

## **PUBLIC ATTITUDES AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE\***

### **Report Prepared for the Campaign Finance Task Force**

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#### **Abstract**

Public attitudes toward the role of money in the political system undergird Supreme Court doctrine in the area of campaign finance law and are used to justify calls for further regulation of the political system. Given the outsized role that public opinion on campaign finance plays in the policy arena, it is important to understand what the public knows about money in politics, what it thinks about the role of money in politics, and whether campaign finance reforms are likely to influence those perceptions. To this end, we summarize the relevant scholarly literature and provide initial findings from a new national survey of voters conducted during the 2016 election cycle. This exercise reveals that the public is very uninformed about money in politics but tends to be supportive of campaign finance reform, albeit with skepticism that such reforms will have any effect on corruption. Further, recent studies support this perception that reforms have little effect on how the public views politics. We conclude by recommending that foundations which are interested in improving democracy begin (or continue) to devote resources to educating the public about the basic facts regarding money in politics and existing regulations, as well the findings from rigorous and scientific research on the role of money in American politics.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the 1976 Supreme Court decision in *Buckley v. Valeo*, justifications for campaign finance reform have hinged crucially on the notion that a “better” campaign finance system will cause the public to have more faith or confidence in government, which will in turn have other salutary benefits such as increased turnout. As the Court wrote, “Of almost equal concern as the danger of actual quid pro quo arrangements is the impact of the appearance of corruption stemming from public awareness of the opportunities for abuse inherent in a regime of large individual financial contributions.”

In this report, we review the state of the literature connecting campaign finance and public attitudes. Given the legal and rhetorical links between public attitudes and laws (Primo 2002; Persily and Lammie 2004), there has been surprisingly little rigorous work studying what the public knows about campaign finance, whether it is concerned about the role money plays in politics, and the link between reforms and perceptions.

The work that does exist, however, coalesces around a common theme: The link between campaign finance and perceptions is weak, at best, calling into question one of the fundamental justifications for the constitutionality of reform. We conclude the report by discussing what these findings mean for those groups, including foundations, seeking to improve the quality of democracy.

This report proceeds by considering a series of questions:

- What does the public know about money in politics?
- What does the public think about money in politics?
- Do campaign finance reforms improve perceptions of government?

For each question, we review the relevant literature and report results from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) conducted by YouGov. The CCES is an online survey that is designed to be nationally representative, partially through participant selection and partially through

the use of weighting. There were two waves in the 2016 election, one before the election and one after the election. The Campaign Finance Task Force commissioned the authors to develop a module on campaign finance in both the pre- and post-waves.<sup>1</sup> The sample size was 2,000 for the pre-election wave and 1,621 for the post-election wave. In the results we present in this report, questions are taken from both the pre- and the post-election surveys. Percentages are based on those who responded to questions (non-responses are excluded).

## **WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC KNOW ABOUT MONEY IN POLITICS?**

The public is woefully misinformed about campaign finance law. Both Mayer (2001) and Primo (2002) highlight a 1997 Center for Responsive Politics survey which found that only four percent of Americans were aware that corporations cannot contribute directly to the campaigns of candidates for president and Congress. In that same survey, nearly 90% of respondents answered less than three of five factual questions correctly. A post-*Citizens United* survey by Dowling and Miller (2014) is broadly consistent with the 1997 survey, finding that majorities answered incorrectly or “don’t know” when asked six questions about campaign finance law as applied to corporations, though respondents did slightly better when asked about the law as applied to individuals.

The public not only misunderstands the law but also overestimates the sources and amounts of congressional campaign spending. Ansolabehere et al. (2005) show that from 1996-2000, the median House incumbent spent \$406,000 on a campaign, with average spending of \$785,000. They compared these figures with the results of a 2003 survey asking respondents to estimate the amounts and sources of House campaign contributions. Respondents’ estimates were wildly inflated. \$1.1 million was the median guess, and \$5.8 million was the average guess, and that is after “trimming” the top and bottom 5% of answers. Respondents also do not know where campaign funds come

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<sup>1</sup> The task force also commissioned a module for the 2015 CCES. These results were discussed at an earlier task force meeting.

from, overstating the amount of party money and underestimating the amount of individual contributions and self-financing. Shaw et al. (2012), in a survey done right before the *Citizens United* decision, identify much the same pattern as Ansolabehere et al., but also find that respondents tend to understate how much is spent on Senate campaigns even as they overstate how much is spent on House campaigns.

Ansolabehere et al. point to a likely culprit (or, at the very least, contributing factor) to this misinformation: the mass media. They show that the media overemphasizes PAC contributions relative to individual contributions in news stories, and the races they focus on tend to involve more spending than the typical race. While they cannot establish causality, the authors do show that college-educated respondents (the ones most likely to read the newspaper) do worse than other respondents in their answers.

Results from the 2016 survey are consistent with this previous work. On the subject of campaign finance disclosure, three-quarters of respondents answered “no” when asked whether they knew what size contribution would trigger federal disclosure requirements, and only 8% of respondents selected the two answers (<\$200, \$200-999) that are close to the true answer (\$200). Further, respondents are not well-informed about the kinds of information about contributors that is disclosed. For example, only about a third of respondents know that contributor names and contribution amounts are disclosed, while about 10% or fewer realize that contributor addresses and employers are disclosed (and about as many incorrectly believe that union membership is disclosed). Table 1 summarizes the findings, which also provide breakdowns by party and for the college-educated (defined as those with a college degree). The college educated did somewhat better than other respondents, and Democrats outperformed Republicans.

**Table 1. Knowledge of Campaign Finance Law: Disclosure**

Question: Do you know approximately how large a contribution to a candidate for federal office has to be in order to trigger disclosure requirements?

Response	All	Democrats	Republicans	College Educated
No	74.8%	72.8%	76.2%	70.2%
< \$200	3.8	4.1	3.4	6.2
\$200 – 999	4.2	3.9	4.9	6.2
\$1,000 – 4,999	8.2	9.3	8.6	11.5
\$5,000 – 9,999	3.0	2.4	2.1	1.8
\$10,000 +	6.0	7.5	4.8	4.1

Question: Do you know what kind of information must be disclosed about contributors to candidates for federal office?

Type	Response = Yes			
	All	Democrats	Republicans	College Educated
Amount	34.0%	39.4%	31.3%	39.7%
Name	31.2	37.2	29.0	35.9
Address	8.1	8.8	9.0	11.6
Employer	10.1	11.5	9.6	12.2
Union member	8.9	10.0	7.6	8.2

The public fared a little better—but no better than a coin flip, and often worse—when asked about limits on campaign contributions and spending. For instance, despite all the attention to the *Citizens United* decision, nearly two-thirds of the American public was unaware that there are no limits on contributions by individuals to groups engaged in campaign spending independent of candidate campaigns. In addition, fewer than half of respondents know that contributions from individuals to candidates, parties, and PACs are limited by law. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the findings. As with disclosure laws, the college educated did somewhat better than other respondents, and Democrats outperformed Republicans.

**Table 2. Knowledge of Campaign Finance Law: Individual Contribution Limits**

Question: Under current law, do you think the federal government limits contributions made by individuals to the following groups?

All Respondents				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	47.9	24.8	27.3	
National political parties	38.9	31.8	29.3	
Political action committees: direct federal contributions	38.5	31.4	30.0	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	35.0	34.6	30.5	

Democrats Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	53.0	20.6	26.4	
National political parties	41.4	29.7	29.0	
Political action committees: direct federal contributions	41.0	30.0	29.1	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	37.7	33.4	29.0	

Republicans Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	44.0	32.6	23.4	
National political parties	33.7	39.7	26.6	
Political action committees: direct federal contributions	35.9	37.0	27.1	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	32.3	39.3	28.4	

College Educated Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	55.4	24.8	19.8	
National political parties	40.4	38.7	20.9	
Political action committees: direct federal contributions	35.9	37.0	27.1	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	33.4	45.4	21.2	

**Table 3. Knowledge of Campaign Finance Law: Limits on Candidates and Groups**

Question: Under current law, does the federal government limit the following activities?

All Respondents				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Total candidate spending	30.5	39.5	30.0	
Use of candidate's personal funds for campaign	26.2	42.8	31.0	
Party contributions to candidates	33.7	29.6	36.7	
Contributions by groups to candidates	38.4	26.0	35.6	
Independent spending by groups for federal candidates	30.5	34.3	35.2	

Democrats Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Total candidate spending	33.7	37.1	29.2	
Use of candidate's personal funds for campaign	32.2	39.4	28.4	
Party contributions to candidates	33.6	26.7	34.7	
Contributions by groups to candidates	43.9	23.5	32.6	
Independent spending by groups for federal candidates	35.9	32.4	32.4	

Republicans Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Total candidate spending	27.4	46.0	26.6	
Use of candidate's personal funds for campaign	21.1	50.8	28.1	
Party contributions to candidates	29.1	36.3	34.6	
Contributions by groups to candidates	33.2	30.9	35.9	
Independent spending by groups for federal candidates	26.2	38.8	35.1	

College Educated Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Total candidate spending	26.6	49.4	24.1	
Use of candidate's personal funds for campaign	24.0	51.8	24.2	
Party contributions to candidates	31.2	38.3	30.5	
Contributions by groups to candidates	38.0	33.2	28.8	
Independent spending by groups for federal candidates	26.5	45.9	27.7	

The public did the worst in answering knowledge questions about limits on corporate and union activities in campaigns (see Table 4). Respondents in 2016 did slightly better than those in 1997 (but still poorly on an absolute level) at knowing that the law prohibits direct contributions by corporations or unions to candidate campaigns (12.5% vs. 4%), and just 20% knew that there were no limits on contributions or spending associated with independent activities supporting or opposing candidates. For these questions, there are only minor differences by party and education.

**Table 4. Knowledge of Campaign Finance Law: Limits on Corporations and Unions**

Question: Under current law, do you think government limits/prohibits the following types of political activities by corporations and unions?

All Respondents					
Type of activity	Prohibits	Limits	No Limits	DK	
Contributions: direct to candidates	12.5%	41.8%	16.1%	29.5%	
Contributions: to groups that ind. supp. or opp. cand.	10.5	36.0	21.7	31.8	
Spending: independently supp. or opp. candidate	10.9	37.6	20.4	31.1	
Democrats Only					
Type of activity	Prohibits	Limits	No Limits	DK	
Contributions: direct to candidates	10.1%	48.7%	16.5%	24.7%	
Contributions: to groups that ind. supp. or opp. cand.	10.2	37.9	22.5	29.4	
Spending: independently supp. or opp. candidate	9.7	41.8	21.9	26.6	
Republicans Only					
Type of activity	Prohibits	Limits	No Limits	DK	
Contributions: direct to candidates	15.7%	39.0%	18.6%	26.6%	
Contributions: to groups that ind. supp. or opp. cand.	11.9	34.5	25.1	28.5	
Spending: independently supp. or opp. candidate	11.2	35.2	23.7	29.9	
College Educated Only					
Type of activity	Prohibits	Limits	No Limits	DK	
Contributions: direct to candidates	12.1%	46.5%	19.0%	22.5%	
Contributions: to groups that ind. supp. or opp. cand.	11.3	37.5	28.2	23.0	
Spending: independently supp. or opp. candidate	11.3	36.7	27.7	24.3	



In addition to remaining largely unaware of campaign finance laws, the public also is still uninformed about the sources of campaign spending. In our 2016 survey, 80% of respondents answered that Super PACs were the source of at least half of all 2016 federal campaign spending. While the precise answer depends on the data sources, how spending is defined, and other details, the answer is clearly in the 0-24% range. Less than 5% of voters got this answer correct, with education and party ID making little difference in success rates (see Table 5).

**Table 5. Knowledge of Campaign Spending: Super PACs**

	Super PAC spending (as % of total federal campaign spending)			
	0-24	25-49	50-74	75-100
All Respondents	3.8%	13.2%	47.2%	35.9%
Democrats Only	4.1	13.2	44.4	38.3
Republicans Only	3.3	9.9	50.3	36.5
College Educated Only	2.8	11.1	45.8	40.4

The upshot, then, is that despite all the attention paid to campaign finance in recent years in the wake of *Citizens United*, the public remains remarkably uninformed about the state of campaign finance laws and campaign spending, with education and party identification mattering somewhat but not as much as one might think. It is possible that the media and reform groups contribute to this continued misunderstanding by conflating various forms of spending and various forms of corporate activity. For example, the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) often incorporates contributions from individuals who work for a corporation/industry into reports of that corporation's/industry's contribution behavior.<sup>2</sup> It is also possible that the use of the *Citizens United* decision as a symbol for all that ails American politics further skews the public's understanding of the process.

<sup>2</sup> The CRP does show the breakdown of contribution sources, but the top-line figure is often the one reported by the media.

## WHAT DOES THE PUBLIC THINK ABOUT MONEY IN POLITICS?

On the one hand, the results in the previous section should give us pause as we consider the public's concerns about the role money plays in politics, since it is clear that these perceptions may rest in part on fundamental misunderstandings. However, we should not discount perceptions entirely, since even if the public may not understand the distinction between a contribution from a corporation's treasury and one made by its PAC, they still may have legitimate reasons to be concerned about corporate involvement in campaigns, period. Moreover, the Supreme Court clearly views public perceptions about the political process as relevant for justifying campaign finance restrictions.

In an early comprehensive review of polling in this area, Mayer (2001, 47, 53) writes, "the public is remarkably cynical about the current campaign finance system and the general role that money plays in American elections" and "strongly supports limits—of just about any kind—on campaign contributions and spending," though they are less favorable toward public financing.

Judging from a May 2015 New York Times/CBS News survey, the public is perhaps more concerned than ever about the role money plays in the political system. 84% of Americans surveyed believe that money has too much influence in American political campaigns, and 85% believe that campaign finance is need of fundamental changes or complete rebuilding.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the results of our CCES survey show that Mayer's assessment of support for reform remains accurate. Majorities support limits on contributions by individuals to candidates, parties, PACs, and organizations that engage in independent spending. Majorities also favor campaign spending limits, party contributions to candidates, contributions by political groups to

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/04/business/inequality-poll.html> for survey results. Of course, question wording matters. For instance, 41% of voters in a late 2015 poll conducted by Third Way answered 10 on a 10-point scale when asked whether changing campaign finance rules "to get money out of politics" would help their family personally; this exceeded items such as "improve worker and job training programs," in part because the phrase "to get money out of politics" is an impossibility. Therefore, it is not clear what these replies reflect except perhaps disenchantment with the political system generally. Results available for download at this site: <http://www.thirdway.org/memo/voter-ire-toward-money-in-politics>.

federal candidates, and outside spending. Perhaps the most interesting finding is that less than 20% of respondents wish to outright prohibit corporate and union campaign contribution and spending activity. A similarly low proportion support public financing. In general, Democrats and the college educated tend to be more supportive of reform than Republicans. Tables 6-9 report these findings.

**Table 6. Support for Campaign Finance Reform: Individual Contribution Limits**

Split-Sample (Version A): Do you think government should limit contributions made by individuals to the following groups?

All Respondents				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	58.7	20.6	20.8	
National political parties	55.3	24.4	20.3	
Political action committees: contributions to fed. cand.	62.4	17.2	20.4	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	56.2	22.8	21.0	
Democrats Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	68.5	14.6	16.9	
National political parties	62.5	21.7	15.8	
Political action committees: contributions to fed. cand.	71.8	13.0	15.2	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	66.2	18.3	15.5	
Republicans Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	49.3	31.5	19.2	
National political parties	46.0	33.2	20.9	
Political action committees: contributions to fed. cand.	55.5	23.5	21.0	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	47.9	29.4	22.7	
College Educated Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	62.3	25.1	12.6	
National political parties	57.9	31.6	10.5	
Political action committees: contributions to fed. cand.	70.0	19.1	10.9	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	66.1	23.2	10.7	

**Table 6 (cont.)**

Split-Sample (Version B): Do you think government should limit your contributions to the following groups?

All Respondents				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	57.6	22.3	20.1	
National political parties	53.5	27.1	19.5	
Political action committees: contributions to fed. cand.	56.7	20.9	22.4	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	52.4	24.4	23.2	
Democrats Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	64.7	17.7	17.8	
National political parties	62.2	20.2	17.6	
Political action committees: contributions to fed. cand.	65.0	14.3	20.8	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	55.6	21.4	23.0	
Republicans Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	48.7	35.2	16.3	
National political parties	41.5	44.3	14.2	
Political action committees: contributions to fed. cand.	44.6	38.0	36.2	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	44.5	35.2	20.4	
College Educated Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Candidates for federal office	59.6	26.7	13.7	
National political parties	52.7	31.9	15.4	
Political action committees: contributions to fed. cand.	61.6	24.6	13.7	
Political groups: independent supp. or opp. of fed. cand.	54.2	28.1	17.8	

**Table 7. Support for Campaign Finance Reform: Limits on Candidates and Groups**

Question: Do you think government should limit the following activities?

All Respondents				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Total candidate spending	57.1	23.4	19.5	
Use of candidate's personal funds for campaign	41.3	40.7	18.1	
Party contributions to candidates	50.1	24.8	25.1	
Contributions by groups to candidates	59.9	20.2	19.9	
Independent spending by groups for federal candidates	55.5	22.3	22.2	

Democrats Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Total candidate spending	64.3	19.4	16.3	
Use of candidate's personal funds for campaign	52.2	30.8	17.0	
Party contributions to candidates	57.5	21.5	21.0	
Contributions by groups to candidates	70.0	13.6	16.4	
Independent spending by groups for federal candidates	62.7	18.2	19.2	

Republicans Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Total candidate spending	45.0	34.5	20.4	
Use of candidate's personal funds for campaign	27.4	58.9	13.8	
Party contributions to candidates	40.9	34.1	25.0	
Contributions by groups to candidates	48.0	32.2	19.7	
Independent spending by groups for federal candidates	44.2	32.6	23.2	

College Educated Only				
Type of activity	% Yes	% No	% DK	
Total candidate spending	58.3	27.4	14.3	
Use of candidate's personal funds for campaign	41.1	47.7	11.3	
Party contributions to candidates	49.0	33.7	17.3	
Contributions by groups to candidates	60.5	25.5	14.0	
Independent spending by groups for federal candidates	58.8	26.0	15.2	

**Table 8. Support for Campaign Finance Reform: Limits on Corporations and Unions**

Question: Do you think government should limit/prohibit the following types of political activities by corporations and unions?

All Respondents					
Type of activity	Prohibit	Limits	No Limit	DK	
Contributions: direct to candidates	17.6%	49.7%	11.5%	21.2%	
Contributions: to groups that ind. supp. or opp. cand.	15.5	47.1	13.2	24.3	
Spending: independently supp. or opp. candidate	15.5	47.2	12.2	25.1	
Democrats Only					
Type of activity	Prohibit	Limits	No Limit	DK	
Contributions: direct to candidates	16.0%	56.5%	7.7%	19.8%	
Contributions: to groups that ind. supp. or opp. cand.	14.7	50.2	10.7	24.4	
Spending: independently supp. or opp. candidate	15.2	52.9	9.6	22.4	
Republicans Only					
Type of activity	Prohibit	Limits	No Limit	DK	
Contributions: direct to candidates	16.8%	42.6%	21.1%	19.5%	
Contributions: to groups that ind. supp. or opp. cand.	14.5	44.4	19.9	21.2	
Spending: independently supp. or opp. candidate	13.7	43.7	19.5	23.2	
College Educated Only					
Type of activity	Prohibit	Limits	No Limit	DK	
Contributions: direct to candidates	19.5%	55.0%	13.9%	11.7%	
Contributions: to groups that ind. supp. or opp. cand.	17.2	52.9	15.3	14.6	
Spending: independently supp. or opp. candidate	16.7	52.7	14.4	16.2	

**Table 9. Support for Campaign Finance Reform: Public Financing**

Split-Sample (Version A): Government should give taxpayer dollars to candidates to pay for their campaigns.

Split-Sample (Version B): Candidates should be allowed to use public funds to pay for their campaigns.

	All Respondents				
	Strongly disagree...			...Strongly agree	
	1	2	3	4	5
Version A	47.9%	14.0%	21.8%	10.2%	6.0%
Version B	37.9	13.0	25.8	13.9	9.3

  

	Democrats Only				
	Strongly disagree...			...Strongly agree	
	1	2	3	4	5
Version A	37.4%	11.6%	26.7%	14.8%	9.5%
Version B	35.2	14.2	23.9	13.9	12.8

  

	Republicans Only				
	Strongly disagree...			...Strongly agree	
	1	2	3	4	5
Version A	61.9%	12.6%	15.7%	5.6%	4.2%
Version B	42.0	17.1	25.8	9.4	5.7

  

	College Educated Only				
	Strongly disagree...			...Strongly agree	
	1	2	3	4	5
Version A	41.3%	13.3%	18.3%	16.6%	10.5%
Version B	36.1	11.5	22.5	17.4	12.5

But what motivates support for most types of reform? It is possible—and desirable—to study how values (and, by extension) partisanship shape such perspectives. For instance, in a survey, La Raja and Schaffner find that, when asked to pick from among five values policy makers could take into account when considering campaign finance reform—reduce corruption, prevent unequal

influence, ensure transparency, promote competition, and preserve freedom—reducing corruption and preventing unequal influence were the most highly ranked, in that order (2015, 155-156).<sup>4</sup>

Despite some measure of support for campaign finance reform, it is not a priority for the public (Mayer 2001; Primo 2002). Even when voters say that campaign finance is a high priority, as 60% did in a 1997 Center for Response Politics (CRP) survey, they also believe that other issues should be dealt with *first*. In other words, it is a priority once all the other priorities have been dealt with. In addition, not unlike other policy issues, support for reform tends to be strongest when the issue is presented in the abstract, with support declining when specific reforms are mentioned.

One caveat to the above findings is that support for reform doesn't necessarily mean support for new regulations. For example, the results in Table 8 indicate that less than 18% of respondents think contributions from corporations to candidates should be prohibited, while over 60% support limits on corporate contributions. Existing law is therefore already more restrictive than what these respondents indicate is a preferred regulatory regime (recall that only 12.5% know that direct corporate contributions are currently prohibited by federal law). Similarly, while just over 60% of respondents think that PAC contributions to candidates should be limited, about the same number do not know that those types of contributions already are limited. Consequently, the tendency for the public to support reform should be understood in the context that many people seem to think that money in politics is not already highly regulated.

In summary, then, Americans are concerned about money's influence in politics and tend to support campaign finance reform, especially in the abstract, but they just don't think it should be a priority for policymakers. One reason for the latter finding might be that they don't think it will do much good, and it is to this issue we now turn.

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<sup>4</sup> Other examples of such research include Grant and Rudolph (2004) and, more recently, Brewer et al. (2017) and Jorgensen et al. (2017). For an international perspective, see Nwokora (2015).



## **DO CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORMS IMPROVE PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT?**

Given the concerns expressed by voters about the American political system and the support for campaign finance reform, it is important to ask whether such reforms are likely to fix American democracy. Americans, it seems, are skeptical. In our 2016 survey, an overwhelming majority of respondents believed that politics was inherently corrupt and that reforms would be ineffective in addressing this problem, as we see in Table 10. Democrats and the college educated are more optimistic than Republicans, but still pessimistic overall.

Of course, it may be that just as voters are unaware of the specifics of campaign finance laws, they are also unaware that reforms can help improve American democracy (and, by extension, perceptions of government). The question posed here—do campaign finance reforms improve perceptions of government?—is tackled in three ways in the literature. First, survey respondents have been asked whether or not they believe that reforms will have an effect on politics. Mayer's (2001) read of the polling data is that Americans are “skeptical” about the political prospects of reform. Primo (2002) notes that one weakness of this approach is that the answers will vary depending on survey design decisions such as question wording. He compares the 1997 CRP survey (referenced earlier) finding that 62% of Americans agreed that laws can be effective in reducing the role of money in politics with the 64% in a 2000 Gallup poll who agreed that campaign finance reform would not reduce “the power of special interests.”

Given the sensitivity of responses to question wording, as well as what exactly reform means to different people, we asked respondents whether “the right package of reforms” will reduce political corruption. This enables respondents to answer with reference to their preferred reform. Nevertheless, there is a dramatic change in our 2016 answers compared to even the slanted wording of the 2000 Gallup poll. We suspect that since the 1997 and 2000 surveys were conducted, whatever optimism existed about campaign finance reform's healing powers has dwindled further. In fact,

Harvard Law Professor Lawrence Lessig points to this cynicism—what he calls the “nihilist politics of resignation”—as evidence of the need for wholesale reform of the political system (Lessig 2014).

**Table 10. Can Campaign Finance, Ethics, or Election Reform Reduce Corruption?**

Split-Sample (Version A): Is it possible to address the problem of political corruption through campaign finance reform, or is politics always corrupt?

Split-Sample (Version B): Is it possible to address the problem of political corruption by reforming current ethics and election laws, or is politics always corrupt?

Responses from 1-7, with

1 = The right package of reforms will greatly reduce public corruption

7 = Reforms are ineffective; politics will always be corrupt

	All Respondents						
	Reduce corruption...				...Reforms ineffective		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Version A	6.6%	12%	18.7%	23.8%	17.8%	9.8%	11.3%
Version B	8.5	11.4	14.3	24.4	16.6	10.4	14.4

	Democrats Only						
	Reduce corruption...				...Reforms ineffective		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Version A	8.1%	17%	21.3%	23.0%	16.3%	6.5%	7.9%
Version B	11.1	11.5	19.0	22.2	14.4	10.1	11.9

	Republicans Only						
	Reduce corruption...				...Reforms ineffective		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Version A	5.0%	4.9%	20.0%	18.4%	22.8%	14.9%	14.2%
Version B	4.9	11.1	12.3	21.4	19.9	15.2	15.3

	College Educated Only						
	Reduce corruption...				...Reforms ineffective		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Version A	8.7%	16.1%	22.2%	14.7%	20.9%	9.4%	8.0%
Version B	9.4	16.2	19.8	19.6	15.8	12.0	7.3

Another interpretation is that the public is skeptical about the efficacy of reform because they view money as but one part of the political process, believing that many other factors—such as organizational capacity or the informational advantages of “powerful” interests—drive the policymaking process. The survey results presented at the beginning of this section offer some support for both interpretations.

Instead of asking the public whether they think reforms will make a difference, a second—and superior—approach is to look at the actual relationship between public perceptions and campaign finance laws/spending. The second approach is akin to studying revealed preferences in economics, while the first approach focuses on stated preferences. For well-documented reasons, it is generally superior to observe how people’s behavior changes after they receive a treatment rather than ask them how they think their behavior would change if they received a treatment.

Early papers in this vein provide suggestive evidence of a weak link between laws and perceptions. Primo (2002) notes that there is little over-time relationship between trust or confidence in government and campaign spending, and Primo (2002) and Persily and Lammie (2004) both point to the fact that trust in government was increasing right alongside soft money receipts in the 1990s.

Neither of these papers, however, contained regression analyses taking advantage of over-time changes in laws, which is the closest political scientists can come to a treatment in this area. Unfortunately, federal law has changed too infrequently to get meaningful results focused on the federal level. Primo and Milyo (2006) published the first econometric study trying to link campaign finance laws with trust and efficacy by utilizing changes in state-level campaign finance laws. Using data from the American National Election Studies from 1952-2000, they find no meaningful relationship between state campaign finance laws and political efficacy.

One weakness of Primo and Milyo’s study is that the survey questions did not ask about state government. Milyo (2016) advances Primo and Milyo’s work by utilizing state-level questions about trust and efficacy pooled across dozens of national polls from 1987 to 2009. His findings largely

mirror Primo and Milyo's. In a study focused on public financing systems in Arizona and Maine, Miller and Panagopoulos (2011) use a 2003-04 National Annenberg Election Survey and find no effect of those laws on perceptions of government, including state-level perceptions.

The classic study of campaign spending's influence on citizen perceptions matches these findings on laws' effects. Coleman and Manna (2000) combine spending on US House races with ANES data and find no relationship between perceptions of government and how much is spent in a respondent's House race. This result is consistent with the literature on a specific use for campaign spending—negative advertising—which has produced little evidence that negative advertising harms political efficacy (e.g., Jackson et al. 2008).<sup>5</sup>

Experiments are a third way to connect perceptions and laws/spending. Sances (2013) and Bowler and Donovan (2016) conduct survey experiments where respondents are exposed to varying forms of campaign finance information, with the goal of learning how this affects perceptions. Sances finds little evidence that exposure to a campaign ad discussing funding sources affects trust in government. Bowler and Donovan find that *how* the money is used seems to affect perceptions. For instance, when asked how one would describe a \$5,000 contribution to a candidate for Congress, 20-25% of respondents view it as corrupt or somewhat corrupt if used to “pay for campaign ads” or “pay for TV ads,” but that figure jumps to 70% when told the contribution would “pay for negative TV ads.” Of course, this may say as much about voters' perceptions of negative advertising as it does about the role of money in politics.

Finally, Brown and Martin (2015) conduct a series of survey experiments to gauge respondents' perceptions of legislator responsiveness to interest groups based on the identity of interests involved in the process and the amounts they contribute to a campaign (even though the contribution amounts are in some cases illegal, a fact left out of the experiments). They find that

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<sup>5</sup> The subject of negative advertising and its effects has been addressed by other members of the task force, so we do not focus on it here.

respondents view a legislators' fidelity to constituent interests as stronger when the group is known to have given \$10,000 or even \$1,000,000 than when respondents are informed that some money has been given but are not given the amount. However, since \$1,000,000 contributions would be illegal, and since it is hard to know what voters infer from simply knowing that a contribution has been made without knowing the amount, it is difficult to draw clear conclusions from this study.

## **WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

The literature to date has established that the public does not understand campaign finance law and has a poor grasp on the actual costs associated with running political campaigns. The public strongly supports reform in the abstract or when articulated as part of an illusory promise (e.g., to eliminate the influence of special interests in American politics or get money out of politics), but that support is more tempered when focused on specific proposals, including regulations that are already in place. A notable exception is public funding, which receives less than majority support.

Despite tending to be supportive of restrictive regulations on money in politics, the general public doesn't appear sanguine that such laws will do much to reduce corruption in politics, and perhaps because of this doesn't view campaign finance reform as a policy priority. Consistent with this, the few systematic and scientific analyses linking campaign finance laws or spending to perceptions of government find little-to-no effect. Further, a burgeoning experimental literature is also largely consistent with these empirical studies. One lesson of these findings is that perhaps reformers and the courts are asking too much of campaign finance reform. As Malbin (2008, 2) puts it, "[I]t was never plausible to expect changes in campaign finance law by themselves measurably to improve citizens' views about the government."

Given these findings, the Task Force can play an important role in helping to educate the public about existing campaign finance laws. Indeed, such a large swath of the public is so ignorant about existing regulations that this sort of information could constitute a major "reform" in the minds

of the public. Popular concern with the role of money in American politics may be assuaged somewhat simply from improved knowledge about the regulations that are already in place (especially for those individuals who do not have strong priors). To be sure, voters' lack of knowledge about specific regulations might not be so concerning; voters, after all, have incentives to be rationally ignorant, and does it really matter if they do not understand what a coordinated expenditure is? That said, to the extent that the courts continue to link public perceptions and the constitutionality of the laws, and that voters believe "the system" is corrupt, it is important for the public to actually understand the role that money plays in the political process, as well as the role regulations already in place play in that process. If we were physicians rather than political scientists and saw that the public believed, say, that smoking was healthy, we would have an obligation to issue a strong report saying that the public fails to understand the dangers of smoking. Consequently, we believe this is an opportunity for the Task Force: to correct misinformation about the health of the democratic process in the United States.

It is also, we argue, an opportunity for charitable foundations, like the ones who so generously supported the work of our Task Force, to (re)consider how they should approach the subject of campaign finance moving forward. Rather than tilting at windmills, foundations may achieve more for democracy by supporting initiatives that seek to educate the public about what we know—and don't know—about the role of money in the political system. This may be viewed as similar to the goals of The Concord Coalition, which has instituted similar educational programs, but applied to an understanding of the budget process. If a foundation's programs can lead the public to have a more nuanced understanding of the political system and the role that money plays in that system, this may serve as one of the great achievements of foundation work in the area of campaign finance.

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