

By Alex Kane Rudansky

WASHINGTON -- A North Carolina congressman unveiled legislation this week that would restructure financing of presidential elections by substantially increasing the public tax dollars that are used to match private contributions.

The proposal by Democratic Rep. David Price would restructure the presidential campaign public-financing system that was put in place 40 years ago after the Watergate scandal.

Price announced the legislation Tuesday. He had introduced a bill in 2007 that sought to address some of the same issues.

"It's ironic, but I think appropriate, that we're doing something on the anniversary of Watergate," Price said in announcing the legislation. Sen. Mark Udall, D-Colo., has introduced similar legislation in the Senate.

"If we pass this legislation, the country and the democracy will be much stronger," said Rep. Chris Van Hollen, a Maryland Democrat who announced the legislation with Price. "Candidates will spend less time chasing after contributions and more time focused on important issues."

The new legislation would increase the public matching money for primary elections from one-to-one to four-to-one for donors who give no more than \$200. This would make a \$200 contribution by an individual worth \$1,000 to the candidate. The \$800 in additional money would come from the presidential campaign-fund checkoff on individual tax returns.

"Most Americans want to get back to a system that empowers small donors, rather than allows a few wealthy donors having substantial influence over the next president," Price said.

The bill also would eliminate spending limits on candidates and require presidential campaigns to disclose all individuals or groups that bundle contributions totaling more than \$50,000 during a four-year election cycle.

Since a pivotal 2010 Supreme Court case, Udall said, the public financing system is no longer a realistic option for presidential candidates. The Supreme Court case *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* bolstered the influence of so-called "super" political action committees and enabled candidates to receive large amounts of undisclosed donations from special interests, corporate entities and wealthy donors.

"Unfortunately, the *Citizens United* decision changed everything," Udall said. "We cannot roll back the Supreme Court's decision, but we can try and adapt the system Congress created in 1974 after Watergate to make it useful in this new era of big money and politics."

Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama opted out of the public financing system in the 2004 and 2008 elections. Obama and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney have opted out in this year's election, as well.

In an interview, Price said the bill was a hard sell in Congress but that he remained optimistic, partly due to the necessity of campaign finance revisions in a post-*Citizens United* climate.

The bill is intended to prevent a scandal like Watergate. However, J. Michael Bitzer, the chair of the history and politics department at Catawba College in Salisbury, N.C., said he thought it would take a scandal like Watergate to create real change.

"It's hard to get people to do something until, unfortunately, they're shamed into it," he said. "It's a great idea, but I think the establishment in both parties will see the status quo, basically the Wild West of fundraising, much more viable than any new proposals at this time."