

RUSH!

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A Government Reform Project Study

TRUTH IN TESTIMONY: PENETRATING THE SPECIAL-INTEREST FACADE

Conservatives in Congress have not fared as well as many expected, partly because they have failed to make institutional reforms that would make it easier to promote conservative policies. A “Truth in Testimony” rule requiring witnesses appearing before congressional committees to disclose the amount of federal money their organizations receive would shed a bright light on the often self-serving character of testimony before Congress. Liberal advocacy groups would lose their claim to moral superiority when required to admit that they often benefit directly from the government programs they promote. Either house of Congress could adopt such a rule independently of the other, with no need for joint congressional or presidential approval.

Stand for Children: A Case Study

Those who doubt that Truth in Testimony would be an effective tool in responding to criticism of efforts to secure a balanced budget should consider the recent Stand for Children march in Washington, D.C. The Children’s Defense Fund, a leading opponent of efforts to reform welfare, began a major public relations blitz months in advance of its June 1, 1996, Stand for Children rally on the Mall. Early stories invariably were favorable, largely verbatim recitations of organizers’ claims that the event was “a non-partisan call to action” aimed at celebrating the nation’s youth.

Beginning a few weeks before the march, The Heritage Foundation and other groups revealed that 25 percent of the national endorsing organizations were direct federal grant recipients, receiving a total of nearly \$400 million per year. Other sponsoring organizations included the lobbying arms of federal programs costing nearly \$7 billion per year and 20 groups representing social service administrators.¹

Once the fact emerged that organizers had a vested interest in maintaining their own direct federal subsidies, even the mainstream press felt obliged to look beyond their claim to be defending children. Major print and broadcast media prominently reported information on sponsors’ government funding in their coverage of the march. What could have been a public relations nightmare for conservatives in Congress turned into a wash. Indeed, Marian Wright Edelman, the Stand for Children’s chief organizer, found herself spending much of her time deflecting questions about government subsidies.

¹ Kenneth R. Weinstein, “Stand for Children or Last Stand for Big Government?” Heritage Foundation *Government Integrity Project Report* No. 9, May 31, 1996.

The Congressional Analogy

Thus, in some ways, Stand for Children became an important conservative victory. Conservatives were able to change the terms of debate by revealing that at one-fourth of the national sponsors of the rally receive federal funds. According to a reliable estimate, a far higher proportion of witnesses before congressional committees are federally funded advocates.² Just as the Stand for Children's claim of altruism was unmasked, so can the claims of other federally funded advocacy groups which purport to speak on behalf of the disadvantaged while feathering their own nests.

Requiring organizations or individuals who testify before Congress to reveal the amount they receive in federal grants would radically change the dynamics and coverage of many congressional hearings. Almost daily, it seems, witnesses from various organizations express their outrage over proposed reductions in federal spending. Whereas the media often repeat hostile allegations made in testimony, what remains largely unknown to taxpayers is the extent to which advocacy groups enrich themselves at taxpayers' expense. That story goes unreported because Congress itself participates in the cover-up by refusing to disclose the links between witnesses and the programs about which they testify.

Under Truth in Testimony, representatives of, say, the American Association of Retired Persons appearing before House or Senate committees would be required to disclose that their organization receives \$86 million each year in federal grants. Labor leaders testifying on behalf of federal job training programs would have to disclose that their unions receive millions of dollars each year to administer these very programs. Inevitably, such information would become part of the media coverage of the hearing.

Truth in Testimony: A House Rule

Either the House of Representatives or the Senate could act on its own to initiate Truth in Testimony. This reform does not require either the agreement of both houses of Congress or the signature of the President.

Language for a Truth in Testimony rule might read as follows:

Witness statements shall include the amount and source (by agency and program) of any federal grants (including subgrants from other organizations or from a state pursuant to federal block grant) or any contract received during the current fiscal year and previous two fiscal years by a witness or an organization a witness represents. No testimony shall be included in a hearing record without such disclosure.

Because this would be an internal House or Senate rule rather than a federal statute, there would be neither civil nor criminal penalties attached to Truth in Testimony. Therefore, witnesses coming before Congress could not claim to be intimidated by the rule. The measure would provide a clear sanction: If witnesses failed to provide such information, they would be penalized by their testimony's being excluded from the official hearing record.

Conclusion

Truth in Testimony is a needed reform, one that would open up the congressional process by informing taxpayers when federally funded groups lobby Congress for more funds under the guise of impartial testimony. Coverage of the Stand for Children indicates that the media are quite willing to disseminate information about the size and scope of federal grants to organizations seeking to lobby Congress. Truth in Testimony, likewise, would help to turn criticism of efforts to balance the federal budget into scrutiny of those who profit from tax dollars.

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² James L. Payne, *The Culture of Spending* (San Francisco: ICS Press, 1991), p. 12.