

not exempt the Internet from consumer safety laws. We do not exempt the Internet from intellectual property or copyright laws. We do not because we think those laws are important.

We wrestle with the details of unavoidable and unintended consequences. Why do we do the hard work of wading through the details? Because why would we do anything else? Why should we disregard the integrity of the political process?

Mr. Speaker, I yield 1½ minutes to the gentleman from Maine (Mr. ALLEN).

Mr. ALLEN. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding me the time.

Mr. Speaker, I rise to oppose H.R. 1606, the soft money loophole ban. Three years ago, Congress spoke: corrupting soft money should not be part of the Federal election process. When President Bush signed the Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act, he made unlimited Federal soft money donations illegal.

Democracy was enhanced. Today, however, the House is debating an attempt to make soft money legal again. H.R. 1606 would allow corporations, labor unions, and wealthy financiers to make unlimited soft money donations for campaign ads on the Internet coordinated by candidates.

Bloggers should be free to write whatever they want about candidates for office. But if this bill passes, the public will have no idea whether or not Internet campaign ads are being financed by secret soft money.

Why is this bill on the suspension calendar? Americans are frustrated by the majority's corrupt habits of ramming through legislation in the middle of the night without an opportunity to read or amend proposed legislation.

Today, the majority is pushing through a bill that would enable monied interests to regain undue influence on Federal elections. The bill should be considered through regular order with consideration of amendments.

Mr. Speaker, the better way is the bill that the gentleman from Connecticut (Mr. SHAYS) and the gentleman from Massachusetts (Mr. MEEHAN) have proposed.

Mr. Speaker, that should be an amendment to this bill on the floor. It cannot be under this procedure. This bill should be defeated.

Mrs. MILLER of Michigan. Mr. Speaker, I yield 4 minutes to the gentleman from California (Mr. DOOLITTLE).

Mr. DOOLITTLE. Mr. Speaker, I know the theme of the minority is the Republicans abuse power and they are corrupt; but I think this example is absolutely ludicrous, given that it was recommended by a prominent Democrat member of the House Administration Committee who happens to support the legislation.

And she prudently recommended it because at the time it seemed like it

was a relatively noncontroversial idea, supported by most of us. I would venture to guess that the outcome will be just as she assumed, that it will pass by the two-thirds vote required.

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I just cannot sit here and listen to this recitation when it is so unfair, given the facts of this particular case.

Mr. Speaker, the Constitution is clear, "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech." Unfortunately, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled to the contrary that, in this instance, in political speech Congress may abridge the freedom of speech and it may do so under the guise of preventing corruption or the appearance thereof in campaign activities. I disagree with that decision, but the Supreme Court has spoken for now, so we must live with it.

I am grateful to my colleagues on the other side of the aisle who at least feel, as concerns the Internet, that there are compelling policy reasons why that should not be subject to this kind of regulation. Heaven help the average American if they fall under a regulation similar to what any candidate must now undergo for Federal office because that would basically mean that you would have to check with your accountant and check with your attorney before you engage in the Internet communication that might at all be perhaps close to whatever the line would be. In other words, it would have a chilling impact on people's exercise of what we believe should be their free speech rights.

This rise of the Internet is one of the greatest democratic, with a small d, trends the world has ever known. Anybody with access to a computer can communicate throughout the world his or her views. Why would we seek to regulate such an activity and to place this chilling impact out there?

I commend, by the way, the FEC. They correctly decided not to regulate the Internet. Unfortunately, the big government campaign reformers found that intolerable, filed suit in Federal court and were vindicated with the judge ruling that, indeed, the law required the FEC to regulate. In the absence of our passing this kind of legislation, the Internet will be regulated.

Mr. Speaker, we must put an end to this now before it spreads out of control. Please vote yes for the Hensarling bill. I am so grateful the gentleman introduced it, and I commend him for it. Please support freedom of speech. The Online Freedom of Speech Act is what this legislation is called.

Now is the time to draw a clean, clear, bright line and say if you are engaging in speech over the Internet you do not have to check with your lawyer or your accountant. You are a free American, and you have the opportunity to engage in free speech over the Internet. Vote yes.

Mr. MEEHAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself 10 seconds.

I can appreciate the gentleman from California's consistency. He was opposed to campaign finance reform. On the floor, he said he was opposed to any limit. He would just as soon have no limits at all on any campaign finance. He thinks corporations should give.

Mr. Speaker, I yield 1 minute to the gentleman from New Hampshire (Mr. BASS).

Mr. BASS. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Massachusetts for yielding.

I rise in opposition to the bill. We passed a bipartisan campaign finance reform act 3 or 4 years ago to close huge loopholes in campaign spending, including the soft money loophole. Now the Internet is becoming an increasingly important medium for campaign spending and advocacy. According to some surveys, 37 percent of the adult population and 61 percent of Americans use the Internet to determine how they would vote in an election.

Now I do agree with my friends on the other side of the aisle that, had this bill gone through the regular order, we probably could have worked out some compromises that would have protected the rights of individuals and bloggers and so forth, but we do not have that ability at this point, so it is either an up or down vote on a complete exemption.

In the absence of this compromise, we have to depend on the FEC for regulation. Because if we do not and if this bill passes, we will in effect have an exemption to BCRA that will allow for unlimited advertising and advocacy over the Internet.

I do not believe that bloggers or individuals will ever be fined by the Federal Election Commission. I urge my colleagues to vote against this bill when it comes up later today.

Mrs. MILLER of Michigan. Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. MEEHAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield 1 minute to the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. HOLT), a strong supporter of campaign finance reform.

(Mr. HOLT asked and was given permission to revise and extend his remarks.)

Mr. HOLT. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to oppose H.R. 1606 and ask us to come back with a procedure that will permit the Shays-Meehan alternative.

This bill opens a huge loophole in the campaign finance laws. The gentleman from Massachusetts (Mr. MEEHAN) and others have been bulldogs in moving us toward a more perfect democratic union by keeping government of and by the people, not of and by some of the people and by special interests; and this act would not add protections of freedom of speech on the blogosphere as it is purported to do. Rather, it would bring large amounts of money back into deciding who can buy the largest microphone in a Federal campaign.

It will smother, not enhance, the voices of true grassroots movements.

This would compromise not only the blogs it purports to help, it runs a great risk of harming the political procedure. There are too many questions raised by this. The procedure circumvents open debate.

All of us believe that bloggers should not be subjected to censorship. I myself am an occasional guest blogger on political Web sites. Bloggers, like traditional journalists, should be able to communicate with their audience without any fear of violating FEC regulations. However, this legislation is not ready for prime time.

I urge my colleagues to oppose it and come back with a procedure that will permit the Shays-Meehan alternative.

Mrs. MILLER of Michigan. Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. MEEHAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield 1 minute to the gentleman from Delaware (Mr. CASTLE), who has been a courageous hero in the fight for campaign finance reform.

Mr. CASTLE. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman for yielding me time.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today in strong opposition to H.R. 1606, the Online Freedom of Information Act. This controversial bill purports to protect the freedom of speech of Internet bloggers but instead creates a major Internet loophole for soft money in our Federal campaign finance laws. These are exactly the soft money expenditures the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 1992, BCRA, sought to prohibit.

Internet advertising should be no exception and ought to conform to the same rules as those governing other media. H.R. 1606 is the wrong way to address the issue of bloggers and will only lead to new corrupting soft money scandals and campaigns. The Internet has increasingly and rightly been used as a powerful political tool in recent elections, but it is negligent that we would permit it to be a safe haven from our campaign finance laws.

Under H.R. 1606, House members and other federal candidates would be permitted to control the spending of soft money—provided by corporations, labor unions and wealthy individuals—to buy Internet advertisements to support their campaigns. State political parties would also be allowed to spend soft money on Internet advertising to attack and promote federal candidates. And, these contributions would never be disclosed in campaign finance records.

If the Congress is really concerned with protecting Internet bloggers, I urge consideration of legislation introduced yesterday by my colleagues Representatives SHAYS and MEEHAN, which reaffirms that bloggers communicating on their websites are not covered by campaign finance laws without allowing Members of Congress and other federal candidates to use corrupting soft money to support their campaigns.

I urge my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to vote no on the Online Freedom of Speech Act.

Mrs. MILLER of Michigan. Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. MEEHAN. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself the balance of my time.

Mr. Speaker, in this time when a cloud of scandal hangs over Washington, when the Chief of Staff to the Vice President of the United States has been indicted for perjury, making false statements, when a top White House official is led away in handcuffs, indicted on charges of making false statements related to an investigation of his dealing with lobbyists, at a time when a top Republican lobbyist and fundraiser has been indicted for fraud, when that investigation is the subject of a Department of Justice investigation, and today over in the other body there is a hearing going on looking into possible other misdealings, at a time when the American people have indicated that they are fed up with scandals, how can this House support a bill that would open up new avenues for corruption to enter the political process?

The courts have clearly argued that the reason why you can limit campaign contributions is because of corruption and the appearance of corruption. Why would we take a step backwards from campaign finance reform and open up a loophole so big that you could drive a truck through it?

Finally, I keep hearing Senator REID's name mentioned here. I want to assure you of something. If the Senate brings up this bill, they will get more than 20 minutes a side to discuss it. They will discuss it for as long as it needs to be discussed. That is what we should have done here.

Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

Mrs. MILLER of Michigan. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself the balance of my time.

Mr. Speaker, I spent 8 years of my life as the Michigan Secretary of State. That was a job where I had a principal responsibility as the chief elections officer of that State. During that time, we made constant attempts to increase voter participation and voter turn-out, particularly among young people. And I believe this bill does that.

Mr. Speaker, we must stand up for the right of freedom of speech and for the first amendment. I urge my colleagues to pass this bill.

Mr. SHAYS. Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to oppose H.R. 1606, the so-called Online Freedom of Speech Act. The legislation will exempt the Internet from campaign finance laws, thus opening up a major loophole for unlimited union dues money, corporate treasury money and large individual donations to once again corrupt federal elections.

I understand that many web loggers are concerned that somehow campaign finance law will restrict their speech, and I believe allowing bloggers the assurance that they will not be so burdened is something that we can ensure. Unfortunately, H.R. 1606 goes far beyond exempting bloggers and allows federal candidates and political parties to again make use of soft money in federal campaigns.

That is why MARTY MEEHAN and I introduced legislation that would preserve the soft money ban and protect bloggers from unnecessary regulation. Because H.R. 1606 was consid-

ered under suspension of the rules, though, we were not allowed to offer this alternative approach. That is why we must defeat this bill.

If this law were to pass, a member of Congress could simply go to a large donor, corporation or union and control their spending of \$1 million in soft money to pay for political advertising all over the Internet.

This is precisely the type of behavior prevented when Congress passed the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act in 2002. By all accounts, the law is working—despite concerns about the law being the death knell of the parties, the parties were strengthened as they raised more in hard money in 2004 than they raised in hard and soft money combined in 2002 and greatly expanded their donor base.

Once again, I urge my colleagues to oppose H.R. 1606 and oppose the return of corrupting soft money to our political process.

Mr. KENNEDY of Minnesota. Mr. Speaker, I rise today as a proud cosponsor of H.R. 1606, the Online Freedom of Speech Act, which is bipartisan and bicameral legislation offered by my colleagues, Mr. HENSARLING and Mr. WYNN, as well as the Minority Leader of the other body. That's across the aisle support we don't see often enough these days.

This bill is designed to protect the free speech rights of Americans whose only alleged crime is wanting to use the Internet to express their opinions. These individuals find themselves in jeopardy because an activist court decided to radically expand the meaning of a law beyond what Congress intended. The Court decided that the FEC, the agency in charge of regulating our election laws, was in error when it decided it did not have the authority to require the regulation of free speech on the Internet.

As a result of this ruling, all computer users and bloggers now stand to see their first amendment rights thrown out in the name of "freedom". The ruling effectively says that individuals have fewer free speech rights than giant media corporations that pay people to offer their opinions. Using this twisted logic, large newspapers and media companies oppose this bill because they fear the competition bloggers pose to them. I disagree with the mainstream media elites at the Washington Post and the New York Times who seem to think that an unregulated media is dangerous, unless it is them who are being regulated.

What is disturbing and dangerous to me, and to the constituents I represent in this House, is the ease with which so many advocate government regulation of speech.

Mr. Speaker, bloggers don't have to spend millions of dollars on printing presses, nor do they have to invest in TV or radio broadcast towers. They are able to share their opinions and ideas free of charge on the most powerful tool of free speech the world has ever known.

Bloggers are everyday citizens. They are our neighbors, friends, and coworkers who want to be able to share their ideas without asking permission from a gatekeeper in the mainstream media and certainly not from a government official. They are the historical descendants of Founding Fathers like Thomas Paine and other pamphleteers who contributed enormously to our democracy.

Mr. Speaker, I read a children's book called House Mouse Senate Mouse to school children across my district, to try to help them understand the government that we will one day to turn over to their care. It shocks me that