and time has made it look worse. In this election two men—one Democrat, one Republican—effectively bought high office. John D. Rockefeller 4th spent $2 million of his own to become Governor of West Virginia; H. John Heinz 3d, $2.2 million to be Senator from Pennsylvania.

The Court's unconvincing attempt to equate money with "speech" cannot be the end of the story. Congress should make a new, more sophisticated effort to control the use of private wealth in politics.

One possibility is to extend public financing to Congressional and senatorial campaigns, conditioning it on limited private spending by the candidate or others on his behalf. But reformers will have to be on their guard to make sure that any such change is not designed to help those whose names are already known, namely incumbents. As the results in House races last week suggested, incumbency is already too great an advantage for the health of democracy.

Money is not everything in politics. It did not dictate President Ford's fatal choice of Robert Dole, the Jud Fry of the 1976 campaign, who could not resist playing his role of the bad guy; to the end he refused to admit that Adolf Hitler had anything to do with starting that "Democrat war," World War II. If Mr. Ford had picked William Ruckelshaus or Howard Baker, he might well have won.

But money can corrupt the political process. The reforms voted by Congress in 1974 have already done much for the legitimacy of our politics, and we should be grateful for that. This time, we have no reason to suspect that anyone has bought an embassy or an airline route.