Checks on Union Political Influence Needed

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Last Wednesday, by a vote of 120-29, the Massachusetts House of Representatives refused to pass a campaign finance amendment sponsored by state Rep. Ryan Fattman, R-Webster, to a campaign finance bill. Had it passed, Fattman's amendment would have sharply reduced the influence of special interest money in Massachusetts politics.

His amendment would have closed the loophole that allows unions, including those from other states, to donate up to $15,000 to state candidates, while individuals can donate only up to $500 and corporations are prohibited from giving at all. Fattman's amendment would have limited unions to giving $1,000 to a single candidate in a given year.

In the past, this union-only privilege has existed only because of an antiquated ruling made by the Office of Campaign and Political Finance. Now, the Legislature has essentially given that ruling its seal of approval, all while claiming to clean up election law and increase transparency concerning outside groups, including Super PACs. Some of the original bill may have had merit, but state House leadership fell on their face with this missed opportunity. Unfortunately for the commonwealth, Fattman's amendment fell on a party-line vote because no Democrats had the courage to cross their party's powerful union backing.

Sadly, this type of behavior isn't new on Beacon Hill. In many ways, it resembles last year's vote against publicizing votes by legislative committees. Early in 2013, the House voted against creating a public database of votes taken during committee hearings, thus allowing lawmakers to escape scrutiny for the positions they take in the early stages of the legislative process and preventing citizens from verifying their representative's rhetoric.

As with so much else, this rule only benefits incumbent politicians. And just as on Fattman's amendment, not a single Democratic state representative voted with the Republicans in their efforts to make committee votes public.

These two votes highlight the systemic problems that plague our state. Our Founders, however, rightly understood that checks and balances are crucial to the flourishing of our democracy, and when legislative leaders go too far, the courts serve to rein them in. It appears, that just Monday, in Harris v. Quinn, the U.S. Supreme Court limited the ability of some public-sector unions to collect dues, which will hamper unions' ability to enroll members against their will and make contributions those members would oppose. The immediate impact may not be very large, but in time, it will even be felt in Massachusetts.

According to Politico, after Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker worked to pass laws eliminating compulsory union membership in his state, the American Federation of Teachers lost 65 percent

of its statewide members and the National Education Association saw its numbers drop by 19 percent.

It's very telling that, when actually given a choice, so many decline to continue their participation. A ruling against unions in Harris v. Quinn may do what the Massachusetts Legislature failed to do to a degree: limit unions' that enlist government as a recruiter, and reduce the influence of unions in elections for generations to come.

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