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The Boston Globe

Limit campaign fund-raising

By Alan Simpson | March 10, 2006

WHEN I WAS first elected to the US Senate, I thought I was elected to serve the folks of Wyoming. But as time went on, the demands for campaign cash became so great that it was almost impossible to do my job without spending much of my time raising money.

I wasn't the only one. Voters should be concerned about how much time elected officials spend raising money rather than legislating. US senators running for reelection in 2004 raised and spent, on average, more than \$6.5 million. The average US House member raised and spent more than \$1 million in 2004.

Raising that kind of money takes a lot of work -- work that could be better used making good policies and visiting with constituents. That's why I'm a strong supporter of the type of campaign spending limits law that Vermont passed in 1997 -- and which the US Supreme Court considered last week.

Under that law, Vermont capped the amount of money a candidate for state office could spend. The state limited contributions and also provided public financing for campaigns. Candidates would be limited only to the amount needed to run an effective campaign, and to "get out their message." But they would no longer be forced to beg on the phone or write pleas for money to ensure that they can keep up with their opponent.

It's a good idea -- and one the Supreme Court should accept. Otherwise, candidates and lawmakers will continue to plod along on the course that requires fund-raising marathons.

Former US representative Bob Edgar of Pennsylvania once commented that "80 percent of my events and meetings were fund-raisers. Rather than go to a senior center, I would go to a party where I could raise \$3,000 or \$4,000."

The time that elected officials spend to raise money raises questions about their ability to be effective and deliberate legislators. When we were spending so much time raising money, we simply could not devote quality time to thoughtful decisions and debate. It lowered the substance of our work.

I liked to feel that I was always doing the best job possible -- but I also know well that if I had spent less time fund-raising, I could have spent more time learning the ropes about vital legislation.

Given the inflated and excessive cost of campaigns, many of us couldn't raise the full chunk for the campaign in our own states. So off we would go to New York, Illinois, Texas, or California for our fund-raisers. Even if you might think fund-raising to be a fine use of a legislator's time, it's pretty hard to see how raising a bundle 2,000 miles from home actually helps your constituents too much.

Don't read me wrong. It's not that I think all fund-raising is bad. I've had to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars in my political career. The important ability to persuade the voters to provide you with financial assistance is a sure sign that a candidate has their support. But it shouldn't be the only sign, and it shouldn't take up so much time. Laws such as the one passed in Vermont could help us right the drifting ship. I earnestly hope the Supreme Court upholds this long overdue, common-sense campaign reform.

Alan Simpson served in the US Senate from 1979 to 1997. He lives in Cody, Wyo. ■

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