

## POINT

# Public funds wasted on party conventions

Political party conventions are a part of the American political process. Held every four years to determine the major party's presidential candidates, these conventions are a waste of taxpayer money — money given over to entities which are basically private clubs. This year the Federal Election Commission (FEC), the regulatory agency that administers and enforces federal campaign finance laws, announced that each of the two major political parties will receive initial payments of \$16,356,000 for planning and conducting their respective 2008 presidential nominating conventions.

The Anti-Masons party introduced the nominating convention in 1831 when delegates from 13 states met in Baltimore to select its candidate. The Democrats followed in 1832 and re-nominated President Jackson. Since that time, many of the conventions have been places of great drama, where multiple votes were required to elect a party's presidential candidate.

But the current system of primaries determines who the candidate will be long before the convention. There is no drama and the outcomes are predetermined. Instead the conventions have been used as a tool by the political parties to market its candidates and unveil the party platform. In recent years the only true disagreements at the conventions have been negotiations over party platform.

Taxpayer dollars have funded the conventions since 1976 as part of federal election laws adopted to try to keep the influence of money out of politics. But federal election laws are not a new idea. The first federal campaign finance legislation was an 1867 law that prohibited federal officers from requesting contributions from Navy Yard workers. Over the next hundred years, Congress enacted a series of laws which sought broader

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regulation of federal campaign financing. These legislative initiatives, taken together, sought to limit contributions to ensure that wealthy individuals and special interest groups did not have a disproportionate influence on federal elections; prohibit certain sources of funds for federal campaign purposes; control campaign spending; and require public disclosure of campaign finances to deter abuse and to educate the electorate.

Sound familiar? This battle never ends.

The effort to bring about more comprehensive campaign finance reform began in 1907 when Congress passed the Tillman Act, which prohibited corporations and national banks from contributing money to federal campaigns. The first federal campaign disclosure legislation was a 1910 law affecting House elections only. In 1911, the law was amended to cover Senate elections as well, and to set spending limits for all congressional candidates.

The Federal Corrupt Practices Act of 1925, which affected general election activity only, strengthened disclosure requirements and increased expenditure limits. The Hatch Act of 1939 and its 1940 amendments asserted the right of Congress to regulate primary elections and included provisions limiting contributions and expenditures in congressional elections. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 barred both labor unions and corporations from making expenditures and contributions in federal elections. (In addition, Taft-Hartley impedes employees' right to join together in labor unions, undermines the power of unions to rep-

resent workers' interests effectively, bans secondary boycotts and authorizes an array of anti-union activities by employers.)

The campaign finance provisions of all of these laws were largely ignored because none provided an institutional framework to administer their provisions effectively. The laws had other flaws as well. For example, spending limits applied only to committees active in two or more states. Further, candidates could avoid the spending limit and disclosure requirements altogether because a candidate who claimed to have no knowledge of spending on his behalf was not liable under the 1925 Act.

The evasion of disclosure provisions became evident when Congress passed the disclosure provisions of the 1971 Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA). In 1968, still under the old law, House and Senate candidates reported spending \$8.5 million. But in 1972, after the passage of the FECA, spending reported by congressional candidates jumped to \$88.9 million.

Since 1976, taxpayers have funded the party conventions to the tune of over \$921 million. Wasted taxpayers dollars for a gala show by private political parties for which we know the outcome. In exchange for public funding of the conventions, the political parties agree to certain requirements, including spending limits, the filing of periodic disclosure reports, and detailed audits. Big deal — let them spend as much of their own money as they want!

Campaign financing is an important goal that must be linked to accountability to the public. The outmoded convention model costs taxpayers millions of dollars better spent on other aspects of campaign financing.

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