

AN OVERLOOKED PIECE OF GOOD NEWS

by Bill Woods for StreetVibes

With Trump's "national emergency," the Mueller Report, and other horrendous news swirling around Washington, D.C., one positive action that took place in the nation's capital this spring received very little attention. On March 8th, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 1- the For the People Act. This piece of legislation sets the gold standard for political reform in this country. It includes reforms on voting rights, gerrymandering, and "big money" in campaigns.

The bad news is Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's declaration that the "For the People Act "won't even get a hearing in the Senate. The Senator from Kentucky's commentary on this Bill makes it sound like any genuine effort to renew the health of democracy represents a political attack on the Republican Party. Nevertheless, this comprehensive reform deserves a great deal more attention than it has yet received in order to make people aware of its potential for improving the current political process.

First of all, H.R. 1 is not just a political ploy to insure the election of Democrats. Traditional reform groups such as the League of Women Voters and Common Cause

strongly support it. In fact, Common Cause worked behind the scenes with the drafters of the Bill to insure that certain reforms were included in the final version. When it came up for review in the House, Karen Hobert Flynn, President of Common Cause, testified for H.R.-1 before the House Oversight and Reform Committee.



What is in the Bill? Protecting and enhancing voting rights certainly remain a focus of the proposed legislation. Election Day would become a national



holiday, and a variety of steps are put forward to make it easier for people to register and vote.

For Federal elections, the proposed law attempts to minimize the impediments that states often adopt to make it more difficult for some groups to vote. It calls for the availability of Internet registration, and an automatic registration process.

A redistricting reform that would essentially eliminate gerrymandering is included in the House Bill. It proposes to establish non-partisan state commissions to draw Congressional district lines every ten years. It revitalizes the Voting Rights Act that had been weakened in recent years, and it calls for all states to restore the right to vote for ex-offenders who have been released from prison.

This method would do away with the highly partisan process that currently exists in many states, and such a citizen commission would also improve Ohio's new plan adopted by the voters in 2018.

H.R. 1- even tackles the major problem of "big money" as a dominant factor in today's political campaigns. It calls for disclosure of major donations to candidates for Congress. Although certainly not a cure, disclosure at least gives public exposure to "Fat Cat" efforts to influence elections.

The Bill also provides limited public financing for campaigns. A certain number of small donations will trigger a percentage of public dollars to aid candidates who are not receiving huge PAC contributions. However, Supreme Court rulings such as the Citizens United Case still make it extremely difficult to diminish the influence of "big money" on the political process.

H.R.1- also establishes reforms for administering elections. It seeks to protect the voting process from any tampering by domestic or foreign organizations, and it lays out guidelines for preventing hacking and other forms of fraud. It also mandates sufficient funding to pay for administrative improvements.

In conclusion, reformers need to call attention to the many needed changes that would occur if the For the People Act became the law of the land. For those who believe that a renewed democracy is critical to addressing other growing problems such as income inequality, poverty, health care, racism, and climate change, the passage of H.R. 1- would be a major step in the right direction. Who knows? If reformers make enough noise and the news media picks up the message, Republicans in the Senate might feel pressured to at least give this Bill a hearing.



H.R. 1

FOR THE PEOPLE ACT

