



Politics Comes Cheap

Campaign reform is designed to keep government big.

The most important item on the Beltway agenda this year is the increased regulation of political speech. An early indicator was the four-part series in the *Washington Post* in February ("The Fund Raising Frenzy of Campaign '96"). Seven reporters filled nine pages of the paper. The amounts now being spent on federal elections were "unbridled," "freewheeling," or "unconstrained," they said. But their stories strategically omitted the key information needed to conclude that the amounts of money really are excessive.

By way of background: the Federal Elections Campaign Act of 1974 limited individual campaign contributions to \$1,000, an amount not adjusted for inflation since (the indexed amount would now be \$3,300). Political Action Committees may give up to \$5,000. As mass communication is impossible without large expenditures, the law inevitably restricts political speech. A porn site on the World Wide Web cannot be regulated in any way, but set up your own "Vote for Al Gore" site on the Web, or print your own bumper stickers and spend over \$250 doing so, and you are subject to FEC reporting requirements.

These reforms have forced candidates to devote so much time to fundraising that a real headache has been created. It is a general rule in Washington that interference with markets in the name of reform will create new problems and therefore calls for more reform. The classic case was the energy crisis, created by

price controls. It was found that we had no "national energy policy," so the Department of Energy was created. The current hullabaloo about the cost of elections was a byproduct of reforms enacted after Watergate. (The unanticipated revival of the political parties is another. Because unlimited "soft" money can be channeled to the parties for television ads, as long as they don't urge voting for specific candidates, they have found a new role as the brokers of TV advertising.)

Recognizing that political speech is a First Amendment issue—indeed one of the most important—the Supreme Court ruled in 1976 that the communication of opinions about political issues is protected by the First Amendment and cannot be restricted. The court also acknowledged that rich people can spend as much of their own money as they like. Hence issue advertising, a rising number of millionaires in the Senate, and Steve Forbes on the presidential hustings. Again, unintended consequences.

Strange New Lott

For supporting the Chemical Weapons Treaty, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott won the 1997 Strange New Respect Award. The presentation was made by Arthur Ochs Sulzberger of the *New York Times*. He congratulated Lott for "refusing to second-guess the decisions already made by the State Department and the international community." Senator Lott's request that reporters be barred from the ceremony, held in Katharine Graham's dining room, was respected. —T.B.

Editors of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, the major television networks, and a mostly Democratic collection of politicians, have construed soft money and PAC expenditures as mere circumventions of their good intentions. So they seek a new round of more Draconian reforms. Their whole tendency is to think of politics as something that should be immune from market forces—played out, ideally, in a forum organized by Common Cause, with no candidate enjoying any monetary advantage over another.

The problem is that the *consequence* of politics—increasingly its whole purpose—is the capture of billions of dollars of real money and its redistribution to favored recipients. Liberals don't mind that at all. If they forswore any further redistribution, then no doubt we could enjoy a moderate politics restricted to the functions set forth in the Constitution. Common Cause rules of engagement would then suffice. But the liberals don't want that. They want to be able to take and redistribute money politically without having to deal with a rational response from its present possessors or its potential acquirers. They want to outlaw any organized response to their own organized larceny.

Their good-government smokescreen has been the disparagement of excess. "The basic problem is that the cost of conducting a campaign for federal office has been bid up to a point that is destructive of the very democratic process it is said to represent," the *Washington Post* editorialized in April. "The cost at both the congressional and presidential levels is obscene."

Dominating the culture means never having to provide evidence for your beliefs. Here are some relevant figures. The total amount spent by the Clinton and Dole campaigns from January 1995

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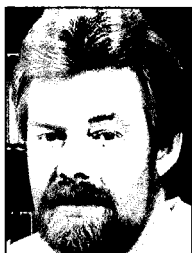
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through December 1996 was \$232 million. Of this, \$113 million was spent on advertising, mostly on television. In contrast, total spending by the federal government this year will be \$1,650 billion. Add the amounts to be spent in the next three years, and the total outlays by the federal machine before the next presidential election will exceed \$7 trillion.

Even though the big items such as Social Security and Medicare will remain largely unchanged whoever wins the White House, the president exercises considerable influence over expenditures. He can veto or redirect hundreds of billions of dollars a year. And yet the two main contenders for this office spent a quarter of a billion dollars in their most recent quadrennial contest. The *total* amount spent on elections to fill 476 federal offices in 1996 was \$2.6 billion. By contrast, \$4.5 billion was spent on potato chips. (Thanks to columnist George Will for that one.)

The level of debate here is low indeed. "I hear people say we spend more on yogurt or bubble gum than on politics," said Sen. Chris Dodd. "That's a pretty dark day, to compare this process with bubble gum or yogurt." The man's mind has gone. He was the one who raised the money issue. He needs \$5 million to get himself re-elected in Connecticut, but is sore because he will have to collect it one small donor at a time. He has Watergate to thank.

Faced with a similar task, Sen. Wendell Ford did Kentucky and the nation a favor last month by announcing his retirement. "I do not relish, in fact I detest, the idea of having to raise \$5 million for a job that pays \$133,000 a year," he said. He must know that the job's value and his remuneration are unrelated. Being a U.S. senator, he added, has become "a job of raising money to be re-elected instead of a job doing the people's business." The problem is that he thinks the people's business involves spending trillions of the people's money. Does it surprise him that opponents are willing to spend a few million to elect someone who takes a more responsible view of the people's business? Tobacco and whiskey interests would have been happy to finance his election, but the spirit of reform has outlawed that. Ford was a sponsor of the Motor Voter law,

allowing welfare recipients to register in welfare offices. We gladly bid him adieu.

The following amusing comparisons come from the Cato Institute's 1997 *Handbook for Congress*. Total congressional campaign spending in the 1993-1994 cycle: \$724 million. Annual sales of Barbie Doll line: \$1 billion. Cost of Michael Huffington's 1994 campaign for Senate seat in California: \$29 million. Amount budgeted by Sony Music International to promote the latest Michael Jackson CD: \$30 million. Total PAC contributions in federal elections, 1993-1994: \$189 million. Cost of producing the 1995 movie *Waterworld*, \$180 million.

Here's one more: Total political spending in the United States in the 1991-1992 election cycle, including federal, state, and local elections: \$3.2 billion. Total amount spent on education per year in the U.S: \$650 billion. According to Cato, "total political spending for all local, state and federal races and ballot issues is approximately 0.05 percent of the nation's gross domestic product, only slightly more than what was spent 20 years ago."

The journalists who write stories with headlines such as "The System Cracks Under the Weight of Cash" (Ruth Marcus and Charles R. Babcock of the *Washington Post*) don't give us these figures. Instead, newspapers commission and publish their own misleading polls, contriving to teach us anew the lessons of the 1970's: "The system is broken" and can't be fixed; the politicians enjoy cozy relationships with fat cats, etc. Columnists then ventriloquize back these pollster-fabricated opinions. "The public clearly wants reform," says David Broder. But it's a pollster's fantasy to imagine that there is something real out there called voter sentiment on the arcane topic of campaign financing. No one has the foggiest idea about these things. The *New York Times* even pretended to measure public sentiment about the likelihood of its passage (small).

It's true, as many journalists have reported, that the present system helps incumbents. But there's another angle to this story: the media's own interest. Leading Democrats have started to call for constitutional changes to get around what the *New York Times* calls the "disastrous deci-

sion" of the Supreme Court (in 1976) House Minority Leader Dick Gephard said this year: "What we have is two important values in direct conflict: freedom of speech and our desire for healthy campaigns in a healthy democracy." Democratic Party Chairman Roy Romer said that spending money to advance a political conviction "is a constitutional right, but we've got to find a way to limit it."

They were proposing to change the First Amendment, yet no murmur was heard from the press. This was perhaps the most amazing non-barking dog in my years of observing the Washington scene. The press normally flourish the First Amendment in our faces as a crucifix before vampires. They think it is synonymous with the Constitution. Normally they bark fiercely whenever they see any threat to it—and rightly so. But if there was any rejoinder to Gephardt and Romer I did not hear it.

Surprisingly enough Nadine Strossen, the president of the ACLU, which opposes limits on campaign contributions, drew attention to what is really going on here. "If Rupert Murdoch, who owns a newspaper, wishes to use it to support an incumbent, he may do so without limit," she said. "But if a wealthy individual wishes to contribute the cost of a full page ad on behalf of the challenger in order to balance the newspaper's coverage, the law prohibits her from doing so." Substitute *New York Times* et al. for Rupert Murdoch, and "TV advertising" for "full page ad" and you get the picture.

New limits on campaign finances, such as those advocated by Senators McCain, Thompson, Feingold, and Wellstone, would effectively reduce the diffusion of political information from independent (i.e., paid) sources such as advertising. Meanwhile the autonomy of the regular news media would be untouched. Their influence would increase as their competition was restricted. So their sagging control over the dissemination of political information would be bolstered. The good news is that ABC's "World News Tonight" with Peter Jennings lost 12 percent of its audience in the last year alone. We don't need new campaign-finance limits. We only need to abolish the controls that already exist. ❀

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BURTON IN THE SNAKE PIT

BY JOHN CORRY

Shady real estate deals or fraudulent loans by Madison Guaranty drown in complex detail. They are the crimes of accountants and lawyers. The selling of foreign policy or national security interests, however, is easily grasped. Lifting drug sanctions, say, or providing access to secret information in exchange for campaign donations has a certain clarity about it. Confusion between the vaguely sleazy and the truly intolerable vanishes. This makes Dan Burton a dangerous man. As chairman of the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, he is investigating White House fundraising practices, and he could find evidence that finally finishes off the administration, and damages the Democrats for years. Any number of people do not want him to do this, and so he must be discredited. Press and politicians have joined hands.

The press has had a head start. It has treated Burton as an eccentric ever since he raised questions about the death of Vincent Foster. Burton is convinced that Foster did not die in Fort Marcy Park, and he once fired a pistol in his own backyard in an attempt to prove that if Foster had ended his life where he supposedly ended it, the gunshot would have been heard in the nearby Saudi Embassy. Burton also demonstrated what the press considered loony behavior when he proposed that everyone be tested for AIDS. Judged by Beltway standards, he acts inappropriately. The standards of Indiana's 6th congressional district, however, are different. Burton is a heartland man, and it shows. He is big and bluff, and looks like a well-groomed church elder, or perhaps the president of a medium-sized bank. He reads the Bible, and finds comfort in the Psalms. He is married, and has three children. He is polite and even deferential to the people on his staff, including the ones who seem bewildered at finding themselves in Washington. Burton is no Beltway smarty. Sometimes he seems bewildered too.

But consider some of the unanswered questions about Foster's death. Why did the Secret Service make off with his pager, and why were his car keys not found when the police first went through his pockets, and why was Craig Livingstone parked outside his house the

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