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EDITORIAL

What Price Politics?

A binge of special interest money seems inevitable unless Congress acts quickly — before this year’s election — to repair the damage from the Supreme Court ruling that ended restraints on campaign spending by corporations and unions.

In its overreach, the court’s majority hobbled lawmakers by giving what amounted to constitutional sanction to unlimited corporate and union campaign contributions. But legitimate antidotes are already in the works. Congress should focus on the most feasible proposals. Some of these would:

¶Require detailed disclosure of exactly who is sponsoring and paying for attack ads and other “electioneering communications” that the court has now made possible right up to Election Day. Amorphous “Swift Boat” identities won’t do.

¶Empower shareholders and union members to review and approve the spending campaigns drawn up by their corporate chiefs or leaders.

¶Enact an airtight ban on foreign intrusion in federal elections. The court ruling could open the door to abuse by domestic subsidiaries of foreign corporations. Existing laws against foreign influence are porous and arguably useless in the hands of a Federal Election Commission deliberately hobbled by its Republican members.

¶Restrict campaign spending to the extent possible by companies that contract extensively with the federal government. Why not extend the same legal precedent that restricts Amtrak’s corporate campaigning to banks and companies bailed out by the taxpayers?

These and other proposals are being shaped by Representative Chris Van Hollen and Senator Charles Schumer. They are wisely focusing on what is immediately feasible, not trying to amend the Constitution.

Public financing for Congressional campaigns may ultimately be the only practical defense against corporate and union treasuries. For now, measures requiring transparency, shareholder participation and the like are a good start. Congress should swiftly approve them.