

Why People Who Value Families Should Care About Campaign Finance Reform

June 2001

The Addiction Industries



Seniors



Environment



Working Families



The Addiction Industry

The pernicious influence of big money on American politics corrupts more than our political system; it threatens our core American values. The scandalous campaign finance system permits big-money special interests to advance their agendas in Congress and at the White House.

Special-interest money from the tobacco, alcohol, and gambling industries flows into the campaign coffers of legislators making decisions beneficial to the financial health of those industries, but often detrimental to the health and financial well-being of American families.

THE ADDICTION INDUSTRIES

TOBACCO Big Tobacco has had a tumultuous decade, including being accused of lying to Congress, facing increasing evidence that it is marketing its products to children, and being confronted with an increasing number of studies detailing the negative health effects of cigarettes. Tobacco companies have responded by providing a steady stream of campaign contributions to national parties and federal candidates — \$22.8 million in soft money and \$12.1 million in PAC money during the past ten years. The tobacco industry has been able to beat back efforts to allow the Food and Drug Administration to improve public health and reduce youth smoking through regulation of tobacco.

Now, as pressure to regulate the industry increases, tobacco companies are suddenly willing to accept FDA regulation. Tobacco giant Philip Morris has been lobbying for it, seeking protection from more stringent state and local laws and federal support for “reduced risk” cigarettes, which critics say are designed to keep current smokers from quitting and attract new smokers. Philip Morris’ regulation proposal is much more watered-down than those supported by health advocates in Congress. Critics, such as the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, charge that the industry is changing its stance to protect its profits, not the public health. Meanwhile, 400,000 people continue to die each year from smoking and more than 3,000 kids become regular smokers every day.

ALCOHOL

The alcohol industry has contributed \$27.3 million to national parties and federal candidates since 1991, including \$14.6 million in soft money. In 2000, Congress finally passed legislation that would require states to lower the minimum blood alcohol level allowed for driving a vehicle, but pressure from the alcohol industry was instrumental in blocking the legislation for years, despite overwhelming support from health, medical, insurance, and consumer groups, as well as public opinion polls. Mothers Against Drunk Driving estimates that 500 lives could have been saved each of those years if the new standard had been in effect.

In 1999 the alcohol industry successfully blocked legislation in Congress to spend a portion of the \$195 million set aside for anti-drug advertisements to include spending for ads to prevent underage drinking. “I guess this was a real experience in how powerful outside interests can be, regardless of the merits of the case,” said Representative Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA), who sponsored the legislation in the House. Underage consumption of alcohol remains the leading drug problem for young people — 6.5 times more youth die from alcohol than illegal drugs. There are still no restrictions on alcohol broadcast advertisements targeted to young people.

GAMBLING

The gambling industry gave \$23.2 million during the past ten years to national parties and federal candidates — \$20 million of which came in the form of soft money. Gambling interests have dramatically increased their political spending through the decade due to the growth of the industry and in response to a federal study outlining the negative impacts of gambling and the need for regulation. The industry is currently fighting an attempt by Congress to ban betting on Olympic, high school, and college sports. The ban has support from religious groups and the National College Athletic Association, which believe that legalized gambling on high school and college sports undermines the integrity of the sports and jeopardizes the welfare of student athletes. Approximately \$1 billion is spent betting legally on college sports in Nevada each year. According to a study released by the National Gambling Impact Study Commission that was created by Congress, problem and pathological gambling costs the country an estimated \$5 billion per year.

By banning soft money – the huge, unregulated contributions to political parties from corporations, unions and wealthy individuals – the McCain-Feingold/Shays-Meehan bills will help reduce the influence of wealthy special interests on public policy. McCain-Feingold/Shays-Meehan will help ensure that government decisions are based on what is good for families — not what is good for large contributors.