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EDITORIAL

Campaign for Sale

The sticker price for next year's presidential and Congressional elections is rocketing toward \$5 billion, shocking even political professionals who figure the ante in the opening Iowa round may cost out at \$300 per caucusgoer. When you consider that the votes taken at those caucuses actually have no direct effect on who is nominated by either party, the cost should be ludicrous by the laws of economics, never mind politics.

But the campaign is harvesting record amounts of money, seeded by the front-loading of the primary schedule with major contests in the first six weeks of the year, watered by the willingness of candidates and party machines to ignore the spirit of the law, and fertilized by the bottom lines of television companies.

By next Election Day, the two presidential nominees are expected to break the \$1 billion mark in combined spending — a 50 percent rise over the outrageously high price of the 2004 campaign. Congressional races will total out at hundreds of millions beyond that, while party organizations and their mushrooming stealth operations will run up their own deluxe tabs.

Even if the Supreme Court has started treating the cash of wealthy corporations and special-interest groups as free speech, there are responsible ways to put brakes on a runaway money train that promises to generate little in the way of voter turnout or issue elucidation.

The Federal Election Commission, normally weighted with machine loyalists from the two parties, has to become more of an enforcer of the law than an enabler of law-evaders. It must crack down harder on such blatant abusers as the noxious "527 committees" of 2004 that tapped illegal fat-cat donations to pass off bare-knuckle partisan operations as tax-exempt initiatives.

The commission did finally penalize prominent malefactors like the Republicans' Swift boat attackers and the Democrats' anti-Bush drive, called America Coming Together. But this came almost four years after initial complaints — and the fines amount to just 1 or 2 cents per dollar for the hundreds of millions spent illegally by these shadow-party operatives. Treating subverters of fair elections as political jaywalkers can only encourage a fresh round of schemers next year. The commission needs to issue a broadside warning right now that its penalties will be far steeper and more timely and will target principals, not just their umbrella groups.

A second needed measure harks back to the felonies of Watergate, which resulted in the creation of publicly subsidized campaign financing as an alternative to special interest and private donations. The option worked well for the major nominees for 30 years, but Congress failed to update its subsidy levels for inflation. That — and the frenzied, early and decisive primaries — finds most of the current candidates rejecting the \$65 million it would provide as so much chump change.

A worthy bill to restore public financing's relevancy is scheduled to be introduced this week. It is solidly

bipartisan and bicameral, sponsored by Senators Russ Feingold and Susan Collins and Representatives Christopher Shays and David Price. The subsidy and spending formulas would be repaired to allow candidates to be competitive without plunging into the money maelstrom.

The measure would take effect in 2012, so there's no good reason why the current array of presidential candidates — some of them already burned by tainted fat-cat donors — should not join Senator Barack Obama in endorsing this step back toward campaign sanity.

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