

Features

New 'animal' created to heal campaign money abuse

WASHINGTON — The political clout once enjoyed by wealthy "fat cat" contributors in smoke-filled rooms, is now being wielded in board rooms, club houses and union halls around the nation.

The reform laws enacted after the Watergate scandal to cure campaign spending abuses have created what critics such as Common Cause call a new and dangerous political monster — the Political Action Committee, or "PAC."

The millions of dollars individual contributors used to give to candidates — sometimes in return for ambassadorships or a favorable antitrust decision — were outlawed. Individual contributions were limited to \$1,000.

But at the same time a new political animal was created, allowing the unions, big business, trade associations, and ideological groups like the National Rifle Association and anti-abortion groups to get into the action in a

major way.

Numbering more than 2,500, PACs raised and spent more than \$130 million in the 1980 election. The Federal Election Commission has not yet compiled final spending figures from last fall's election, but it is widely believed that for the first time PACs gave more to congressional candidates than individual contributors.

PACs were also active in the presidential race, giving nearly \$2 million to candidates in the primaries.

The Republican and Democratic National Committees have PACs. Ronald Reagan used one to keep his political activities going between the 1976 and 1980 elections. Sen. Edward Kennedy and former Vice President Walter Mondale recently organized PACs, some say in anticipation of 1984 presidential bids.

But there is a major difference between the new PACs and the old fat cats. Contributions by PACs are legal and are all reported

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on the public record. The fat cats did not have to report their contributions, which were legal except when they used corporate funds.

PAC money does not come from corporate funds or union dues, but from contributions by individual members to the corporate or union PACs, which give the money to candidates.

And while \$5,000 from any one PAC may not seem like much, 20 or 30 different PACs can all give their money to one candidate.

Common Cause and other reform groups have been highly critical of PACs, charging that these contributions are a subtle form of buying influence in Congress. Defenders maintain PACs are just a constitutional exercise of free speech.

A look at the campaign records of the FEC show clearly that PACs give their money to members of Congress who influence their turf. Some examples:

—Sen. John Tower, R-Texas, now chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, received contributions to his 1978 campaign from PACs of Grumman Corp., General Dynamics, Hughes Aircraft, Lockheed Aircraft, McDonnell Douglas, Northrop, Rockwell International and United Technologies — all major defense contractors.

—Sen. Jake Garn, R-Utah, chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, got contributions from the American Bankers Association, Chase Manhattan, Citicorp, First America Bank, and

Household Finance.

These examples were picked at random, but a pattern of similar contributions can be found in almost all the other House and Senate committee chairmen and ranking minority members. And to a lesser extent, members of these committees get contributions from the interests they legislate.

Common Cause is outspoken in its criticism of PACs, which it wants abolished in favor of public financing of congressional elections.

"Our representative government is rapidly becoming a government of the PACs," David Cohen, president of Common Cause, said. He said PAC contributions to members of Congress buys access and enables special interest groups to influence legislation.

"It's a system that benefits special interest and buries solutions to our most pressing public problems — inflation, energy and health care," Cohen said.

A lot of the controversy surrounding PACs has arisen simply because they have changed the way America does its political business.

By the end of 1974 there were

less than 600 PACs. Labor still dominated. But by 1980 there were more than 2,500 PACs, 1,250 of them tied to corporations, and only 332 connected with labor.

But most of all, the PAC phenomena was a question of Republicans and big business learning to play the game that the unions and liberals had used for years.

After the defeat of six liberal senators in the 1980 elections, ultra-conservative PACs like the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress, Gun Owners of America and the political wings of the Moral Majority and the anti-abortion movement said it was their money that did the job.

"PACs really ought to be called 'Purchase the American Congress' because that's what they're going to be doing in a few years," says Rep. David Obey, D-Wis., who for several years has sponsored legislation to curb the power of these committees.

"It is critical to the integrity of the democratic process that a limit be put on the amount of PAC contributions," he said.

Obey uses himself as an example of how PACs operate. He said that although he has been a spon-

sor of every major education money bill in recent years, the National Education Association's contribution to his campaign was 75 percent when he voted against pet project, creation of a Department of Education.

"I don't think people contribute to me because I'm such a statesman," Obey said. "The voter wants to know what's going to do for the widget industry or the widget workers. Do I really think when a congressman sees that lobbyist in his office doesn't see the gleam of PAC dollars in his eyes?"

On the other side of the fight in Congress is Rep. William Frenzel, R-Minn., who said he has a positive force in politics because it has been employed heavily by the political parties rebuilding their strength.

In addition, he said it gets people involved in the political process.

To the "reformers" Frenzel says: "Once you get rid of the PACs, once you force the direct mail out of sight, one limit individual contributions, you will have to use taxpayer money to elect the same bunch of bandits."

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Farm co-ops growing in popularity

CINCINNATI — They are as old as the Mayflower Compact. They are as big as Sunkist. They are so popular that five out of every six farmers belong.

"They" are farm cooperatives. The co-ops are growing in numbers and in clout.

"Farmers have a saying about their cooperative," says Bill Swank, executive vice president of the Ohio Farm Bureau. "We've paid for a lot of companies, but we own this one."

Many farmers used to think that both ends of their stick were short — overcharged for supplies they had to buy, underpaid for the produce they sold.

"Simply put," says Swank, "a lot of farmers felt they were being ripped off. So, they formed cooperatives to survive. I suppose farmers today could exist without cooperatives, but I'm not sure they would."

In America, farm cooperatives date back to the pilgrims. Their Mayflower Compact — sharing

the labor and its fruits — probably helped them survive.

Today, there are more than 7,500 farm cooperatives in the country. Many are a whole lot more than a dusty silo where a few dirt farmers stash their corn.

When you buy a Sunkist orange, you're helping a cooperative's product.

Spread some Land O' Lakes butter and you're spreading money through that Minnesota-based cooperative.

Those well-advertised Ocean Spray cranberries? Another cooperative venture.

Most cooperatives, of course, are not as big as Sunkist. But the trend is to make cooperatives as large as possible. And sometimes, as encompassing as possible.

The Ohio Farm Bureau's cooperative (Landmark), for ex-

ample, not only sells the farmer seeds and fertilizer and buys back his grain, it also sells him gasoline, oil, tires and batteries.

All this to give the farmer a choice from the goods and prices offered by private companies.

"The main value of a cooperative is that it provides this competitive factor and is a bellwether for good, competitive business," says Swank. "Without a cooperative, a farmer tends to feel there is collusion among other business people — that their profits are unduly high and that the prices they pay to farmers are unduly low."

"But when farmers have their own cooperative, they have a pretty strong feeling about just what it costs to, say, deliver a sack of fertilizer or a bushel of grain, because their own outfit is also doing it."

With the growth of cooperatives, however, has come the fear that co-ops may have become their own enemy — perhaps dealing with bureaucratic softness, making them similar to the businesses they were trying to dis-

place. "Some critics feel farmers are not to be in this kind of business," Swank said. "But we think it's just an extension of the job of farming. What's the difference between farmers having their own fertilizer made and Sears and Roebuck having their own products made? I don't think a cooperative can get too big."

Swank, of course, is a believer in big farm cooperatives because his Landmark operation is the largest co-op in Ohio. It has \$100 million worth of business and 100,000 farmers last year.

But a more unbiased farmer expert also agrees that bigger is better.

"My feeling is, yes, it's a necessity for farm cooperatives to be larger simply because private companies are getting larger," says Dr. Donald G. Chafin, chairman of Wilmington (Ohio) College's agriculture department.

"And, co-ops have been forced to grow in order to be able to handle sufficient volumes to be competitive from private business."

"I don't think that hurts the original intent of co-ops. I think it's just an economic fact of life. The business has to be sufficiently large to be economical."

What about the small-scale farmer? Do co-ops still help him?

"Yes, because the little guy doesn't have sufficient volume to benefit from the lower prices of the bigger farmer could get from large-scale buying at a private firm," answers Chafin. "I favorably on co-ops because think they've really been beneficial to farmers on all levels."

Says Swank, "The little farmer is helped a lot more than the big cooperatives. We end up helping the little farmer get what he needs, while some private companies just want to do business with the big guy and forget the little guy."

Chafin, however, points out an area of weakness he has noted in some cooperatives.

"Just like any business, if you aren't managed efficiently, the costs are going to go out of control," he says. "Sometimes the removal of a big profit incentive causes a lack of cost-control."

"For example, in the crunch of the early '70s, some co-ops got into the oil refining business to try to guarantee members a source of fuel. But they also got locked into a high cost of operation. They have been careful of getting trapped with really all they are trying to do help."

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