

Our View: Leash the PAC spending beast

Alaska lawmakers right to call for limits on super PAC spending

It's only a resolution but it's a good one.

Sen. Bill Wielechowski has introduced a resolution in the Alaska Senate calling on Congress and the president to back a constitutional amendment that would ban unlimited contributions to third-party groups to support or oppose political candidates.

Rep. Les Gara has introduced a similar resolution in the House. Such an amendment requires a two-thirds vote of Congress and the support of three-fourths of the states. That's a long climb.

And it's an iffy proposition in the Alaska Legislature as well.

It's still a stand worth taking.

In 2010, the Alaska Legislature was swift to respond to the Supreme Court decision that granted personal free speech rights to corporations, unions and other organizations, essentially equating money with speech and allowing unlimited contributions to independent groups fighting for or against a candidate.

The court's decision was a classic example of abstract exercise and legal logic without regard to the reality of our political system.

The practical exercise of free speech in 21st century American political campaigns costs money. Lots of money. Giving corporations and unions free rein to spend as much as they can gives the well-heeled few an overwhelming advantage in electoral campaigns.

The restrictions are a joke. Corporate giving is restrained in that there can be no coordination with a candidate's campaign. Fact is, there doesn't need to be any direct contact to coordinate a campaign, for one side to skew a campaign, for one side to dominate the media and the message. And who believes there won't be contact? As fig leafs go, this one doesn't cover anything.

Had the Supreme Court set out to encourage corporate influence over the U.S. electoral process, they couldn't have done much better than their January 2010 ruling.

Obviously, political self-interest comes into play here. There was bipartisan support for disclosure in 2010, but limiting super PACs (PAC meaning political action committee) may help Democrats more than Republicans. So Alaska Republicans may hesitate to sign on. If Democrats gained by the court ruling, they might be the ones hesitating.

No one should hesitate. Alaska has had workable campaign contribution rules that allowed everyone -- corporations, unions, other organizations and individuals -- to support candidates and causes but within

limits that didn't allow moneyed interests too disproportionate an influence. Money still mattered but not enough to drown individual voices and arguments on the merits.

Equating money with speech has the practical effect of muting some speech while vastly amplifying other speech. And it's not an independent exercise of citizens' rights. It's a ticket for special interests to dominate campaigns and serve themselves.

Alaskans across the political spectrum should stand against that.

Special interests should have their shot; the founders counted on that. They just shouldn't have a bottomless ammo box.

BOTTOM LINE: Resolution against unlimited campaign spending is the right stand.

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