

Dollar tax check-off for politics may be repealed

By Kathy Glanville
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SALEM—It may give some people a bit of satisfaction to be able to check off \$1 of their state income tax as a contribution to a political party.

After all, at income tax time there's not much else you can do to direct the flow of money from your pocket to the government's.

More than one Democrat put forth the argument last week during hearings to repeal the \$1 checkoff adopted by the 1977 Legislature.

At least one Republican wasn't having any of it. Rep. Bill Rogers, D-Vida, wryly asked if the taxpayer wouldn't get more satisfaction with checkoffs for things like road repair.

Debate on the issue has been fairly lively as Democrats talk about "reviewing the two-party system" and curbing the power of "special interests" while Republicans and dissident Democrats question the use of public tax money to subsidize political parties.

But for all the talk, it's doubtful the \$1 checkoff will be repealed this year. A Democratic-controlled Legislature passed the measure two years ago and this year's Democratic-controlled Legislature isn't likely to let it die.

The \$1 checkoff pulled in \$285,000 in 1977, and the Democrats got \$2 for every \$1 checked off for the Republicans.

Naturally, the Republicans would like to do away with the system. And not all Democrats are solidly behind it.

Chief sponsor of the bill to repeal the measure is Max Simpson, D-Baker. Altogether, nine Democrats and 31 Republicans are co-sponsors of the repeal bill.

Simpson went after the \$1 checkoff because he doesn't like the way the Democratic Party distributed it during the last election.

"It is a fact that less than one-half of the state's party checkoff funds went to direct aid for the candidates," said Simpson. Simpson didn't get any of the money, but he says that's not why he opposes the system.

"It is also a fact that 20 of the 34 Democrats now serving in the House didn't get a dime of that fund."

Simpson charges that those Democrats with conservative views were the ones left out of the pot.

"The conservative approach best represents the thinking of most Democratic Oregonians," said Simpson. "Yet the Democratic party funds the liberal viewpoint."

The intent of the \$1 checkoff was to strengthen the state's political parties and the law isn't specific about how the money is to be spent.

The State Democratic Party gave direct contributions to 33 state representative candidates. Fourteen of those Democratic candidates won their elections.

The task of dividing up the money stirred up a lot of controversy, something Democratic party leaders say shows how well the \$1 checkoff fund is working to revive the party.

Rep. Wayne Fawbush, D-Hood River, said it's true that the \$1 checkoff fund was used as part of a move to get the "Hornets," the conservative Democrats who formed a coalition with the Republicans during the last session. Simpson was a member of the Hornets.

"The revolt among the Hornets upset a lot of party people, so there was a move to get them," Fawbush said. "Things are entirely different this year, there won't be any breaks in the ranks. People are going to get money based on need."

Fawbush says the furor over the \$1 checkoff misses the

main point: The ever increasing cost of running for public office.

"The whole question is who gets elected and who pays for

it?" says Fawbush. "The trend in elections is to spend more and more money. I'm not optimistic about the \$1 checkoff changing that. My goal is to get some kind of expenditure limit."

Fawbush received almost \$4,000 from the \$1 checkoff

fund. He said his opponent spent almost \$26,000 to his \$14,000 in the last election.

Fawbush said his case is the exception. He points out to statistics which show that by and large, the candidates who spent more were the winners

in state elections last year. "If something's not done, elections are going to go to the highest bidder," Fawbush says.

Limits on campaign spending have been thrown out by the U.S. Supreme Court as unconstitutional infringement

on the right of free speech.

Proponents of campaign limits argue that the poor candidate has a right to be heard by as many voters as the rich candidate who can afford television and radio time. But the Supreme Court

hasn't been willing to stretch constitutional guarantees in that direction.

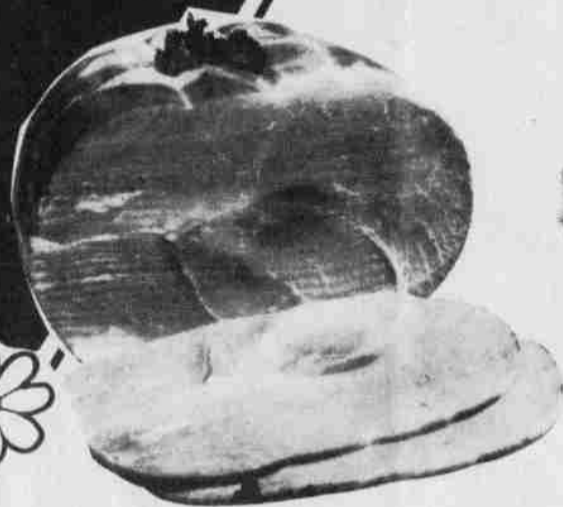
Fawbush said the \$1 checkoff may be amended this session to appease opponents with a different distribution system for the funds.

Whatever they do, the \$1

checkoff won't help curb campaign spending. The \$1 checkoff has a sunset provision which means it is automatically repealed in 1981, and Republic Gov. Atiyeh has said he would repeal any attempt to resurrect it.

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