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## Republicans Join Bandwagon on Revamping Campaign Money Rules

By Eliza Newlin Carney - CQ Roll Call

The Republican Party has long championed campaign finance deregulation, but a small yet growing number of GOP lawmakers and politicians are joining in calls to overhaul the political money rules.

“Conservatives out there in the field want conservative solutions on money in politics,” said former GOP political consultant John Pudner, executive director of Take Back Our Republic, a new group rallying Republican support for campaign finance changes from a conservative perspective.

Pudner just met with with some two dozen House and Senate Republicans during his first week making the rounds on Capitol Hill, and enjoyed a reception that he said was “beyond our wildest expectations.” Pudner was handing out state-by-state poll results showing high levels of conservative support for such changes as boosting disclosure for outside groups and tax credits for small donors.

Pudner’s status report came at a Friday forum titled “Finding Common Ground on Money-in-Politics in Washington” hosted by the Campaign Legal Center, a nonpartisan legal institute.

Also on hand to discuss campaign finance changes that might bridge partisan divides were Jay Cost, a staff writer at the conservative Weekly Standard, and Norm Ornstein, a political scientist and scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Moderating the panel was Meredith McGehee, Campaign Legal Center policy director.

“Conservatives, particularly in the grassroots, are very open to this,” said Cost, citing mounting concern on the GOP’s right flank over so-called crony capitalism and tax breaks for corporations that lobby Capitol Hill. Cost is author of a new book, “A Republic No More: Big Government and the Rise of American Political Corruption,” that explores how public resources benefit private factions and interests.

“This is where I think there’s a potential of overlap between conservatives and progressives,” said Cost.

Not that Republicans are suddenly poised to embrace progressive proposals to amend the Constitution to permit limits on political spending, for example. But other areas, such as boosting disclosure for big-spending outside groups and rewarding small donors with tax credits, have drawn GOP interest, said Pudner. Particularly popular is his group’s suggestion that the ban on foreign contributions be better enforced through credit card verifications and other means, he said.

Another potential area for common ground might be raising the limit on individual contributions to candidates, which now stands at \$2,700 per election, in exchange for such changes as tax credits and improved disclosure. Such a plan would “divide the traditional reform community,” Ornstein acknowledged, but is something he said he would be “perfectly happy to offer as part of the give and take” of crafting a compromise.

A handful of Republicans on Capitol Hill have already shown interest in campaign finance legislation. GOP Reps. Lou Barletta, of Pennsylvania, and James B. Renacci, of Ohio, recently co-sponsored a bipartisan bill (HR 2931) to overhaul the Federal Election Commission.

The bill would replace the six-member FEC with a five-member body selected by a blue-ribbon panel and headed by a chair serving a 10-year term. Now evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, the chronically stalemated FEC has essentially stopped enforcing the campaign finance rules.

“A lot of Republicans are interested because they think the FEC is just a waste of taxpayer money,” said McGehee of FEC overhaul proposals.

Rep. Walter B. Jones, of North Carolina, is the lone Republican cosponsor of House legislation (HR 20) authored by Rep. John Sarbanes, D-Md., that would match low-dollar contributions with federal funds. Asked about that legislation, Pudner said that Take Back Our Republic has remained neutral on matching funds. Some Republicans in the group’s state affiliates are open to the suggestion, he said, while others voice gut objections to public financing.

### **Bashing Washington**

If nothing else, Republicans on the campaign trail are responding to polls that show public concern on both the right and left about how campaigns are financed. A June New York Times/CBS poll found that 84 percent of respondents agreed that money has “too much influence” in politics, and fully 85 percent said the system should be changed fundamentally or completely overhauled.

Sen. Ted Cruz, the Texas Republican seeking the GOP presidential nomination, has complained that “lobbyists and career politicians make up the Washington cartel.” Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, another Republican seeking the White House, recently pledged to fight “this culture of special interest access,” and proposed a six-year ban on lobbying for former House members and senators.

Pudner knows firsthand the potency of campaign finance politics. He managed Virginia Republican Dave Brat’s primary win over then-House Majority Leader Eric Cantor last year, in an unprecedented upset built in part on anti-special interest attacks.

“To leave the field void, to say no one on the right is talking about money in politics, I think is a problem,” he said.