

Rep. Yarmuth visit 5/12/17

Mary Lynn Collins welcomed attendees and provided background information on the Together Frankfort civic engagement group. Rep. Yarmuth's visit was a kick-off to the group's summer study on dark money - defined as money given to superPACs and 501(c)(4) groups that is unable to be traced back to individual donors. Together Frankfort will hold a book discussion meeting focusing on the book *Dark Money* by Jane Mayer on May 23, 2017 at the Community Room at the Paul Sawyer Library. The discussion will be led by Richard Taylor. Together Frankfort will also host another forum on dark money in August with co-hosting by the New Kentucky Project and the American Association of University Women. Mary Lynn noted that Rep. Yarmuth has introduced a constitutional amendment and other legislation on public finance, and that his website, <https://yarmuth.house.gov>, contains additional information about the role of dark money in politics. It was noted that while the book focuses on dark money from the right, conservative-leaning side, it also occurs with left, progressive-leaning organizations. Dark money diminishes the voice and vote of citizens.

Rep. Yarmuth began his talk explaining his World Championship in the German stick game of Dainty. He said he is the world champion because the championship was one game in Germantown, Louisville.

Rep. Yarmuth said Washington has a circus atmosphere now, and that he has concerns that the President is "not mentally right" and that he fears democracy is being jeopardized. He said policy discussions get lost because "Trump sucks the oxygen out of the room." In response to a later question, Rep. Yarmuth said he thought the media was doing a better job of reporting now than they were during the presidential campaign.

There is more and more dark money pouring into campaigns and it is a significant factor in campaign financing. Rep. Yarmuth said money, dark or light, exacerbates the partisanship in government. He said the Koch brothers spent over \$889 million in last year's election, and that some of that money was spent in Kentucky. He said the amount of dark money is growing, but there is good news in that the marketplace is providing some balance because advocacy groups, protests, and social media are changing the effects of dark money. He said that television advertising is less effective than ever, citing a study that showed 60% of people do not watch live TV and the need for millions of dollars for advertising is declining. He cited a PEW study that found that about 62% of the population get their news from Facebook and social media. He believes

getting out the vote and “feet on the ground” are the most important factors for engaging people. He credited recent protests and questions at town hall meetings for the failure of the first “replace and repeal” vote. He commented that Gov. Matt Bevin won the governorship by about 16% of Kentucky registered voters. Rep. Yarmuth stated that the dark money issue will not be fixed by legislation, evidenced by the 12 or so constitutional amendments that have already been filed in Congress. He said those were not going anywhere because of Republican leadership in Congress. Rep. Yarmuth has introduced the “KOCH Act” (Keep Our Campaigns Honest) that would require any TV ad to identify primary donors of the ad, requiring messages to include “I financed this message.” Undisclosed expenditures also fund get the vote out measures, citing the recent congressional election in Georgia.

He talked about the *Citizens United* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court and said that the opinion stated that full disclosure of corporate funding should occur, but that hasn't happened. The ruling prohibits dark money in campaign donations, but allows those funds to go to political action committees (PACs) without disclosure. He sees that as a manipulation of the original decision. He commented that nothing will change until Congressional leadership changes. A recent survey showed that 54% of people stated Democrats should be in control of Congress, while 38% said Republicans. He thinks this should be a sign of hope, and reiterated that the changing methods of political messaging should reduce the need for huge campaign spending. He commented that President Trump has accepted a lot of money since he was elected, and there is big money in the Trump Administration from corporate and Wall Street connections to his Cabinet officials.

He said his top priorities are improving health care, removing money from politics, and reducing gun violence. In response to a question, he said there is no national referendum process in the U.S. Some asked about other models to address corporate and dark money spending, and Rep. Yarmuth responded that there has been some legislation introduced, such as his KOCH Act, Rep. Sarbane's (MD) Fair Elections Now Act, but these don't get traction in Congress. A participant recommended the book *Billionaires and Ballot Bandits* by Greg Palast, and suggested that voters want election and tax reform, evidenced by the appeal of Sen. Bernie Sanders. Rep. Yarmuth said the dilemma is energy versus vast amounts of money. He said the Democratic Party is losing working people and those without a college degree, and traditional labor groups. Most people who are issue-oriented are already committed voters. He added that a study by

psychology professor Drew Weston of Emory University found that in any election 85% of the vote is predictable without any identified candidates. The "more engaged" and "least engaged" are already decided voters. There was discussion about the dangerousness of social media with false stories and opposition research. Rep Yarmuth cited the negative issues experienced during 2009-10 when the Affordable Care Act (known as Obamacare) was being debated, with the death panels as an example. He is unhappy with what he called little reaction from the Democrats. He has suggested the formation of a communications network to fend off false claims.

County Judge Executive Huston Wells asked for some specifics about the new health care bill passed by the House. Rep. Yarmuth said the bill had nothing to do with health care but it was a mechanism to provide a tax cut to those earning over \$200,000. Yarmuth said the bill made no sense and he did not think it would move forward, partially because any provision in this type of bill has to reduce the deficit and this bill does not do that. He said many House members voted for the latest bill because they feared challengers for their seats. He thinks Senate Majority Leader McConnell may not bring the House bill for a vote in the Senate so that his members don't have to take a vote on this controversial issue. He believes politicians are beginning to realize there is no alternative other than a single payor health care plan, along the lines of Medicare and Medicare Advantage Plans. These current plans provide basic health care with supplemental plans available based on need and cost. Another question addressed the acts of defunding of parts of Obamacare and Rep. Yarmuth replied that the greatest challenge in Obamacare is the individual market plans and rates. Funding has been cut that supports areas with high unhealthy populations and financial assistance to low-income earners may be cut or reduced. He says the ACA can be sabotaged but that could come at a political price.

There was discussion about district lines and the Census results. Rep. Yarmuth said changes to current districts would have to effect other districts, but with Republicans in control of the processes, little change is expected.

Rep. Yarmuth was asked about the status of the National Democratic Party and his thoughts on its new director, Tom Perez. He said he is encouraged and was happy to see Sen. Sanders on visits with Mr. Perez. Rep. Yarmuth supports an audit of the organization, and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, to include all contractors, media, consultants to spark some new energy into the groups. He called it "incestuous inertia". In his opinion, the Party

is great at policy but bad at empathy because Democrats don't appear to listen well to the challenges people are facing. He said that there are 10,000 Teamsters who are facing a 60% loss of their retirement benefits but that was not discussed on the campaign trails. Rep. Yarmuth was asked about the relevance of the electoral college and replied that he was not ready for direct vote because that could be chaotic. He thinks there could be a good modified version that will require candidates to visit all states.

Rep. Yarmuth is the ranking Democrat on the House Budget Committee, and was thanked for his recent efforts to prevent the shutdown of the federal government. He thinks the omnibus spending plan was a good compromise. He said the House has not passed an actual budget in the 10 years he has been in Congress, and probably won't this year either. The Committee usually receives the executive branch budget in February but President Trump has not yet submitted his budget. The administration is not yet fully staffed. The House Republicans have also not submitted a budget. He said that of the \$3.7 trillion in revenue, \$2.7 trillion is already committed to mandatory spending for Medicare, Social Security, and debt reduction. Of the \$1.7 trillion left, half of that (about \$54 billion) is for defense spending and the other half is discretionary spending for all other government programs such as education, health, environment, and others. He supports an audit of defense programs and actual preparedness. Rep. Yarmuth said the deficit is about \$500-\$600 billion now.

Attendees of the meeting expressed additional concerns about public education, vouchers, and charter schools; the amount of fundraising required by politicians, the high ranking of the U.S.'s maternal and infant death rates, and voter apathy. Rep. Yarmuth noted that 90% of the population opposes the *Citizens United* decision; 75% of the members of the National Rifle Association (NRA) support national background checks prior to a gun purchase; and the majority of the population supports a higher minimum wage. He said we don't have these policies in place because it makes a difference who is running Congress and elections do matter. He encouraged people to stay informed and stay active.