

Free Speech Coalition: Public Citizen has 'Ethics' Problem With its Grassroots Lobbying Legislation



MCLEAN, Va., Dec. 14 /PRNewswire/ -- Grassroots leaders today told Joan Claybrook, President of Washington-based Public Citizen, that grassroots legislation being crafted by Public Citizen for Speaker-Elect Pelosi in the name of ethics and lobbying reform is "hypocrisy" since it would help protect the culture of corruption in Washington.

The Virginia-based Free Speech Coalition, Inc. told Ms. Claybrook in a letter signed by 47 grassroots leaders (<http://freespeechcoalition.org/pdfs/ClaybrookLetterAndAnalysis.pdf>) that the grassroots reporting and penalty provisions being crafted by Public Citizen and others violate the First Amendment rights of small citizen action groups, yet create loopholes for big corporations, unions, trade associations and membership special interests such as Public Citizen itself.

"Public Citizen fails to disclose how the grassroots legislation would hurt citizen advocates and critics, protect big special interests and assist corruption in Washington," said Dick Dingman of the Free Speech Coalition, who added, "Public Citizen, with its eight-figure assets and multi-million dollar revenues, shows no shame in being less than honest about so-called 'honest government' legislation."

Public Citizen acknowledges it is helping craft legislation for Speaker-Elect Nancy Pelosi modeled after her 2006 legislation, H.R. 4682. The bill would treat communications to the general public more harshly under lobbying disclosure law than actual lobbying conducted by high-priced K Street lobbyists. The new legislation won't be available until the next Congress convenes, but its model, H.R. 4682, would create unprecedented restrictions and penalties, potentially criminal, on the free exercise of First Amendment rights by citizens to speak, publish, associate and petition the government.

First Amendment lawyer and Co-Counsel for the Free Speech Coalition, William J. Olson, said, "The Public Citizen/Pelosi bill would allow corporations, unions and even foreign interests to spend literally hundreds of millions of dollars mobilizing their shareholders, officers, employees and members, yet hide those expenditures. On the flipside, their bill would require real citizen associations to essentially obtain Congress's consent to communicate about important policy matters that impact on them. It's not just the imbalance that is wrong; it's a frontal attack on the First Amendment and political speech."

"The grassroots legislation may be the most expansive and wrongly targeted regulation of First Amendment rights ever written," added lawyer Mark Fitzgibbons. "We hope that Democrats who pledged reform when campaigning will target real corruption instead of the rights of citizens to participate in their democracy," he concluded. Free Speech Coalition Co-Counsel, Mark Weinberg, expressed confidence that his fellow liberal Democrats will see the light and correct these inequities.

The letter to Ms. Claybrook, along with an analysis of the grassroots provisions, is at <http://freespeechcoalition.org/pdfs/ClaybrookLetterAndAnalysis.pdf>.

Free Speech Coalition, Inc. 8180 Greensboro Drive, Suite 1070, McLean, Virginia, is a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization that protects the First Amendment rights of advocacy. It was founded in 1993, and can be reached at (703) 356-6912.

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