INTRODUCTION OF THE CITIZENS INVOLVEMENT IN CAMPAIGNS (CIVIC) ACT

HON. THOMAS E. PETRI

OF WISCONSIN

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, January 7, 2003

Mr. PETRI. Mr. Speaker, today, I am introducing legislation to establish a program of limited tax credits and tax deductions to get average Americans involved in the political process. My bill, the Citizens Involvement in Campaigns (CIVIC) Act, will broaden the base of political contributors and limit the influence of big money donors in federal elections.

Members of Congress can be forgiven for being exhausted by the recent debates over campaign finance reform that last year concluded with passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA). Although that legislation will curb some of the worst abuses of our current campaign system, such as the unlimited soft money loophole, the reality is that special interests and high-income donors still will have a disproportionate level of influence in our political system. We cannot stop here, with the job only partly complete.

As the next step in the process of campaign finance reform, we need to take a fresh look at innovative approaches, including ways that encourage, and not restrict, people's participation in our campaigns. Toward this end, I have been advocating tax credits and deductions for small political contributions for many years. An updated tax credit system would be a simple and effective means of balancing the influence of big money donors and bringing individual contributors back to our campaigns. The impact of this counterweight will reduce the burden of raising money, as well as the appearance of impropriety that accompanies the money chase.

Most would agree that the ideal way to finance political campaigns is through a broad base of donors. But, as we are all painfully aware, the economic realities of modern-day campaigning lead many candidates to focus most of their efforts on collecting funds from a few large donors. This reality alienates many Americans from the political process.

The concept of empowering small donors is not a new idea. For example, from 1972 to 1986, the federal government offered a tax credit for small political contributions. This provided an incentive for average Americans to contribute to campaigns in small amounts while simultaneously encouraging politicians to solicit donations from a larger pool of contributors. Currently, six geographically and politically diverse states (Oregon, Minnesota, Ohio, Virginia, Arkansas, and Arizona) offer their own tax credits for political contributions. These state-level credits vary in many respects, but all share the same goal of encouraging average Americans to become more involved.

The CIVIC Act can begin the process of building this counterweight for federal elections. This bill is designed to encourage Americans who ordinarily do not get involved in politics beyond casting a vote every two or four years (that is, if they bother to vote at all) to become more active participants in our political process.

The CIVIC Act will reestablish and update the discontinued federal tax credit. Taxpayers can choose between a 100 percent tax credit for political contributions to federal candidates or national political parties (limited to $200 per taxable year), or a 100 percent tax deduction (limited to $600 per taxable year). Both limits, of course, are doubled for joint returns. As long as political parties and candidates promote the existence of these credits, the program can have a real impact and aid in making elections more grassroots affairs than they are now.

A side benefit of this legislation will be to strengthen political parties, which, many feel, have been weakened by the passage of BCRA. Under the CIVIC Act, only federal candidates and national party committees count as eligible recipients for purposes of the tax benefits. This will allow the parties to tap new sources of revenue and begin to replace the massive soft-money donations that have been cut off.

In conclusion, a limited tax credit for political contributions can be a bipartisan, cost-efficient method for helping balance the influence of large money donors in the American electoral process. Instead of driving away most Americans from participation in political life, we can invite them in. It seems to me that this will be a fruitful way to clean up our system, while at the same time convincing Americans that they actually have a meaningful stake in elections.

VOLUNTARY SCHOOL PRAYER

HON. JO ANN EMERSON

OF MISSOURI

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, January 7, 2003

Mrs. EMERSON. I rise today to introduce a constitutional amendment to ensure that students can choose to pray in school. Regrettably, the notion of the separation of church and state has been widely misrepresented in recent years, and the government has strayed far from the vision of America as established by the Founding Fathers.

Our Founding Fathers had the foresight and wisdom to understand that a government cannot secure the freedom of religion if at the same time it favors one religion over another through official actions. Their philosophy was one of even-handed treatment of the different faiths practiced in America, a philosophy that was at the very core of what their new Nation was to be about. Somehow, this philosophy is often interpreted today to mean that religion has no place at all in public life, no matter what its form. President Reagan summarized the situation well when he remarked, ''The First Amendment of the Constitution was not written to protect the people of this country from religious values; it was written to protect religious values from government tyranny.'' And this is what voluntary school prayer is about, making sure that prayer, regardless of its denomination, is protected.

There can be little doubt that no student should be forced to pray in a certain fashion or be forced to pray at all. At the same time, a student should not be prohibited from praying, just because he/she is attending a public school. This straightforward principle is lost on the liberal courts and high-minded bureaucrats who have systematically eroded the right to voluntary school prayer, and it is now necessary to correct the situation through a constitutional amendment. I urge my colleagues to support my amendment and make a strong statement in support of the freedom of religion.

HONORING THE MEMORY OF WAYNE OWENS

HON. ALCEE L. HASTINGS

OF FLORIDA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, January 7, 2003

Mr. HASTINGS of Florida. Mr. Speaker, it is with a heavy heart that I rise today to honor the memory of our colleague and good friend Congressman Wayne Owens. His death on December 18, 2002, was, indeed, unexpected. Today, we are left with a void that will undoubtedly remain unfilled for a long time to come.

A four term Member of Congress, Wayne Owens experienced this institution from the inside during two very trying times in American history. As a member of the House Committee on the Judiciary, in 1973, Congressman Owens voted to recommend the impeachment of then President Richard M. Nixon. Additionally, in 1991, during his final term in the House of Representatives, Congressman Owens joined with 44 of his Democratic colleagues to sue then President George H. W. Bush to prevent him from taking offensive action against Iraq without first obtaining a Congressional declaration of war or ''other explicit authority from the Congress.'' While the suit only succeeded to delay war for a brief period, it reaffirmed the Congress' constitutional authority to make war.

Congressman Owens remained a continued advisor to many of us still serving today long after he left the House of Representatives in 1992. In 1989, Congressman Owens cofounded the Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation where he quickly became a leading voice advocating a peaceful solution to a historically deadly conflict. Many of us were often left in true admiration of his passion and commitment to educating policy makers and public citizens that peace in the Middle East is not a pipe dream, but rather a real possibility. During my tenure on the House Committee on International Relations, I often sought Congressman Owens advice and guidance, especially when considering legislation affecting the Middle East. While Middle Eastern leaders continue down the difficult path toward peace, Congressman Owens' voice of reason and understanding will truly be missed.

Mr. Speaker, the United States must work harder to fulfill the aspirations of peace that Wayne Owens sought for so long. Peace in the Middle East is not a pipe dream. Wayne Owens knew that and the Center that he founded is evidence. Without doubt, it would be a fitting legacy to the memory of Wayne Owens for Middle Eastern leaders to recommit themselves today to a life of peace, harmony, and coexistence. Congressman Owens wouldn't have wanted it any other way.