

Testimony by
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Senate Bill 547 - ACC Accountability in Campaign Advertising
Government, Elections and Administration Committee

SB 547 – An Act Concerning Accountability in Campaign Advertisement has a few admirable goals in mind. It is clearly the goal of Connecticut Republicans to ensure that political debate is free, open and transparent so voters have a clear picture of where information is coming from and who is offering it for public consumption.

While Republicans, Democrats and political parties should be held accountable for the veracity of their positions and facts, it should not be the role of legislators to decide who is telling the truth, who is stretching it or simply fabricating facts for their political end.

The genius of the First Amendment is the freedom to express one's ideas and allow the public to decide whether those who utter them deserve the public trust. Through a free flow of ideas and debate, the voters can easily discern which positions meet the test of legitimacy.

The bill does ask for candidate identification which is certainly a laudable standard but more often than not, citation for statements and facts are already standard for most campaigns. Why? because an alert press and diligent voters have demanded it. To make it law would result in defacto censorship of free speech.

We do support controls on automated phone calls or robo calls by requiring audio disclaimers. That should stop some of the outrageous abuses of calling that occurred in 2006.

The most dangerous provision in SB 547 calling for a "truth in campaign code" is simply another name for governmental "thought police." The idea that we would even ask people running for office to comply with a truth code is Orwellian in its design and a nightmare in its implementation.

It seems strange that at a time where both parties are trying to enlist more people to run as candidates and get involved in the political process, the Legislature would entertain a law that would effectively tell them what they can say and how, and threaten to punish them if it didn't meet the guidelines of some arbitrary, unelected panel of truth experts.

And who will be the arbitrators of the "truth code?" What standards would apply to positions or ideas presented by candidates during the course of campaigns? How would these comments be ruled fact or fiction? And who would be chosen to sit in judgment to referee public debate?

The right to free speech is a sacred right and has been protected by the sacrifices of thousands of Americans. It is also the right and duty of all voters to challenge the government on a daily basis and to question authority through words and deeds. With the exception of the provision affecting disclosure of automated calls, this bill would severely crush those sacred rights and send a horrible signal from a state, which prides itself on being called "The Constitution State."

As someone who has managed campaigns, written about them as a newspaper reporter and watched them from afar, it has been my experience that voters get it and know when someone is crossing the line.

Information today flows at lightening speed and while the explosion of blogging and other forms of independent thought often tax our patience as citizens, passage of SB 547 would be a crippling blow to the constitutionally protected ability to say one's piece, anywhere, anytime and to anyone.

We should be making our election more open, not restrictive. Please reject SB 547.