

## **Campaign bill needs more work**

OHIO GOV. BOB TAFT'S PURPOSE IN CALLING A special session of the Legislature was to achieve real reform to the state's campaign finance system, the bill being debated won't get him anywhere close to meeting his goal.

Rather, as it stands, the bill represents a significant step backward. Here's why:

Republican lawmakers have been confronted with abuses and genuine scandal in how they have raised political money. Supreme Court campaigns, for example, have been supported by millions of dollars in secret contributions to so-called "issue advocacy groups." Local political parties have created "operating accounts" that are hard to distinguish from slush funds and also have confidential contributors.

Meanwhile, these same county organizations invite contributors to donate to other special funds as a way to get around contribution limits; money from those funds then are used for favored candidates' campaigns.

In short, the system consciously puts money ahead of ethics and the public interest.

Increasingly, though, the rules have become a political liability for Republicans as abuses regularly have been front page news. In response, lawmakers have unveiled legislation they say will reform the system, and, indeed, it appears to do so in significant ways.

A bright light is shone on election advertising of all kinds, including by clandestine third-party groups. The legislation would require broad disclosure of information about who contributes, including the identity of their employers. County organizations no longer could operate in secret, nor be used to launder or stash money for specific candidates.

If that's all the bill contained, it would deserve to pass. But there is much more. In fact, judged by its overall content, lawmakers seem to be rewarding themselves for making overdue reforms.

So while Republican leaders boast about certain provisions, they have less to say about how they also are trying to increase the amount candidates can accept from contributors; the limit would go from \$2,500 to \$10,000. The bill also permits political gifts from corporations and labor unions < for the first time in the state's history.

At the same time, though, the GOP majority wants to stick it to organized labor, making it harder for unions to raise money to support candidates. Specifically, the bill would put the burden on unions to have members "opt in" before their dues could be used for political causes, rather than requiring the employees to "opt out." This is a purely partisan move.

Further clouding the legislation is how some of its positive elements have been drafted. The new disclosure requirements, while good in concept, don't track the latest U.S. Supreme Court ruling upholding the McCain-Feingold reforms to the federal campaign finance system. The requirements of the bill are so broad they could be struck down < meaning the genuine reforms could be wiped out and the garbage could be left in law.

Gov. Taft and GOP lawmakers should go back to the drawing board.