

Does money equal power in american politics politics essay



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This essay argues that money does equal power in American politics and that campaign reform is still required in American society as this remains an ongoing problem.

In order to show the impact of money in the American campaigning system I believe this essay should begin with a statement of the recent facts and figures in relation to the cost of campaigning in America. The 2012 campaign by Obama and Romney for the presidential race resulted in spending of over \$6 billion reported which includes money spent by the campaigns of both candidates, outside groups such as PAC's, and independent organizations such as businesses[1]. In the evaluating of money and democracy in the presidential campaigns we must also look at public spending as this was supposed to be the answer in reforming the presidential campaigning.

Campaign finance is not just a problem in the presidential campaigns, In 2010 \$1. 5 million was the average spent by house incumbents and \$11. 2 million was the average spent by senate incumbents, these numbers which we will compare with those of challengers to see if there is any inequality[2]. These figures alone show the eye watering large amounts of money spent today by those in politics. There are many aspects that need to be looked at to determine if money affects the democracy of America. However this is not a recent problem in America, money in elections has been a problem for many decades and finally an introduction of a Act in 1971 was supposed to put this problem to bed.

The Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) of 1971 was created to restore people's confidence in the campaigning system as many people felt large contributors had the biggest voice in political campaigns. This required

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funding to be made public. The Watergate scandal revealed during President Nixon's campaign proved the corruption that was within the political system even with reforms in place as those who contributed large amounts were given positions as ambassadors in Nixons re-election committees, money equalling power[3]. This resulted in amendments being made to the original FECA such as the creation of the Federal Election Committee (FEC) who would ensure laws such as declarations of contributions were adhered to and brought public funding into the picture to try to stop the influence of large contributors. However, even when efforts are made to make campaign finance transparent to the public, there are still those who challenge this.

In 1976 in the case of Buckley v Valeo, the reforms legislated by the FECA were brought to the courts. This case argued that the provisions made in the Act were unconstitutional. Here it was argued that money in politics was not corruption but instead it was a form of speech, therefore was protected by the first amendment of the Constitution of America and was a right of all Americans. It was decided that monetary contributions were an expression of one's support for a candidate which was a democratic right[4]. This association of money equals speech has been the hindrance of any reform after that and still poses problems in reform. Justice John Paul Stevens in 2000 presented a forceful opinion that " money is property and not speech", surely money couldn't equal speech when money is not evenly distributed, this would prove that those with the biggest wallet had the biggest voices. The need for further reform after an extremely large redirecting of contributions in the form of soft money led to further reform of the campaign system in the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA)[5]which

targeted the booming problem of soft money during campaigns. This problem was as a result of the allowance of the FECA of organisations giving money indirectly to candidates; this money was not recorded by the FEC and had an unlimited budget. This was abolished by BCRA to further attempt to bring fairness to all candidates and to try, once again, ensure money did not equal power in America. Campaign reform in America tries to take the impact of money away from the impact of politics. But interest groups and the subsequent PACs have still left a question mark on the influence of money on the campaigns.

Louise Overacker in 1932 expressed her concerns that financing of elections in a democracy is a major problem and raised the question of “ if democracies do not inevitably become government ruled by small groups”[6]. This brings us into the discussion of interest groups and PAC’S and their impact on American Democracy. PACs are organisations created through the FECA to allow these organisations to raise and distribute money to campaigns, allowing more money to be directed at candidates. Many interest groups and large organisations create PACs[7]. Interest groups are known to have aims in politics in America, firstly to elect friends and defeat enemies and secondly to increase the number of people in political positions that share their views. Business interest groups on the other hand will more than likely use the friendly incumbent rule of backing the incumbent that is certain to be re elected and generally shares their views rather than a challenger who may be more supportive of their interests but is not guaranteed to succeed in their campaign[8]. Why is this? Why not support the candidate who is more supportive of your cause and stand by them? This

raises the suspicion of interest groups being more concerned with gaining the access of those in power. If interest groups are raising large quantities of funding for these candidates surely they are receiving something in return, otherwise why continue to pump money into a wasted cause?[9]It is known that many people involved PACs are those that are well educated and part of the upper class society which raises the question of is there an unbalance in the representation of society in America? As political scientist E. E Schattschneider said “ the flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent”[10]. If so this puts further questions on the American branding of democracy.

However those who are against this view that interest groups and individual contributions thwart democracy argue that it does the opposite. They, on the other hand, argue that interest groups are a direct result of a democratic state. They argue that interest groups and PACs increase people’s awareness and interest in politics and therefore improve democracy in expanding people’s knowledge in political matters, an aspect recognised by James Madison[11]. Therefore in theory this activity contributes to democracy in America. But interest groups and PAC’s as discussed above look after and promote their own interests, they can do this by emphasising the negatives of another candidate through negative campaigning[12]or issue advocacy or by promoting the positive aspects of the candidate they are supporting. Therefore are they really serving the needs of the country or the needs of themselves? I feel they are only looking after their own interests to try to increase those in support of the candidate that will best serve them in the event that they win their election. Interest groups and PAC’s are unlikely to

use their funding to compare the candidates in a fair and democratic way in the aim of giving the public a fair and even view of each candidate. Their aim of promoting their interests will lead to thwarted pictures of candidates. The fact is that organisations that make contributions, especially those with significant financial resources, want to ensure they make a Return on Investment, that's what these contributions are from many PAC's and interest groups, they are investments not donations. As said on Capitol Hill "my vote is not for sale but is available for rent".[13]

Public funding was created by the FECA to try to take the issue of money out of campaigns and to prevent corruption of wealthy individuals in politics. However those who took public funding had to abide by a budget given to them. The option of partial funding in presidential primaries was rejected by many as they began to use the system to benefit themselves. In 2000 George Bush decided to reject partial funding in the primaries[14]. This was with the aim of using this time of to raise as much money as he could so that he could easily out race the other opponents in his raising of funds; therefore he was able to create more awareness of his campaign in the primaries over the opponents who were under strict instruction to stick to their public budgets. Bush easily received the nomination he needed but then used public funding in the general election as he has the awareness of his campaign already generated. This shows that even the candidates themselves are thwarting the system to improve their own campaigns without regard for other candidate's chances of receiving recognition or a fair campaign. The ease of which Bush succeed proved that the money he received equalled power in his race for nomination despite the public funding

being in place. More worryingly this year neither Obama nor Romney accepted public funding. Why? Because more money can be gathered from independent sources. A frightening thought considering how much they raised. Is the ideology of a public funding system becoming extinct?[15]if so it is direct proof that money equals power.

Why is public funding being abandoned by candidates for the White House? Mainly it is due to the growth of Super PACs and dark money[16]. Super PACs seem to be replacing the previous spurt of 527 committees who raised money to influence the outcome of elections by raising unlimited amounts of money. Once this money was not used in conjunction with the candidate's campaign and did not openly call for the defeat or election of a particular candidate it was completely legal. However now Super PACs can collect money from both individuals and corporations, they also cannot give money directly to the candidate but can use the money raised independently to help ensure the election of there preferred candidate. In the 2012 election the estimated money raised from outside groups was \$970 million, this increase is being linked to the increase in Super PACs. \$123 million is the estimated amount spent by dark money.[17]Dark money was a phrase adopted by the Mother Jones Magazine[18]which referred to the secret donations given to candidates by individuals and organisations. These donations occur in all political campaigns but seem to be most a part of the republican party fundraising. If people or businesses are able to donate large quantities of money to candidates without them being made public we again have to ask how this affects democracy in America. Money donated to campaigns that are not made public means that we are unable to see if there is a correlation

between the money those secret donors have given and the decisions of the lawmakers. However the question on money in politics applies to all elections including those in the house and senate between incumbents and challengers.

As mentioned in the introduction the power difference between incumbents and challengers in the house and senate where public funding isn't in place is extremely large. This difference boils down to money. Incumbents have the benefit of being well known and established and therefore do not need to spend vast amounts on creating public awareness. They also have loyal contributors already established to their campaign. Challengers on the other hand struggle to raise the money needed to create awareness of their campaign. Often the incumbents merely raise large quantities of money to discourage competition from new challengers. Is it a democracy where people are not made aware of new challengers due to the large spending of incumbents? When new challengers do not even get a chance due to the impact on money? It is known that people vote for those they recognise and reject those they have a lack of information on. Between 1984-2004 57% of challengers spent less than \$100, 000 on their campaigns and all of them lost[19]. Money equals power.

I have discussed many things within the American campaign system that make me question the branding of America as a Democracy due to the corruption caused by money. But does money actually get those who contribute a foot in the door? Political scientist say that the contributions of PACs does not have a major impact on legislators decisions, this is because although there is a direct correlation between donations and votes, there is <https://assignbuster.com/does-money-equal-power-in-american-politics-politics-essay/>

no proven relationship between donations and lawmakers decisions[20]. However this will always be hard to prove as you cannot match contributions on a quid pro quo basis. It may have been found that money doesn't buy votes in congress but it is proven that contributors do get the loyalty of those in congress. It is known that contributions do achieve access[21]such as meetings with the candidates they have supported. Since most organisations will support those who are already in support of their views they do not need to persuade the candidate on their interests, therefore many of the PACs interests may be try to be mobilised through congressional committees. An example of money buying access can be seen in the Bush administration. Bush rewarded those who donated money to his Pioneer bundling system, most of whom were wealthy energy company official, business executives and lobbyists, with individual meeting and receptions, later Bush appointed 19 of the members as ambassadors worldwide[22]Would the lack of large donations have the same impact? We also saw that in the reign of Nixon those who donated large amounts became part of his re election committees, would this have been the case without the large donations? And would the contributors continue to donate without anything in return? It is unlikely. The New York Times gave the statistics that since Obama's election in 2008 to now, those who donated \$30, 000 or less, about 20% of these visited the White House, were those who donated over \$100, 000 where about 75% more likely to visit the President.[23]Statistics that don't prove anything other than money equals power and access.

Although reform was again attempted again through BCRA in 2002, there still seems to be problems within the campaign finance system. There are

many suggested ways in which reform can be achieved. One is the idea of imposing ceilings on the amount spent in campaigns, but this may affect the competitive aspect of the campaigns. This also wouldn't help the challengers who already struggle to make themselves known to voters, therefore the well known incumbents would benefit leading to further questions of money impacting democracy. Another possible solution is to ban PACs and stopping large donations and let candidates rely on small donations to fund their campaigns but this is unlikely to raise enough funds.[24]The idea of public funding seemed to be the perfect solution as it took the importance of large donators out of the picture and put limits in place by candidates. If this was put in place for all elections in the house, congress as well as the presidential elections, this would reduce the amount spent on elections. However, the budgets of these public funds need to be increased to encourage candidates to be a part of this system. It may also attract candidates who don't want to waste too much time in their campaign raising money if the budget is right[25]. The problem with this is that this idea has been branded "welfare for politicians" an idea disliked by the American society.[26]The judgment by the courts that money equals speech also needs to be revisited. With this opinion being circulated it is only benefitting those with money. In order to pursue interests through politics, money and access is needed, but these are things not equally distributed, this makes you wonder how is this a democracy if it is allowing the people with these abilities to use them to push their ideas?[27]

In conclusion, the problem is that many of the ideas for reform have as many positives as negatives, there seems to be no direct way to solve the problem

of corruption within the political system and to prevent money from equalling power. In the last reform there was a “corset affect” that what was squeezed in one place merely popped out in another[28] in the increasing of 527 committees and the creation of Super PACs. It is viewed that this will be the case in any reform as John McCain stated “I promise you that in 20 or 30 years from now...a group of others will be standing here saying we’ve got to clean up the system again, because there’ll be smart people that figure out loopholes in the system”. I doubt he foresaw the speed at which these loopholes would be found. The fact of the matter is that money will always be the fuelling of politics in America and therefore until some way is found to take money out of politics money will equal power. As this essay title says America has the “best democracy money can buy”.

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