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Cleaning up campaign financing

AN EMERALD EDITORIAL

Effective campaign finance reform requires changing the Constitution and putting an end to private and corporate donations

Buckley must die. In this case, the Buckley in question is not the conservative gentleman with the funny sounding voice but Buckley v. Valeo, the 1976 Supreme Court opinion that banned caps on campaign spending (but not individual contributions) as violating free speech.

Effective campaign finance reform will eventually require a constitutional amendment that would override Buckley. The reality of our political system is such that only reform that eliminates the role private and corporate contributors play in the process will ensure some degree of democracy.

Right now, Congress is examining the campaign finance situation. The most widely circulated proposal, the McCain-Feingold bill, seems to be slipping into oblivion. This is neither surprising nor necessarily bad.

McCain-Feingold would ban so-called "soft money" contributions to political campaigns. Soft money is given to a political party, which is supposed to spend the money on party building, whatever that means. Increasingly, however, this money is being raised by candidates and given to parties with the explicit expectation that it be spent to promote that same candidate.

Soft money allows corporations to avoid laws that ban them from contributing to political campaigns. Moreover, it enables both corporations and political action committees, or PACs, to ignore contribution caps currently in place.

Eliminating this money and the problems that stem from it would certainly be an important step toward effective reform of the system. According to Professor Jamin Raskin, writing in the May 5 Nation, the major parties spent almost \$90 million just on the presidential campaign in 1996. That sum is in addition to money raised within the confines of traditional fund-raising apparatuses, and the money spent by parties is dominated by special-interest donations.

McCain-Feingold is not enough to fix this system, however. Raskin reports that the two major candidates also spent \$63 million of privately donated money. Rais-

ing this level of funding, a requirement in today's political landscape, severely compromises the integrity of the candidates.

A campaign donation isn't the same thing as a bribe. Nevertheless, there is no question donations influence political behavior. If candidates want to win an election, they need donations; if they want donations, they need to appear politically useful to the people who give money. Massive contributions from pro-business interests have led to a political situation in which most of our "leaders" argue for the same corporate mentality, regardless of their party.

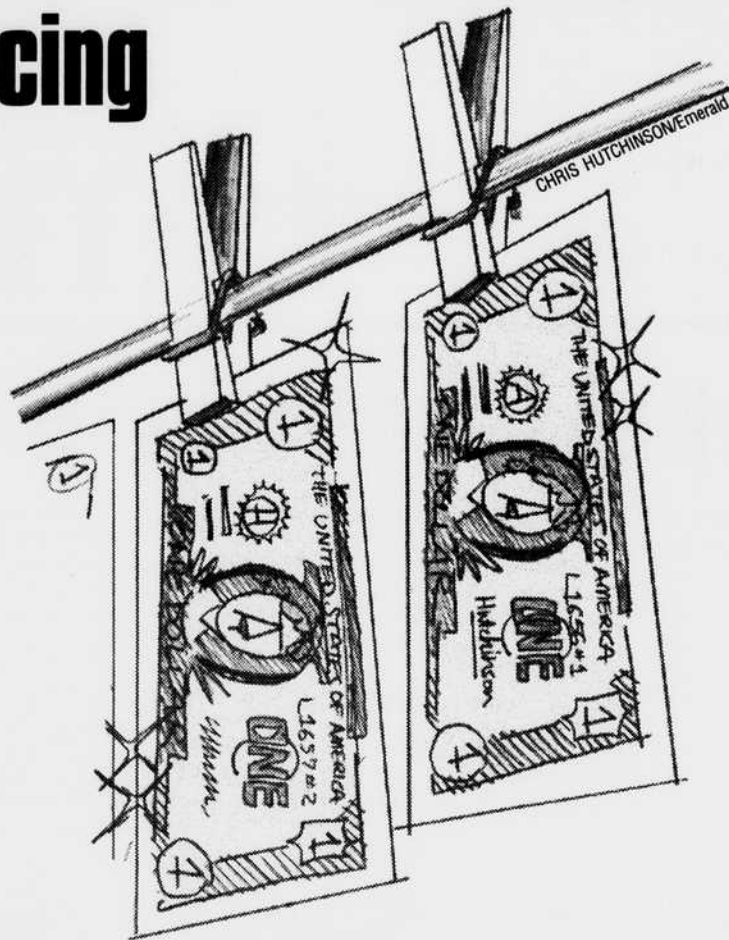
There is a proposal that would come far closer to fixing this problem. In Maine, voters approved a proposal that would provide for publicly financed campaigns. Candidates are required to show a minimum threshold of support by collecting \$5 donations. Once in the system, candidates would agree to stop soliciting private donations and soft money; in return, they would receive state money, free broadcast time and access to a public debate.

According to Raskin, such a proposal has public support on a national level. He cites a 1996 survey in which 68 percent of respondents said they would be in favor of a system similar to that proposed in Maine.

In addition, proposals have been made at the national level to enact a federally financed campaign system. Senators John Kerry, Paul Wellstone and John Glenn announced they would work toward a similar proposal at the federal level, titling their bill "Clean Money, Clean Elections." Oregon's Representative Peter DeFazio announced in July he would introduce a similar bill in the House.

According to DeFazio's office, the proposal would cost roughly \$2 billion annually. A lot of money, but small by federal budget standards. In addition, the amount of unnecessary spending enacted by legislators soliciting increased donations is probably far greater than \$2 billion.

Unfortunately, aside from a few press releases, the plan has received no attention from the press. Debate has focused on



McCain-Feingold and the hearings that are investigating President Clinton's fund-raising efforts.

The reason is simple: Clean Money threatens to reduce corporate influence, eliminate massive campaign war chests that transform into retirement funds when candidates leave, reduce the power of incumbency and introduce a major third-party factor to elections.

Third parties could prove crucial to shaking up American politics. By providing ideas more radical than those proposed by the mainstream, corporate-controlled politicians of today, third-party candidates could widen the range of issues being debated and increase the interest of many marginalized voters in the political process. Whether or not you support groups like the Green Party, they are still admirable for their ability to place environmental issues on the political agenda and force Democrats to acknowledge the left in their party.

Motivated by fear, federal lawmakers are reluctant to give up their privileged

position by enacting effective campaign finance reform. This reluctance points to the biggest flaw in the Clean Money proposals: They're voluntary. Candidates who are reluctant to enact such a system are likely to be reluctant to participate in it.

While the proposal accounts for this possibility by pledging to match an opponent's privately raised funds for participating candidates, such a solution would be expensive and still might fail. The most obvious solution is to make participation mandatory.

This is where Buckley comes into play. Without a constitutional amendment overriding free-speech protections of political donations, even the most effective proposals for finance reform are rendered impotent. And if such reforms are rendered limp, the political system as a whole will continue to fall.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Squirrels are hungry

With regard to Eric Collins' article "Squirrels may face nut shortage" (ODE, Nov. 10) where he expressed my concerns about the scarcity of acorns on campus this year, some observations are needed.

When Tim King, the University campus and grounds supervisor, said that the acorn crop was good, he was not talking about this year. He said to me on the phone that he had meant that the acorn yield was good on normal years. He said that he had not gone out this fall to see what was happening. In fact, there are very few acorns anywhere. A couple of trees by Susan Campbell Hall have a mediocre crop, and I counted 15 squirrels working there at the same time. Two trees near the main entrance to Mac Court had a decent crop, but most of those acorns were crushed by cars, and what is left is pretty un-

reachable for the squirrels who have to cross University Street to get them one by one. Some squirrels are digging acorns up this fall. They're usually burying them in November to have for the whole year.

The squirrels don't look malnourished now because they have been living on last year's crop. My concern is about the coming year. It's true that squirrels eat other things such as bark, fruit, berries, fungi and insects, but these are things that they find in a completely natural environment. In such a place trees get old and fall and as they break down, insects work the wood, the bark falls apart, fungi grow, berries take over as part of the ecosystem, and so on. Here we have a manicured campus with very few fruits or berries where insects are kept to a minimum. When any trees show signs of old age, they are cut down and hauled away. The

campus is not a wild environment and the squirrels don't have adjoining forests where they can go when things are bad.

To complicate matters several oak trees have been cut down in campus in recent years. Have they been replaced with new ones? I wish the University would recognize that the squirrels are a part of the campus and that in such an artificial environment, wildlife management is needed and should be more than the removal of dead or bothersome animals. This year the squirrels need the acorns and they are not here. I personally feel that we should give them some help when a bad year like this one happens. If anybody out there knows of an area of Eugene where there is a definite excess of acorns or nuts (please be sure that it is really an excess because I would not want to take them away from

the local animals there), give me a call. I will drive there sometime with my station wagon and get a load or two to scatter around here.

Luis Verano
 Romance languages

Deserves coverage

Last Sunday, Nov. 2, a group of 82 greek members, with representatives from Delta Sigma Phi, Phi Delta Theta, Kappa Sigma, Sigma Kappa, Gamma Phi Beta, Delta Tau Delta, Theta Chi, Delta Gamma and Chi Omega, went to the North Jetty of Florence to participate in the second annual Delta Sigma Phi Beach Cleanup. With garbage bags supplied by Stop Oregon Litter and Vandalism and the cooperation of coastal weather, we were able to collect garbage along a two-mile stretch of beach.

While we recognize that this isn't the only activity of its sort, it stands as another example of

positive community involvement on the part of the greek system that is overlooked by the media in favor of other topics, regardless of their connection or importance to this campus. Philanthropies being overlooked time and time again wouldn't be as big a deal if every negative, isolated occurrence wasn't jumped on because it's an easy story with reader appeal. The Emerald needs to recognize that what it chooses to include or not include has a large effect on how the student body perceives not just the greek system but every organization on campus. If pumpkin drops, squirrels and M&M's are more of an issue than students volunteering time and effort throughout the community, then somebody needs to reevaluate their priorities.

David Hall
 Delta Sigma Phi
 philanthropy chair