

Voter Ire Toward Money in Politics

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"We now have a political situation where billionaires are literally able to buy elections and candidates. Let's not kid ourselves. That is the reality right now."

—Bernie Sanders, April 2015¹

"You know what's nice about me? I don't need anybody's money."

—Donald Trump, August 2015²

In 2015, Third Way conducted 15 focus groups and a 2,000-person national poll. Between this extensive research and the publicly available polling, one thing has become very clear: though voters always prioritize the economy and protecting our national security when they head to the ballot box, there is a third major issue emerging in this election: who can shake up Washington.³

The discontent over the role of money in politics is palpable. It showed up in every focus group and is evident among every voter demographic across the nation. Voters speak about it without prompting from moderators. And in our quantitative analysis from December 2015, the perceived impact of money in politics colored voter perceptions of the parties and their policies to an extent we have never seen before. In short:

1. The public outcry over money in politics has hit a fevered pitch.
2. The political deck is stacked, and voters think Congress is the dealer.
3. This skepticism towards Congress drives a lack of trust in government.

We explore these themes below, and in [a related memo](#), we unveil some new ideas to clean up a campaign finance system that voters believe has poisoned Washington and its officeholders.

#1: The public outcry over money in politics has hit a fevered pitch.

The vitriol associated with money in politics may be more intense than at any time in modern history. In recent polling, the top problem Americans cite with elected officials in Washington is the influence of special interest money.⁴ In our own December poll, voters were as worried about special interests having too much power in our political system as they were about facing another

terrorist attack on American soil—the two of which topped their anxiety list.⁵ Fully 84% of Americans say that money is too influential in political campaigns today.⁶ This sentiment carries across the entire political spectrum, with 90% of Democrats, 80% of Republicans, and 84% of Independents agreeing with that sentiment.

Two-thirds of voters believe that the wealthy have a greater chance of influencing the election process than non-wealthy Americans.⁷ And while some political commentators may have some other problem in mind when they say that the "system is rigged" or "the deck is stacked," voters were clear in their meaning: as one Democratic primary voter put it, "*The political system is rigged against the people.*"

Many Americans blame the *Citizens United* case by name for bringing so much money into electoral politics. As one Democratic voter noted, "I think it's the *Citizens United* again...money and power and Wall Street, and giving to elect people they want to elect so that they can control who they want to control." But others use the phrase "*Citizens United*" not to mean the specifics of that decision but rather as a proxy for their larger concern about the increase in anonymous and unregulated money in both our elections and our political system.

It is clear voters want to see action. Three-quarters think we should change campaign finance rules to get money out of politics, with 59% strongly favoring such a change.⁸ Nearly eight in ten (78%) believe there should be limits on how much outside groups can spend on campaigns and elections.⁹ And three-quarters say outside groups should be required to publicly disclose their donors.¹⁰ Nearly half (46%) think our system for funding political campaigns needs to be completely rebuilt, while another 39% say fundamental changes are necessary.¹¹ And 77% now favor limiting individual campaign contributions, while only 21% support unlimited contributions.¹² The influx of unregulated money in our electoral system has led to a rarity in politics: bipartisan agreement.

Changing campaign finance laws has always polled well, so that is nothing new. What is novel is the level that voters feel the broken campaign finance system is affecting them personally. In our December poll, when we asked voters which policies would benefit them the most personally, "getting money out of politics" ranked second, light years ahead of raising the minimum wage, making community college free, and or breaking up Wall Street banks.¹³ Voters see the campaign finance system as the root of most of the ills in politics today, from gridlock and polarization to incivility and the proliferation of negative ads.

#2: The political deck is stacked, and voters think Congress is the dealer.

In our focus groups, both Democrats and persuadable voters viewed increased money in elections

as the root of most problems with Congress. To them, Members of Congress are more concerned about satisfying political donors, keeping their jobs, and not facing a primary threat than passing legislation that would help middle-class Americans. When we asked voters who was stacking the deck against people like them, more said politicians (53%) than rich people (45%).¹⁴ In focus groups, participants blamed politicians because Members of Congress are the ones who make the rules and abide by the system. As one of our respondents, a persuadable voter, argued, to reduce gridlock we must "change campaign financing so that politicians aren't rewarded for focusing on raising money for the next election cycle." Publicly available survey data bear this sentiment out, as 55% say that most of the time politicians promote policies that favor individuals and groups who donated to their campaigns.¹⁵

These voters think that increased spending through Super PACs and other shadowy groups has resulted in ever more negative advertising and strident campaigns. And they are, in fact, seeing more advertising. In 2014, campaign spending on U.S. House and Senate elections was at \$3.8 billion—a billion more than was spent in 2006—with somewhere around 80% of that spending going to advertising.¹⁶ And these battles are being fought within the parties, not just between them. This led our research participants to conclude that the vitriol of campaigns has resulted in a respect deficit, which prohibits Congressional action and results in gridlock. For example, openly they wondered how President Obama could work with Republicans in Congress with Speaker Boehner rolling his eyes behind him during the State of the Union.

For them, Congressional gridlock can be seen as the natural result of changes in how campaigns are run, which is driven by increased and unaccountable money in the system. And these trends embarrass Americans and turn them off of politics. One persuadable voter compared our government to a cantankerous condo board meeting, with constant bickering and no action. Another said, "It seems like Congress is acting like every issue is a tug of war contest and that one team has to lose ground for the other to gain ground. When in reality the country is more like the kids in a bad marriage. They are the true ones that suffer." A third noted, "I shake my head when Democrats or Republicans denounce an idea from the opposite party. Knowing that if THEY came up with the same idea, they would be promoting the hell out of it." A fourth went even further, "It may sound trite to compare how some of our political leaders act to the tribal and sectarian leaders we see committing violent acts around the world. Yet at their heart, both mistake an unshakeable absolutism for real vision and leadership."

#3: This skepticism towards government drives a lack of trust in government.

The constant gridlock, shut-downs, and failure of the federal government to solve big problems facing our country leads voters to openly question whether or not the federal government can get anything done. This is particularly problematic for Democrats, who have offered a robust policy

agenda prefaced on the ability of the federal government to act. Inaction in Washington has become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy—they haven't done anything, so they can't ever do anything. This makes politicians' promises of change and progress ring hollow.

This disappointment doesn't necessarily trickle down: 63% of Americans have a favorable view of local government and 57% of the government in their state (both places where Republicans currently hold more governing power). Yet only 28% of Americans have a favorable view of the federal government.¹⁷ And if voters don't think the federal government can be effective, than the Republican alternative of less government and lower taxes may seem like the best way forward. After all, many might say, why should they continue to pay for something that is broken? In our polling, 62% said that government is often an obstacle to economic growth and opportunity. Another six in ten felt that big government was a greater threat than big business. And 61% said that if the government is involved in something, it often goes wrong.¹⁸ Policy ideas are a tough sell if voters don't believe the federal government can function.

Conclusion

The public outcry on the Left and Right over money in politics is off the charts. And voters think that Members of Congress are at best complicit in this arrangement and at worse driving it. As a result of this skepticism towards Congress, trust in government and the ability for Congress to function have fallen, and many voters feel government may not be able to address any real problems effectively. Policymakers need to demonstrate that they understand voters' concerns and have real solutions to reduce the influence of anonymous money in politics in order to gain credibility with voters. This is especially true for Democrats, who represent the party of government and often pursue government solutions to the problems ailing Americans. If voters do not believe government can work for them, then an agenda of cutting government may be attractive—why pay higher taxes for nothing? As such, without a comprehensive and plausible plan to address concerns about money in politics, voters will have difficulty in believing that proposals to fix problems in our country with government solutions are achievable.

In a [related memo](#), we have proposed several policy ideas to make our campaign finance system more accountable and reduce the influence of anonymous money in politics. Because it could not be clearer that voters don't feel that the system and the politicians who do well within it are accountable to their constituents right now.

Endnotes

- 1 Igor Bobic, "Bernie Sanders Is Fed Up With Money In Politics, And He's Running For President To Do Something About It," *Huffington Post*, April 30, 2015. Accessed October 26, 2015. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/30/bernie-sanders-president_n_7179986.html.
- 2 Daniel Libit, "How Trump confounds the money-in-politics debate," CNBC, August 28, 2015. Accessed October 26, 2015. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/28/how-trump-confounds-the-money-in-politics-debate.html>.
- 3 The analysis in this report is based on publicly available surveys and Third Way's original public opinion research during 2015. Benenson Strategy Group conducted three rounds of four focus groups—Democratic primary voters in Denver and Pittsburgh (February 2015), Democratic voters in Des Moines and Las Vegas (March 2015), and persuadable voters in Milwaukee Prince William County (July 2015). Anzalone Liszt Grove conducted three online focus groups during July 2015—college-educated white voters in the Northeast, non-college white voters in the Midwest, and a mix of white and Hispanic voters in the West—and a poll in December 2015 (2000 registered voters, fielded December 10–16, 2015).
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