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Money and Campaigns

[A Different View](#)

By: Joe Murray



Madison, WI -

With the 2006 elections behind us and campaign finance "reform" advocates bemoaning the "tone" of recent statewide elections, I thought I would share with you an excellent article on the issue of future campaign "regulation."

Written by University of Wisconsin – Madison Professor John Coleman, it touches on several issues that do not get equal time with advocates of the campaign finance reform movement. How much is "too much" to spend on a campaign? Who should be able to contribute and how much? When should

we be allowed to spend on a campaign? Should all campaigns be taxpayer financed?

As you know, the Wisconsin REALTORS® Association (WRA) gets very involved in the political process every election cycle, but the "reform" movement would like nothing better than to tell us what we can say, when we can say it and how we can say it. Professor Coleman makes a compelling case for continued free speech by organizations like the WRA.

By JOE MURRAY

Money and Campaigns: A Different View

By John Coleman

With the primary election over and the general election campaigns in full gear, the gnashing of teeth and mashing of keyboards is in full force.

Critics are quick to point out the flaws of the system. Too much money is spent, too much is contributed, too much is devoted to television ads.

Are these charges accurate?

Informing millions of potential voters in statewide races and thousands in other races is expensive. Travel, staff, advertising, research, printing - all these cost money. What if research shows, as it does, that more spending leads to greater voter knowledge about the candidates? And what if this knowledge benefit seems to be particularly true for people in "disadvantaged" groups or who are less likely to follow politics closely? Be careful before assuming that spending less would necessarily be better.

Fortunately, the state Elections Board this week did not require GOP candidate for governor Mark Green to forfeit even more of his campaign funds. But the board's original decision, still in force, was distressing. The board ignored its own precedent, the rules in place at the time of Green's financial transfer, and the opinion of its well-regarded legal counsel in ordering Green to forfeit a share of his campaign funds. A better strategy would have been to allow the funds to be spent, which would make for a more informative and competitive race. And then let the voters decide how serious a problem Green's transfer was. When in doubt, why not trust the voters to make a judgment?

But isn't it unfair that some candidates spend more than others? Not necessarily. Rather than anything nefarious, candidates may raise more money because they are better organized or they simply have more support in the public.

Usually incumbents will spend more. That alone does not make the process corrupt. Incumbents are often quite good at what they do. They do not, after all, re-elect themselves. They are well-known; they know how to use the media; they focus on issues and take positions that their constituents support; and they know how to get things done for the district and for

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individual constituents. When an incumbent lacks these ingredients, money will flow into the challenger's campaign more readily.

And although people love to hate them, there's a reason televised campaign ads are popular among candidates: They work. They get a message out efficiently. They introduce voters to a candidate. Criticism of ads often seems based on an elitist tendency to look down one's very sophisticated nose and sneer disapprovingly at the way other people learn about politics.

Will some ads be "negative?" Yes. But "negative" advertising may just mean that Candidate A is commenting on the flaws in Candidate B's record or that Candidate B's proposals would create a huge budget deficit. Would Candidate B volunteer that information for us? Unlikely. Other negative advertising may provide a policy contrast between the two candidates. The ads often signal to voters that a race is important, which might encourage them to seek out other information.

Of course, negative ads can be misleading and unpleasant - as can the very sober debates between the candidates so often desired by critics. Even ads full of positive messages can be misleading. Throw a rock and you are likely to hit a candidate who is "leading the fight" on a pressing public problem, which might mean that he did nothing more than show up for work one day and vote on a bill. Listen carefully and the candidate might have 10 things that are her "top priority" and the "first thing" she'll work on when elected.

Still, doesn't the money to fund ads come in part from "special interests?" No doubt. But every one of us can be defined as being part of a number of special interests based on our values, employment, personal characteristics, faith, and any number of other factors. Would it truly be more democratic if these interests, your interests, which certainly are subject to the power of politics and government, were unable to have a voice or express speech by supporting candidates in campaigns?

Obviously, no one favors trading public policy for campaign contributions. Violations should be vigorously prosecuted. We should be similarly vigilant in guarding against government officials engaging in equally shameful "pay to play" schemes. Even the "special interests" themselves agree on these points, as none want to be unfairly defeated in these ways.

But it is not conclusive evidence of a dirty, broken process that a policy you disagree with, supported by groups you don't like, happened to be enacted into law. And if voters elect someone whose fundraising you deplore, that is democracy in action and very much their right. Sometimes, in politics and life, you just lose. Sometimes, humility suggests, the other side's ideas may even be better than yours.

Certainly, campaigns are not always pretty or honorable. Sometimes, reform is the right thing to do. When it is, it should follow five guidelines. It should preserve the knowledge and involvement benefits of campaign spending. It should not be an elite vision for telling other citizens how they should learn about politics. It should enlarge the public forum during campaigns, which means expanding speech, participation, and competition and trusting voters to make decisions. It should be based on systematic, not anecdotal, evidence. And it should not promise results that it cannot realistically deliver.

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