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## **Take Back Our Republic — Fighting to Restore Grass Roots to Politics**

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**By: John Gizzi**

As the 114th Congress opens, both the Obama administration and Democratic members of Congress are poised to craft legislation to restore some of the limits on independent campaign spending allowed by the Supreme Court's Citizens United and McCutcheon decisions.

In denouncing "McCutcheon," which blew off the cap on the amount of money one can give to federal candidates in an election cycle, President Barack Obama last year said the U.S. system of financing campaigns was becoming one "where you can basically have millionaires and billionaires bankrolling whoever they want, however they want, in some cases undisclosed."

But, unwilling to concede that the solution to greater citizen involvement in the political process is more regulation, a just-formed group is fighting to encourage more \$500-and-below donors in other ways.

"If the top 100 donors keep giving \$300 million to candidates and "SuperPACs," that's almost as much as the \$356 million given by small donors," said John Pudner, head of the newly-minted "Take Back Our Republic,"

"But, if we can encourage millions of small donors to get involved, we will have the citizen involvement sought by so many on all sides of the political spectrum."

Pudner emphasized "we aren't interested in limiting any amounts of donations or freedom of expression. There are other, better ways, to encourage more broad-based citizen involvement in the process."

In an exclusive interview with Newsmax last week, veteran Virginia Republican consultant Pudner spelled out both the vision and the map to it by "Take Back," a c-3 (educational organization). Among those helping him launch the new group are Jim Gilmore, former Virginia governor and Republican National Chairman, and the Stewart Family Foundation, headed by former U.S. Ambassador to Norway Robert Stewart.

Pudner, who helped orchestrate conservative David Brat's nationally-watched primary upset of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, emphasized that "Take Back" was "politically neutral" and "will attract grass-roots backers of all stripes."

As to how he would reach the goal of raising the ranks of the 10,000 donors for each of the 435 U.S. House districts to 25,000, Pudner said one way to start would be to restore the tax credit for donations to federal candidates and apply it "to the first few hundred dollars of contributions made."

"From 1972-86, the tax credit was in the U.S. tax codes," he told us, "So that means that supporters of Ronald Reagan, who took federal matching

funds, got to deduct. And I'd say they liked the result."

But the tax credit went the way of other "loopholes" in the mid-'80's and was eliminated in tax reform measures. Deductibility at the state level has also been eliminated and exists today only in a couple of states such as Oregon and Virginia. In calling for its restoration, Pudner also said the tax credit for donations should be revived in the states as well.

While a strong believer in transparency, Pudner quickly pointed out that "full disclosure" of one's campaign donations is a dual-edged sword that may also frighten prospective small donors out of fear of retribution. He cited the case of the corporate executive in California who lost his job following revelations of his giving \$1000 to a statewide initiative codifying traditional marriage a few years before.

"There has to be a middle ground between transparency and security," he said, "Perhaps the answer is to raise the disclosure limit—that one's donations must be reported starting at, say, \$500."

But, Pudner quickly added, this is just one possible avenue to be discussed at the growing number of "Take Back" chapters that are just getting started. Within weeks of its official formation, "Take Back" announced that it had between 25 and 50 chapters at the county level nationwide. Its goal is to have chapters in all fifty states, Pudner said, "and to start, very soon, a national discussion on just how to take campaign finance back to the grass roots."

In the early 1970s, the concept of regulation and a heavier government hand in campaign finance had its pivotal start with the formation of Common Cause, a reform group started by former Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary John Gardiner. Four decades later, a new concept of campaign finance reform focused on citizens and small donations may well have its genesis in **Take Back Our Republic**.

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