

RENEWING PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC LIFE

A Call for Campaign Finance Reform

Introduction

Catholics believe that the human person is a social being and that each of us realizes our potential in relationships with others. Thus, all of us are called to be involved citizens who take an active part in public life.¹ Our duty to participate in public affairs is grounded in our dignity as people and our common vocation to become partners in creation. Since the common good of society is most fully realized in the political community,² and government has the moral function of securing basic justice for all,³ politics and participation in public life are noble undertakings.

Moreover, the freedom we Americans hold so dear depends on our participation in political affairs. As Pope John Paul II has affirmed, “Democracy is only possible on the basis of a correct conception of the human person which involves the recognition of the right of each person to take an active part in public life...”⁴

The Importance of Campaign Finance Reform

In a democratic republic such as ours, the vital decisions regarding how society shall be ordered and how the common good is to be secured are made by our elected representatives. As such, the manner in which elections are conducted and financed is a legiti-

mate concern not only for Catholics but also for all citizens.

No society or political system, no matter how educated and affluent its citizenry, can flourish if the citizens themselves do not act virtuously with a commitment to the common good. At the same time, while institutions cannot make people virtuous, they can either encourage or discourage virtuous behavior. Thus the manner in which we choose our leaders does have an effect on how well they govern.

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Few citizens run for public office. Yet citizens have a right and a responsibility to offer their values and experience to important debates. Accordingly, we want to add our voices to those of many other citizens and leaders who are urging reform of campaign finance practices.

Some Reflections on the Political Process Today

As we read the signs of the times in Wisconsin and across our nation, we note that society is blessed by the many women and men who choose public service as a vocation and give of

themselves to serve the common good as elected officials or career civil servants. We also are heartened by the many others who participate in political debates and campaigns as volunteers.

At the same time, we share in the growing public concern that the ability of these and other citizens to participate in the political process, the trust of all citizens in their government and the health of our democracy are all jeopardized by the current system under which political campaigns are conducted and election results are determined.

We cannot blame “the system” alone for this. For, in a democracy, we citizens - by our laws and by our conduct - define our own involvement in the political process. Consequently, even well crafted campaign finance

reforms will have little impact if we fail to take our own rights and responsibilities seriously.

For a variety of reasons, we citizens have not made adequate time in our lives for political activity. Where our ancestors would leave home to attend political meetings, or devote an afternoon to leafleting a neighborhood on behalf of their candidates, we are more likely to participate by writing a check to a campaign committee so it may purchase media advertisements that are beamed into our living rooms and automobiles.

Moreover, the nature of our participa-

tion in the political process has changed in recent times. In the past, citizens organized for involvement in elections via “mediating structures” such as political parties, and neighborhood associations. More recently, it appears that these mediating structures have become less influential, giving way to organizations with a narrower focus but with the capacity to generate larger amounts of money to fund campaigns. In some instances special interest organizations spend more on a specific race than the candidates themselves.

At the same time, the cost of running for office becomes ever higher. Expensive campaigns — once limited to campaigns for President, Congress and Governor, are now commonplace in state legislative contests and occurring even in contests for local government offices and school boards. To a significant extent, these higher costs are driven by the expense of paid media, especially television advertising.

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This trend makes seeking elective office more and more difficult for people of modest or average financial means. Increasingly, legislative and Congressional races are less competitive. Too often, truly serious competition is limited to “open seats” in which there is no incumbent who has been able to use the advantages of incumbency to accumu-

late a large campaign fund to discourage potential opponents.⁵ These few competitive races tend to attract exorbitant sums of money and spending activity.⁶ Often, much of this money is contributed by individuals and groups outside of the districts or communities who are electing the official.

This increase in spending has been accompanied by two other trends, neither of which is conducive to a healthy democracy.

The first is a decline in voter turnout. Even though the number of eligible voters continues to increase, fewer citizens exercise their right to vote than in the 1950’s and 1960’s.⁷ Thus fewer citizens are making the decisions that bind the rest of us.

The second trend is that of a coarsening of political rhetoric. The vital activity of “civil discourse” essential to the health of a democracy is often anything but civil. It is true that strenuous argument and harsh rhetoric have often been part of political debates in the United States. It is also true that over the years some of our most colorful and respected politicians have used emotionally charged rhetoric and tactics to win people to their point of view. Yet this harsher rhetoric seems to have proliferated with the infusion of large amounts of money in the political process and the focus of this money on media advertising, which places a premium on messages that are brief, superficial and emotionally charged.

Overall, such rhetoric is not helpful to the public interest and in some ways undermines it.

For one thing, “negative campaigning” today is often undertaken not for the sake of converting citizens to the campaigner’s point of view, but rather with the specific objective of discouraging voter participation. We do not believe the common good is served by such cynicism in the electoral process.

In addition to depressing participation, the sheer volume of negative advertising serves to overwhelm the message of the candidates themselves. Moreover, since the negative advertising is almost always directed to select “hot button” issues, such advertising has the effect of supplanting the broader agendas of candidates with the parochial concerns of those who can afford to finance large amounts of advertising.

Perhaps most important, negative ads inhibit the ability of those who are elected to lead. For most of our history, even those who waged bitter campaigns would come together to govern effectively after the election. In recent years, however, the ill will spawned by campaign rhetoric seems to linger past the election season. As a result bipartisan cooperation has become more difficult, and leaders are less willing to offer solutions to controversial issues.

This combination of increased spending on media and the use of media to convey negative messages creates a self-sustaining cycle in which large sums of money fund messages that discourage voter involvement which in turn strengthens the role of “special interests.” Taken together, these trends serve to discourage citizen participation and trust upon which our democracy depends for its survival.

For these reasons, we believe the time has come for a serious revision of the system by which campaigns are financed.

Criteria for Reform

While we do not intend to endorse any specific reform proposal, we believe it is appropriate to suggest themes or criteria from our ethical and social teachings as a basis for evaluating proposals for reform. **Specifically, campaign finance reforms should serve to increase citizen participation in the political process, to foster consideration of the com-**

mon good over particular “special” interests, and to make voters more informed about the candidates, including the sources of their financial support.

Participation. Political structures should be arranged in ways that provide every citizen with an effective opportunity to play a free and active part in the foundation of the community, in the administration of public affairs and in the election of their leaders.⁸ While the level of participation may be greater for some than others, there is a basic level of access that must be available for all people. When patterns that exclude people from participation exist, society should correct them if possible.⁹

The Common Good. The common good is not limited to the agenda of one candidate, or one party. Nor can it be found in the priorities of powerful interests. Rather, the common good is found in the sum total of all social conditions, which permit people; either as groups or individuals to realize their potential.¹⁰ The Catholic tradition holds that the common good is the end to which the use of political power must be directed.¹¹

Yet the common good must not be confused with the will of the majority. On the contrary, societies committed to the common good take care to assure that the rule of the majority does not cause a denial of basic rights and goods to those without power. Though one voice may prevail, all are heard and none are silenced. The common good is served when persons and groups take into account not only their own interests, but the needs and legitimate aspirations of others.¹² Therefore, the state, representing the entire community, has a duty to prevent people from abusing their private property to the detriment of the common good.¹³

Accountability. Our very freedom makes us responsible for our actions.¹⁴ This is true for the individual as well as

the group. Every citizen or organization who participates in political debates should assume responsibility for statements made at their behest. For their part, those who exercise authority have a duty to “strengthen the values that inspire the confidence of the members of the group and encourage them to put themselves at the service of others.”¹⁵ Such confidence is fostered by accountability, which strengthens the bond between the people and their leaders.

Accordingly, we believe citizens should evaluate specific reform in light of these questions:

Do the reforms expand or deny access by citizens of average financial means to the political process as candidates?

Do the reforms foster increased citizen participation in campaigns as volunteers and encourage higher voter turnout?

Do the proposed reforms reduce or increase the potential for a small number of powerful interests to dominate or distort political debates?

Do the proposed reforms enhance or limit public awareness of who makes campaign statements or finances campaign advertising?

Two Specific Concerns

While the specific details and components of reform proposals must be left to lay citizens and their elected representatives, we wish to address two specific aspects of reform: **1)** The use of public tax dollars to fund campaigns - which some believe raises questions of conscience for taxpayers; and, **2)** The question of whether regulation or limitation of election related expenditures infringes on the rights of churches and religious organizations.

Public Financing. One of the most contentious issues discussed when

campaign reform is debated is that of whether tax dollars should fund political campaigns. This raises important concerns as to whether it is right for the community to compel individual citizens to pay taxes that may help fund the campaigns of candidates whose values or character they find objectionable.

We do not believe that the use of tax dollars to fund candidates puts the individual tax payer in the position of providing material cooperation with immoral policies or practices embraced by a candidate who may receive such funds.

We believe, on balance, that public financing can be an appropriate way to fund most election costs. Government is the means by which society seeks to identify, achieve, and protect the common good. As this is a concern for all people, it is appropriate that the cost of doing so be shared by all. The use of tax dollars to fund campaigns of qualified candidates without regard to their philosophy can effectively foster the common good by encouraging more people of diverse backgrounds to seek public office. To the extent that public financing makes candidates less dependent on the funds of special interest groups, the public debates over issues will be less subject to domination or distortion by special interests.

We do not believe that the use of tax dollars to fund candidates puts the individual tax payer in the position of providing material cooperation with immoral policies or practices embraced by a candidate who may receive such funds. Nor does a candidate’s receipt of public funds signify endorsement of his/her specific philosophy any

more than use of tax dollars for health care, universities, or schools implies endorsement of religious groups who operate those institutions. So long as public financing of campaigns is structured in a way that affords equal treatment of candidates of differing philosophies and partisan affiliation, it would, in our view, pass the test of neutrality. Although the use of public funds for campaigns does not imply endorsement of immoral positions, it does not follow that public funding must totally supplant private funds used in campaigns. While a system that relies solely on public financing may be desirable in certain respects, the values of both participation and accountability can be served if candidates are compelled to generate a base level of support from citizens as a condition of obtaining public funds. The decision as to what threshold should be met before public funds are provided to candidates is best made in the political arena. We affirm those who seek to strike the appropriate balance on these questions.

Disclosure of campaign expenditures. Some reformers believe it is important to limit or regulate the expenditure of funds and election activities directed for or against a candidate by groups other than the candidates themselves or the political parties. Others are concerned that doing so would hamper free speech, including educational efforts by religious groups.

In our view, the principle of participation suggests that citizens should be afforded latitude as to the means they choose to engage in policy debates. Accordingly, associations of like-minded citizens should be permitted to exhort other citizens to support or oppose candidates, policies, or ideas debated in public life. It is important, however, that such efforts do not overwhelm or supplant the message of other citizens, especially that of the candidates themselves, who by nature of their role in the process are compelled to address a broad range of issues. Nor

should election laws subject those who donate to candidates to greater scrutiny than those who donate to groups who seek to influence election outcomes by donating to special interest organizations.

Accordingly, we believe reasonable efforts to increase disclosure of campaign contributions and expenditures need not interfere with free speech. As with the question of public financing, we think it is best for us to leave the specific means of providing for adequate disclosure of expenditures to other more informed citizens and their representatives. However, we think it is useful to ask: **1)** Whether the proposed reforms have the effect of increasing public awareness of campaign contributions without discouraging participation; and, **2)** Whether the disclosure requirements are likely to lead citizens to prefer donating to groups and organizations in lieu of donating to candidates and political parties.

Conclusion

We are called to share generously the gifts God has given us.¹⁶ Individually we heed that call by offering our time and ideas to the discussions of community affairs. Collectively, we heed that call by organizing the political process itself in ways that invite rather than discourage civic involvement. History looks fondly on people and communities that have done this. Wisconsin has long been such a place. We hope it will remain so. We encourage all in our state who are committed to the work of reform and the renewal of our political process.

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Footnotes

1. Catechism of the Catholic Church #1913.
2. Ibid. #1910.
3. Pacem en terris, #60-62.
4. Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences 4/25/97 as reprinted in Origins, 6/5/97.
5. Wisconsin Democracy Campaign News Release, July 27, 1998.
6. Wisconsin Democracy Campaign News Release, February 3, 1999.
7. Wisconsin Elections Board, Voting Age Population (VAP); Votes Cast in Partisan Elections; and Percent of VAP Voting, Wisconsin, 1948-1998.
8. Gaudium et Spes #75.
9. Economic Justice for All, #77-78.
10. Catechism of the Catholic Church #1906.
11. Octogesima Adveniens, Apostolic Letter of Pope Paul VI issued on the 80th Anniversary of Rerum Novarum, #46.
12. Gaudium et Spes #26.
13. Gaudium et Spes #71.
14. Catechism of the Catholic Church #1734.
15. Ibid. #1917.
16. Rerum Novarum #36.