

Proposed Expansion of Public Financing for Political Campaigns
Testimony of Leader Mitch McConnell
June 20, 2007

Madame Chairman, Ranking Member Bennett: thank you for inviting me here to discuss taxpayer funded elections. As you know, I've taken more than a glancing interest in the issue over the years, and I have the battle scars from a good many floor fights to prove it. As a former chair and longtime member on this committee, it's good to be in familiar territory. I'm delighted to be here.

Let me start by thanking my good friends Senator Specter and Senator Durbin for their interest in an issue that's consumed a lot of my time and energy over the years. Elections can be messy, and ensuring an open, equitable process should be an important priority for every member of Congress. But I would respectfully submit that if past experience is any guide, then the practice of taxpayer-funded elections — or, as I like to call it, welfare for politicians — has proved to be a sharp detour along that road. And expanding it to include Congressional races would take us even farther afield.

Let's take the Ranking Member as an example. Under the population-based formula envisioned by this proposed, if Senator Bennett were running for re-election next year he could expect to receive \$2.14 million for his campaign. If his opponent decided to use private funds, or if independent groups decided to go after him, the maximum amount available to him under the bill's so-called "Fair Fight" provision would be \$5.6 million.

This may seem like a lot of money, and it is. But when we consider that one of our former Senate colleagues, now a governor, spent more than \$70 million of his own money to win a Senate seat seven years ago, the relative value of these sums becomes clear. \$5.6 million vs. \$70 million isn't a fair fight. It's a landslide.

The notion of taxpayer-funded campaigns gained popularity in the days after Watergate. Americans viewed it as a way to prevent corruption. Again, this was a noble goal. But with the perspective of time and experience, Americans have consistently and roundly rejected the idea of funding nominating conventions, primary elections, and general elections not only for the candidates they support, but also for the ones they oppose. Tens of millions of Americans, including the one sitting in front of you, have always found this latter notion particularly hard to fathom.

But for those of you on the dais or in the audience who did “check the box” on your tax returns, electing to contribute, let me give an idea of the return you’ve gotten on your investment: Over the years, you’ve paid for convention parties and podiums from Miami to San Francisco and New York to Los Angeles. You funded the many campaigns of Lyndon LaRouche — who for six years campaigned from prison. You financed negative ads, positive ads, media consultants, political consultants, private jets, limousines, suites at the Four Seasons, and enough streamers and placards to stretch from Bakersfield to Bangor.

And here are some of things you haven’t paid for: In 2004, when nearly every candidate rejected the system as impractical, the social security trust fund was shorted \$207 million. In 2000, the fund was shorted \$240 million. This is money that went to stump speeches and sound bites instead. All in all, taxpayers have spent more than \$1.3 BILLION dollars subsidizing campaign attack ads and convention hot dogs.

The signs of this system’s failure, both practically and popularly, are everywhere.

There’s a growing movement within the states to reverse taxpayer-funded elections at the state level. Just last year, my own state of Kentucky eliminated the practice. Lawmakers could no longer justify the expense while dealing with tight budgets and shortfalls in areas like education and healthcare.

Kentucky’s Secretary of State, Trey Grayson, put it this way: “When facing these difficult choices, it is hard to argue that some of your hard earned tax dollars should be spent to fund political campaigns.” He congratulated the members of the state’s General Assembly for “placing the interests of children, seniors, and all Kentuckians ahead of their fellow political brethren by refusing to allow taxpayer dollars to fund political campaigns.”

This issue has been a major part of the political discourse in Kentucky over the last several years. It’s my belief that Republicans in the state have won races over it, and that they’ve retained control of the state Senate as a result of their position.

Voters in Massachusetts adopted taxpayer funded elections in 1999. But because lawmakers chose to fund projects like the Big-Dig and child health care over campaign picnics, cheerleaders for the system turned to the courts for help.

The courts ruled that the state had to either fund the system or repeal it. Lawmakers eventually chose the latter — but not before advocacy groups won the power to seize state property and auction it off to cover campaign costs. First on the auction block were two Ford

Expedition SUVs and a station wagon, with the Speaker of the House's office furniture next in line. I wonder how many campaign ads could be run for that dais and this table and chairs.

Candidates themselves increasingly reject public financing. Not a single major presidential candidate for 2008 from either party has so far said that he or she will buy into the current system. Yet, mysteriously, public financing continues to be a cause celebre within the so-called reform industry, which has once again sounded its battle cry to "save" welfare for politicians.

These groups often blame the decline on a lack of education about the system. In fact, it is because of education that taxpayers in ever increasing numbers say "no thank you." Never in the history of this country has there been a more complete poll taken than on the question of taxpayer funded elections.

Every year Americans are asked on our tax returns whether we support taxpayer funded elections. The choice is simple: teachers and troops, or streamers and stump speeches. Ninety percent of us vote for the former. Streamers fared just a little bit better in Congress, when Senator Kerry offered an amendment in 2001 that would have instituted public financing for Senate campaigns. A whopping 30 Senators signed on.

The more Americans learn about this system, the less they like it. The chart behind me illustrates the point. The percentage of Americans who checked that little box at the top of their tax returns, agreeing to divert \$3 from the U.S. Treasury to pay for political campaigns, reached its high water mark in 1980 with 28.7%. Since then, it's plummeted to 9.1% participation in 2005 — a nearly 70% decline.

Remember: this isn't money that comes out of a taxpayer's pockets. It's money they already owe. And more than nine out of ten of them would rather it be spent on healthcare and national security than political campaigns.

Candidates reject the system, and nine out of ten Americans oppose it. These aren't reasons to expand it; they're reasons to dispose of it altogether. Congress should heed the decision of over 90% of the American public and fund things that matter — and balloons and bunting aren't on the list.

The American people have spoken. They'd rather spend money on national security and education than attack ads and robo-calls. And we'd do well to listen. I thank the Committee for the opportunity to testify.

###