

Court Decision Could Spark Unlikely Alliance

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By Matthew Murray

Roll Call Staff

Longtime K Street antagonist Fred Wertheimer may soon find that he has an unusual collection of supporters for his revived attempt to create a public financing system for Congressional races: fundraiser-weary lobbyists.

In light of the Supreme Court's decision last week to overturn prohibitions on corporate political expenditures, Wertheimer of Democracy 21, Common Cause President and ex-Rep. Bob Edger (D-Pa.) and other longtime campaign finance players are breathing new life into a once-quixotic effort to shape a taxpayer-financed scheme to underwrite House and Senate races.

Lobbyists also appear open to embracing the call.

"There's a lot of lobbyists out there, some of the top lobbyists in Washington, who have told me, 'Yeah, we want this to change,'" American League of Lobbyists President Dave Wenhold said.

Democratic lobbyist Lawrence O'Brien, who regularly contributes the maximum for federal elections, said he would be relieved to see Congressional incumbents and candidates put on the public dole.

"If it were to translate into a diminished pressure to donate personal money, I would consider that a very positive outcome," O'Brien said. Still, the former Carter administration official added that he's not holding his breath.

"I'll believe it when I see it," he said. "People have talked about reforming the electoral process and campaign donations, but I have no sense what direction this may go.

"I think it's a bridge too far," he added. "You're never going to see it."

But the proposal appears to be picking up considerable steam since Thursday's decision. Wertheimer's informal coalition also has been reiterating its support for legislation sponsored by House Democratic Caucus Chairman John Larson (Conn.), the Fair Elections Now Act, which the lawmaker says will create "a voluntary system that allows candidates to spend their time meeting with constituents and working on issues most important to their communities instead of dialing for big dollars."

According to a summary distributed by Larson's office, the voluntary program would provide candidates with campaign seed money and match small-dollar contributions. The House legislation has 126 co-sponsors. A Senate bill sponsored by Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) has five Democratic co-sponsors.

"We look for support wherever we can get it, subject to knowing who it is," Wertheimer said of lobbyists getting on board with his pet plan.

Sen. John McCain (Ariz.), the most likely GOP supporter of any campaign finance overhaul bill, said Friday that he would not support any measure that calls for public financing.

“No, I’ve never supported public financing,” said McCain, whose campaign harshly criticized then-Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) for breaking a pledge by opting out of the presidential public financing system during the 2008 campaign.

Large corporations and executives are also stepping up their pressure on lawmakers to enact Larson’s plan in the wake of the high court’s decision. Late last week, executives from the toymaker Hasbro, Crate and Barrel, Men’s Warehouse and other companies encouraged Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) to bring Larson’s legislation up for a vote.

“The recent Supreme Court decision in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission has opened the door to increased election spending by the deepest pocketed political interests in American politics,” the executives wrote in a Thursday letter to Pelosi. “The corrosive influence of special interest money already impairs our government’s ability to address our nation’s most critical problems. We cannot continue down this path.”

The same day, dozens of House Members also wrote to Pelosi, urging her to merge Larson’s bill with other campaign finance proposals being floated to blunt the effects of the Citizens United decision.

David Donnelly, the national campaigns director for the pro-reform Public Campaign Action Fund, said Members are now taking the issue seriously out of fear for their own jobs.

“The decision changes the equation for Members. ... This actually impacts their jobs,” he said. “More and more, Members of Congress are tired of spending countless hours on the phone raising money from people all over the country.

“Is this what Members of Congress came into public life to do? To become telemarketers at night?” he added.

Pelosi has tasked Assistant to the Speaker Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) and Senate Rules and Administration Chairman Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) to gather a legislative response to the Citizens United decision. A legislative package is expected to be unveiled by Feb. 5.

But the bill is not expected to include a prompt for a Wertheimer-K Street kumbaya moment, according to a Van Hollen aide. Instead, the bill is expected to tighten disclosure requirements for corporate political ad buys, attempt to limit coordination between corporations and candidates, and include shareholder protections, the source said.

“There’s no way it’s going to get through the Senate,” the staffer said of the public financing bill. “Why bring up something that doesn’t stand any prospects of getting into law?”

John Stanton contributed to this report.