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Press Release - "So Goes the Nation": Campaign Advertising

Edmund S. Muskie

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THE

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"SO GOES THE NATION"

FEATURE

By
RELEASE:

U. S. SENATOR EDMUND S. MUSKIE
Unrestricted on or after October 25, 1970
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CAMPAIGN ADVERTISING

When the Senate returns to Washington after the election recess the first major item of business will be an attempt to over-ride President Nixon's veto of the Campaign Broadcast Reform Act. On the surface it is a partisan squabble between Republicans and Democrats, but the issue has great significance for the future conduct of elections. It has to do with money, political power, and equal opportunities for candidates in congressional and presidential campaigns.

The Campaign Broadcast Reform Act is the first major election reform legislation to pass the Congress in forty-five years. It is designed to halt the steady increase in campaign costs by putting a ceiling on television and radio expenditures. In each Senate, House or Presidential race a candidate would be limited to an expenditure of seven cents a vote (based on the preceding election for that office) or \$20,000, whichever is larger.

In his veto message, President Nixon lauded the Congress for its intent, but said he could not approve the legislation because it would not limit all campaign expenses. He brushed the proposal aside as plugging "only one hole in a sieve."

The President knows, or should know, that radio and television advertising constitutes the largest single advertising expense in most campaigns, today. It has also been the fastest growing item of expense in campaigns. That is not because radio and television advertising are the cheapest media, as the President implied, but because they are the most effective and powerful media available to candidates.

The Veto message was filled with such distortions. For example, it cited differentials in campaign radio and television time costs between metropolitan areas and rural districts. The fact is, of course, that those differentials are irrelevant to the legislation. The election reform act is designed to provide some degree of parity between different candidates for the same office, by

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cutting down the weight of economic power.

Election campaign expenditure reform could go much farther than the legislation we passed, and some day I hope it will. The costs of campaigning put burdens on candidates, campaign workers, political organizations, and contributors. They open the way to political influence based on economic power. But the fact that we have not solved all the problems of campaign spending is no argument for avoiding the issue altogether.

The President argued that "by restricting the amount of time a candidate can obtain on television and radio, this legislation would severely limit the ability of many candidates to get their message to the greatest number of the electorate. The people deserve to know more, not less, about the candidates and where they stand."

No one can argue with the last part of that statement, but the assumptions on which his presentation is based are open to serious question. In the first place, if restricting this kind of campaign spending hampers the ability of voters to know the candidates, then broader campaign spending limits will be even more damaging. But the President says he is for broader limits (although he has proposed none). Second, campaign advertising is not the vehicle for a well-rounded examination of the strengths and weaknesses of a candidate. Campaign advertising is designed to present the candidate as his supporters see him. The testing of the candidate comes through the interchange between the candidate and the voters and, wherever possible, through direct debates and joint appearances. By his veto, the President could prevent such a joint appearance in the 1972 presidential campaign. Without the Campaign Broadcast Reform Act, it is unlikely that such a debate can take place.

One is forced to conclude that the President's veto represents a clear-cut effort by the Republican Party to make the winning of elections a product of economic power and the capacity to dominate the communications media. With one stroke of his pen, the President acted to prevent presidential campaign debates and to eliminate the chance for equality of opportunity in presenting

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different points of view on radio and television.

The issue is not one of advantages between incumbents and challengers, or rural districts versus urban districts. The issue is one of equality of opportunity for candidates in the same election districts purchasing time on commercial radio and television stations. The Campaign Broadcast Reform Act would have helped insure that equality. The President would deny it.

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