

Paging Senator McCain

It may be heretical to say so, but here goes: Campaign spending makes for a better informed electorate. That's the conclusion of a new study for the Cato Institute by University of Wisconsin political scientist John J. Coleman, who finds that the more candidates spend the more knowledgeable voters become about both the candidates and issues.

This makes intuitive sense, because Americans get most of their news and information from mass media, including advertising. But the political class and media consensus has long been that spending is bad, especially when it pays for "attack ads" that dare to inform citizens about how an opponent voted.

Mr. Coleman found just the opposite. More spending sparked increases in voter knowledge in 18 of 20 questions asked. Spending by challengers against better known incumbents is especially useful in educating the public about what's at stake on Election Day. Looking at spending levels in 1996 House races, for example, Mr. Coleman found that when a challenger spent \$230,000, about half of a district's respondents could

fix that candidate on an ideological scale. When spending rose to \$500,000, the informed electorate share rose to 66%, and with \$1 million it climbed all the way to 85%.

A higher level of spending can be particularly valuable for voters with less income and education. Again this stands to reason, because richer voters tend to have access to more sources of information, including private ones. Mr. Coleman found that any information gap narrows as campaign spending increases. When spending for a House seat reached about \$1.3 million in two cases he examined, the gap nearly disappeared.

Mr. Coleman also found that spending doesn't increase voter cynicism or decrease participation. Negative or misleading ads can be countered with opposing ads, so voters overall get a good sense of the debate. All of this of course differs so much from the modern media consensus that we doubt this news will appear anywhere else. Limits on campaign spending are one of those "progressive" obsessions that seem impervious to evidence. But we thought our readers might like to know.