



# MONEY IN POLITICS: WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

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In my many years in Washington, the most alarming development has been advertised under the soothing title of “campaign finance reform.” We Americans are disposed to think that the word “reform” is a synonym for “improvement.” But what is called “campaign finance reform” is nothing less than a frontal assault on the first – the most fundamental – of our freedoms: The freedom to speak our minds and to participate in politics. This assault is always conducted stealthily, by people who pretend that they only want to regulate money, not speech. They say they are only concerned about the quantity of money in politics.

After the 2012 Romney and Obama campaigns spent, combined, \$2 billion dollars, the usual cry was heard from reformers. They said: “There is too much money in politics.” Forget the fact that Americans spend \$2 billion every spring just on Easter candy.

But you must remember this: People who say there is “too much money in politics” are necessarily saying three very sinister things. First, they are saying that there is too much political speech; second, they are saying that they know just the right amount of political speech; and third, they are saying that government should enforce the limits they want on the amount of political speech. That is, the government should regulate speech about the government.

Over the last few decades, reformers have chipped away at the First Amendment guarantee of free speech. They’ve done it with various and sundry campaign finance laws such as limiting the amount of money an individual can give to a candidate. But they’re no longer satisfied with merely chipping away at the First Amendment. Now they want to take a sledgehammer to it.

They admit that what they want – to restrict free speech – is incompatible with the Constitution. So, for the first time in American history, reformers calling themselves Progressives are proposing to change the First Amendment in order to empower Congress to decide the quantity, content and timing of political speech. And who would benefit from the speech-restricting rules Congress would write? Well, we know this: every campaign finance law that ever has existed, or ever will exist has been, or will be, written by incumbent legislators. That is, all laws regulating campaigns will favor the re-election of incumbents.

Incumbents have enormous electoral advantages stemming from their perquisites of office: name recognition, a catalogue of favors done for constituents, and so on. Hence incumbents generally do not need to spend as much money as their challengers must spend. Hence incumbents write laws making fundraising more difficult.

Those who advocate restricting how much money we can contribute to candidates, or how much money candidates can spend on campaigns, always say the same thing. They say, “We are only restricting money, and money is not speech.”

To see how silly this distinction is, consider the following: The New York Times constantly says that money is not speech and therefore the spending of money can be restricted without restricting freedom of speech. But suppose conservatives controlled Congress and said to the New York Times: We of course would never restrict the freedom of the Times to practice journalism – Heaven forbid! We are only going to restrict the amount of money the Times can spend on gathering the news and distributing its newspapers – the amount it can spend on journalists, paper, ink, printing presses, delivery trucks, advertisements, and so on.

Do you think the New York Times would be content with this? Would the Times say: That is fine, because you are only regulating our right to spend money, not our right to speak. No, the Times would strenuously object. It would say: Money is indispensable for making our speech effective. That is true, and not just for the Times.

Without ample money, no congressional candidate can speak to an entire congressional district; and no Senate candidate can communicate to an entire state; and no presidential candidate can make his or her case to our continental nation. Contributing to candidates is one of the most common forms of political participation. So restricting campaign contributions reduces participation.

The only constitutional way to reduce the amount of money invested in politics is to reduce the role of politics in the distribution of money. If government were not so big, if it were not so busy allocating wealth and opportunity to the politically well-connected, then politics would be less important in our lives, and less money would be spent on it.

So the next time someone says we should make government even bigger by giving it the power to regulate speech, tell that person that what we really need is more speech advocating less government.

I’m George Will for Prager University.