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# Public Opinion and Campaign Finance

## *Reformers Versus Reality*

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DAVID M. PRIMO

In the 2000 race for the presidency, Arizona senator John McCain promoted campaign finance reform as a partial remedy for widespread citizen cynicism toward politics. On the Democratic side, Al Gore promised in his acceptance speech for the party nomination that his first act as president would be to send campaign finance legislation to the Congress: “If you entrust me with the presidency, I will put our democracy back in your hands and get all the special interest money, all of it, out of our democracy by enacting campaign finance reform” (Gore 2000). The appeal of such proposals is easy to understand. In an era of public cynicism toward politics, new regulations promise new ways of doing business in Washington. The mass media cover campaign finance feverishly, with the slant that money is the root of all political evils, and treat calls for reform with little of their usual skepticism. Because reformers receive a free ride from the media and the public generally supports reform in the abstract, calls for change carry little political risk.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the public’s overwhelming belief that money corrupts, significant campaign finance reform at the federal level has been elusive since the last major reforms in the 1970s. (The significance of the 2002 reforms remains to be seen.) The parallels to other issues are striking. If the public is asked about health care or social security

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**David M. Primo** is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Rochester.

1. Of course, gadflies on the issue do occasionally incur the wrath of unsympathetic legislators. In 1998, Senator Russell Feingold (D-Wisc.) defeated his Republican opponent by only 40,000 votes out of more than 1.7 million cast, thanks in part to the efforts of Senator Mitch McConnell, who headed the National Republican Senatorial Committee and who devoted millions of dollars of “soft money” to defeat Feingold (Apple 1998; Barone and Ujifusa 2000).

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reform, overwhelming majorities favor new regulations. Yet we observe only glacial movement on these fronts as well. Like many issues in American politics, they share four traits: issue complexity, multiple viable alternatives, fierce defense of the status quo, and division of public opinion on specific reform proposals. These are classic ingredients in a recipe for political stalemate, and only recently has that stalemate been broken.

Elites have passionate views on the issue, and each side claims that public sentiment supports its position. For instance, John McCain believes the public supported his efforts to enact new campaign finance regulations: “I believe that the country wants this reform. There is no doubt about the explosion of soft money. There is no doubt that it has gridlocked us here in Washington and the message of the last election is that Americans do not want that” (CNN 2001). Public opinion also figures into the campaign finance debate in another way. Advocates of new regulations on fund-raising argue that certain aspects of the system, such as soft money and issue advocacy, foster public cynicism and mistrust of American government. Americans have long lacked confidence in Congress and in the presidency in particular as well as in the federal government in general (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). If the advocates are right, new restrictions on campaign finance might counteract this general tendency in public opinion toward a mistrust of American government and public officials.

In this article, I review the public-opinion data and show that the public has favored reform, but it has been inconsistent in its preferences and has assigned campaign finance reform a low priority. I also show that trust in government is not linked to campaign spending. This absence of connection contradicts arguments that Americans will trust government more if the amount spent on campaigns drops following reform.

### The Role of Public Opinion in a Republican System

In a republican democracy, there is a tension between legislators’ representing the desires of their constituencies (the delegate model) and their voting in accordance with their conscience (the trustee or Burkean model). This balancing problem is complicated by imperfect preference aggregation and measurement error. Preference aggregation refers to the manner in which individual preferences are translated into a policy outcome. The last four decades of research in political science and economics have demonstrated that in general no “will of the people” exists.<sup>2</sup> For instance, a desirable property of an aggregation rule is transitivity: if policy A is preferred to policy B, and policy B is preferred to policy C, then policy A should be preferred to policy C. The most famous example of an intransitivity, leading to what is known as “cycling,” is Condorcet’s Paradox. Suppose three citizens have preferences for alternatives A, B, and

2. The most famous mathematical statement of this result is Arrow’s Impossibility Theorem.

C as follows. Citizen 1 prefers A to B to C. Citizen 2 prefers B to C to A. Citizen 3 prefers C to A to B. In pairwise majority-rule competition, A beats B, and B beats C, but also C beats A, thus violating the transitivity condition.

Second, even if a “will of the people” existed, how might we discover it? Possibilities include constituent mail, public-opinion polls, or town-hall meetings, all of which are imperfect. Constituent mail and town-hall meetings are unlikely to be representative of the district as a whole. Polls are plagued by nonresponses and by poorly worded questions.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, all means of capturing citizen preferences are imprecise, at best.

Supporters of a given policy tend to take a trustee perspective when it suits their needs and a delegate position when the public appears to support them. Similarly, public-opinion data tend to be dismissed as faulty when they hurt one’s position and to be adduced as evidence for change when they support one’s policy preference. Campaign finance is a particularly interesting case because here public opinion is tied intimately to the policy change. Reformers claim that cleaning up the system will restore faith in government. If such restoration is the goal of campaign finance reform, then using public-opinion data is the best way to ascertain whether reform is a worthwhile policy change. In other words, the public’s views on campaign finance are ostensibly the reason for reform.

### What the Public Thinks of Campaign Finance Reform

Answering a question of the form “What does the public think about campaign finance reform?” is a daunting task. Many polls on the topic have been conducted, with various wording and ordering of questions. Most polls show that the public wants to fix a “broken” system. Some polls even show significant support for limiting campaign expenditures, a clear violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution. If the public is so supportive of new regulations, why did a version of the McCain-Feingold bill and the Shays-Meehan bill—the Senate and House campaign finance reform proposals, respectively—take nearly seven years to achieve legislative success?<sup>4</sup>

One hypothesis that receives mixed support is that the public does not believe that reforms will change anything in Washington. In a 1997 Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) poll,<sup>5</sup> 62 percent agreed that laws can be effective in reducing the role of money in politics, whereas in an October 2000 Gallup poll, 64 percent agreed that campaign finance reform would do nothing to reduce the “power of special inter-

3. Still, polls represent the best estimate of preferences, given the limited tools at our disposal, because they permit one to generalize from a small sample of respondents to a larger population.

4. Reformers have been extremely successful at the state level but not at the federal level. The most likely reason for this difference is that the states have been trying to match the national restrictions following the wave of federal reforms in the 1970s. Also, as Herbert Alexander and Lori Nyblom (1996) suggest, the greater frequency of scandals at the local level may trigger reforms.

5. For further details on the CRP polls, see <http://www.opensecrets.org/pubs/survey/s1.htm>, <http://www.opensecrets.org/pubs/survey/s2.htm>, and <http://www.opensecrets.org/pubs/survey/s3.htm>.

ests.”<sup>6</sup> (The CRP is a nonpartisan group that examines the role of money in politics and has a reformist bent.) These answers are, to a large degree, a function of question wording, question placement, and other survey-design matters.

A more plausible hypothesis is that, outside the Washington Beltway, the public does not care about the issue, which allows opponents to kill proposed reforms with impunity. Consider the data. When asked by the CRP if reform should be a top or high priority, most Americans (60 percent) answered in the affirmative. Yet they also agreed that a number of other policy areas were more important. This evidence suggests that campaign finance is a priority only after more important issues have been dealt with. In fact, in poll after poll, campaign finance is near the bottom of the list of important issues, trailing behind homelessness.<sup>7</sup> This response is forthcoming even when the issue is high on the media and government’s agenda. For example, at the height of John McCain’s popularity, campaign finance reform languished at the bottom of policy priorities.<sup>8</sup>

Even after the Enron debacle, which the media and elected officials linked to campaign finance and which was viewed widely as the impetus for the reform legislation passed in early 2002, only 1 percent of the public mentioned campaign finance as one of the two most important issues (Taylor 2002). When campaign finance was presented in a list of other issues, only 14 percent thought campaign finance should get the highest priority from President Bush, making it the lowest of all issues listed.<sup>9</sup>

Elizabeth Drew presents an alternative perspective:

Reform of our campaign finance system to get at the worst, most corrosive problem in our political system isn’t a lost cause. The argument that “people don’t care” doesn’t stand up to scrutiny; it’s a convenient ruse used by opponents of reform. Public support for campaign money reform has been

6. To minimize the clutter of in-text citations, I do not cite the date of every poll in the text. This information is available upon request.

7. From 2000 alone, when McCain put the issue front and center, there are several examples, including the Harris Poll, 10/19/00, 9/8/00, 7/13/00, 6/8/00, and 1/6/00; Fox News Opinion Dynamics Poll, 8/9/00, 5/10/00, 1/26/00; *ABC News–Washington Post* Poll, 2/3/00, 1/13/00. In an extensive search on the Lexis-Nexis database, I was unable to find any evidence that more than 1 or 2 percent of people polled responded with “campaign finance reform” when asked without prompting to name the one or two most important issues facing the country. This finding is not surprising when viewed in isolation. It is surprising, however, when one considers that several of these polls were taken at the height of the “McCain phenomenon” in the Republican primaries. This evidence suggests that even when the media and politicians focus on the issue, the public is uninterested. McCain, using some tortured logic, argues that this analysis is incorrect because Americans “don’t expect [Congress] to enact real reforms, and they defensively keep their hopes from being raised and their inevitable disappointment from being worse” (McCain 2001).

8. In a discussion on the state of public opinion on the issue, the Citizens Research Foundation at the University of California at Berkeley wrote, “Just two months after the John McCain campaign ended, campaign finance reform was completely off the scope of the American public; even the (nonexistent) budget deficit was seen as a larger problem” (see the Citizens Research Foundation Web page at [http://www.igs.berkeley.edu:8880/research\\_programs/CRF/Basics/opinion.html](http://www.igs.berkeley.edu:8880/research_programs/CRF/Basics/opinion.html)). I have found no evidence that campaign finance reform was ever on the public’s radar screen.

9. *Washington Post–ABC News* Poll released on January 28, 2002.

growing. Again and again, polls show that when asked about it directly, they are strongly in favor of it, even if they do not list it as one of their top priorities. In a survey conducted in August 1998, voters in eight states were asked if they preferred major changes, minor changes, or no changes in the campaign finance system. In all eight states, including New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and even Mississippi (home of Trent Lott)—pluralities called for changes. Majorities did so in New Hampshire and Indiana. (2000, 267)

Drew's statement implies that in six of eight states less than a majority called for changes.<sup>10</sup> Although I believe these numbers may be low, one wonders how these claims help her argument. She claims in this statement that (1) the public views reform as a low priority and (2) fewer than a majority in the surveys favor reform. She then uses these facts to assert that opponents of reform are pulling the wool over the public's eyes by claiming that the public does not care about reform. (Perhaps it depends on the definition of *care*.)

Why should policymakers concern themselves about the public's policy priorities? To the extent that they adopt the delegate model of representation, legislators should account for constituent preferences when allocating their time and effort. The legislative agenda has limited space, and giving attention to certain issues entails excluding others. Given this reality, the priority that citizens assign an issue is important because it informs policymakers whether that issue should take up valuable and scarce time on the legislative agenda. The public's attitude generally seems to be, "Sure, we support campaign finance reform, but only once you've taken care of the big issues." Admittedly, the public tends to show little concern about certain issues that must be tended to, such as foreign affairs, but campaign finance is different because in its case public sentiment is the very *raison d'être* of reform.

The fundamental tension in politics is similar to a basic tenet of economics: an unlimited number of issues face a limited agenda to deal with them. To promote reform by citing the preferences of constituents while ignoring how they rank various policy priorities is misleading. Whatever one's views on the substance of the issue, it is difficult to sustain the argument that a lack of federal action demonstrates an abrogation of elected officials' responsibility to their constituents.

With respect to public sentiment toward particular policy proposals, the data are so muddled that extensive analysis is infeasible. Responses to questions about specific programs often reflect only the way in which the questions are worded. For instance, a question regarding public financing of campaigns can result in vastly different responses depending on whether the term *publicly funded* or *taxpayer funded* is used, even though the meaning is virtually unchanged. Question-wording effects suggest that whoever chooses the terms of the debate will win it.

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10. Drew unfortunately does not provide citations for her specific claims about the eight states.

Suffice it to say that in the 1997 CRP survey a majority favored either somewhat or strongly all of the following reforms: establishing mandatory public financing, placing further restrictions on political action committee (PAC) contributions, limiting TV advertising, and limiting contributions to political parties. Nearly a majority polled simultaneously favored the elimination of all limits on contributions, however.<sup>11</sup> The public seems to favor almost any reform simply in the name of reform.

Reflected in these views may be a tension between freedom of expression and a desire to prevent corruption or perhaps simply poor knowledge of the existing system. When the CRP asked a series of knowledge questions, Americans failed miserably. Only 4 percent of those polled knew that laws forbid corporations from contributing directly to the campaigns of candidates for president and Congress,<sup>12</sup> and only 12 percent of respondents answered three or more of the five questions correctly. To be sure, campaign finance laws are complex, and few persons can claim to understand their intricacies unless doing so is their vocation. Still, one must tread very carefully when analyzing the public's views on specific policy proposals because the knowledge level is so low.

Skeptics of the argument presented thus far may pose this question: If Americans care so little about this issue, then why is campaign finance reform so popular on Capitol Hill? Why would elected officials push or vote for an issue that may hurt them in fund-raising and will yield little or no political benefit in return? Four replies may be given. First, certain "true believers" view campaign finance reform as the cure for what ails Washington, and they are determined to push the issue. Second, partisan and incumbency advantages might be gained by changing the way campaigns are financed, and elected officials always will try to benefit from changes in the rules. Third, the issue is a media favorite, which leads to sporadic but intense coverage of the issue. Fourth, elected officials may respond to vocal minorities in their district who call or write for reform, fearing that those individuals may cast votes in subsequent elections based on the issue. Because electoral margins are in the single digits in several districts and states, elected officials may feel the need to act accordingly. Overall, however, by any reasonable measure, campaign finance reform is a media and inside-the-beltway phenomenon.

In an earlier version of this article, I wrote, "While scandals may bring campaign finance to the fore temporarily, public attention will not remain focused for long. Only significant evidence of widespread corruption or some other focusing event may

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11. Gierzynski (2000) points out this same fact.

12. Corporations usually set up PACs, which must maintain a degree of separation from the corporation, for the purpose of making contributions to candidates. Corporate PACs often are vilified in the press, and many commentators fear that PAC contributions "buy" the votes of legislators on key issues. Milyo, Primo, and Groseclose (2000) demonstrate, however, that corporate PAC campaign contributions are a small percentage of overall campaign spending and that corporations spend far more on political lobbying and philanthropy.

be enough to generate and sustain public intensity for campaign finance reform” (Primo 2001). In 2001, reformers were able to build up nearly enough support in the House to bring campaign finance to the floor, against the wishes of House leaders, but were sidetracked by the events of September 11. In late 2001 and early 2002, the Enron scandal received such sustained scrutiny that it revived reform efforts. In short, campaign finance reform was already well on its way to passage prior to September 11, and the Enron scandal helped to put it back on track after the terrorist attacks had derailed it.

It turns out, however, that although the Enron focusing event was enough to generate and sustain the interest of the media and of elected officials in campaign finance reform, it did not spark the public’s concern. There is no evidence of increased public interest since Enron. As noted earlier, Americans’ desire for reform was unchanged in the wake of Enron. Moreover, the *link* between Enron and campaign finance reform was created by the media and by elected officials; the general public did not view campaign contributions as the major concern arising from the scandal. In a February 11, 2002, Gallup Poll, only 9 percent of Americans chose Enron’s political donations as the “most important issue in the Enron situation.” This finding reinforces the conclusion that campaign finance is an issue that captivates the elites but bores the masses.

### Paid-Off Politicians and Trust in Government

*Should* the public view campaign finance as a major issue? At the heart of the debate is a view that campaign contributions either corrupt elected officials or create the appearance of corruption.<sup>13</sup> The link between campaign contributions and policy outcomes, however, is unclear. The statistical evidence regarding the effect of spending on campaign outcomes is mixed, and the evidence for a cause-and-effect relationship between donations and policy outcomes is equally muddled.<sup>14</sup> Most advocates of reform intimate that quid pro quos are the norm, but they stop short of making such a claim directly. (Some proponents, such as Senator Russell Feingold [D-Wisc.], do make the direct link and refer to campaign contributions as “legalized bribery.”) Instead, they sometimes suggest that even the *appearance* of impropriety justifies reform because citizen distrust of government is connected to the belief that politicians are corrupt.<sup>15</sup>

13. In the seminal 1976 decision *Buckley v. Valeo*, the Supreme Court suggested that such concern was one of the few legitimate reasons for restricting campaign contributions.

14. See Sorauf 1992 and Smith 2001 for accessible reviews of this issue. The academic literature is quite technical and revolves around an issue known as *endogeneity*: donations to a campaign might both affect and be affected by the propensity of an elected official to vote with an interest group.

15. In fact, this belief has led to the enactment of ethics laws that at the federal level forbid a congressional representative to accept meals or gifts worth more than \$100 in total from a lobbyist in a given year. Elected officials cannot in general accept gifts worth more than \$20. See <http://profs.lp.findlaw.com/election/index.html> for an overview of ethics laws.

The reformers' arguments, then, hinge on a link between cynicism toward government and the financing of campaigns. This link seems to be a slam dunk for the reformers. John McCain, in introducing his proposal for campaign finance reform to the Senate in 1998, stated eloquently:

Mr. President, no Washington pundit thought that the House would actually pass campaign finance reform, but it did. It was not an easy fight. But those in favor of reform prevailed. I hope the majority in the Senate that favors reform will be able to prevail here. A majority in the House passed reform because the American people demand it. Members of the House recognized that the current system is awash in money, exploited loopholes, and publicly perceived corruption. It is a system that no Member of Congress should take pride in defending. . . .

As I mentioned, Mr. President, yesterday was primary day in Arizona. Turnout was an all-time low, indicating another record-setting low turnout election day. I have no doubt whatsoever that the way in which we finance our campaigns has in no small measure contributed to the abysmal commentary of the health of our democracy. The people's contempt—there is no more charitable way to describe it—for us and for the way in which we attain our privileged place in government cannot be sustained perpetually. We will someday pay a high price for our inattention to this problem. We will forfeit our ability to lead the country as we meet the complicated challenges confronting us at the end of this century because we have so badly squandered the public respect necessary to persuade the Nation to take the often difficult actions that are required to defend the Nation's interests.

Our ability to lead depends solely on the public's trust in us. Mr. President, *people do not trust us today*. And that breach, that calamity, is what the supporters of campaign finance reform intend to repair. I beg all of my colleagues to join in this effort and give our constituents a reason to again trust us, and to take pride in the institution we are so proud to serve. (U.S. Senate 1998, emphasis added)

When he introduced his legislation in 2001, McCain stated that “surely frequent campaign finance scandals and their real or assumed connection to misfeasance by public officials are a major part of the problem” (McCain 2001).

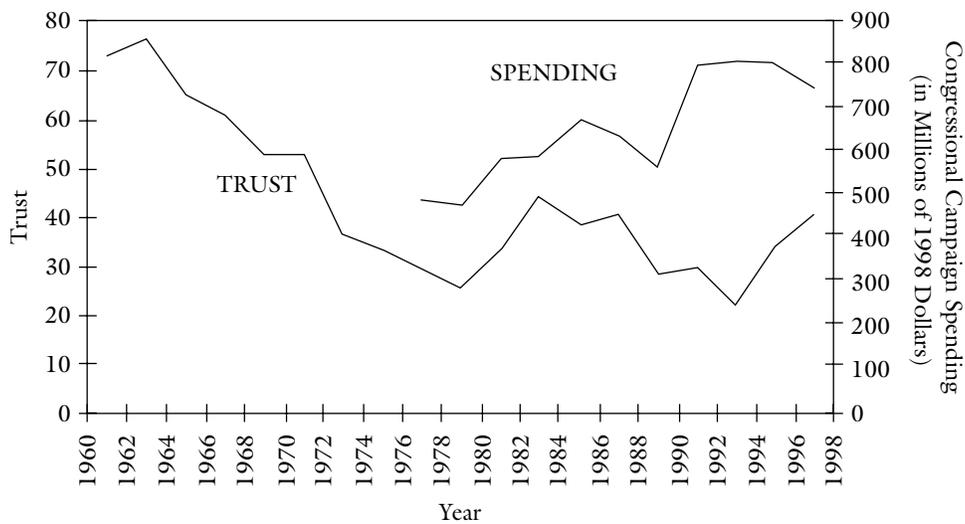
McCain is not the only senator to make unsupported claims. On the campaign finance section of his Web site (at <http://thompson.senate.gov/issues/finance-reform.htm>), Senator Fred Thompson (R-Tenn.) writes, “Americans have less and less faith in their government. One of the main reasons is that they are distrustful of the system we have in place to elect our political leaders.” On “Meet the Press,” January 7, 2001, he reiterated the importance of getting campaign finance legislation on the agenda because passage of such legislation could help to restore confidence in the system: “I think that President-elect Bush will work with McCain and others of us

who think we ought to do something in this regard, that big money has gotten out of control and played too much of a role in American politics. . . . for the first time, we have an opportunity of coming up with something that I think is good and will help restore a little bit of confidence of the American people in our system.”

Journalists make similar claims. In her book on the corruption of American politics, Elizabeth Drew writes that in large part the “dangerously low” trust in government has resulted from “the enormous and ever-growing role of money in our political campaigns—with corruption now outpacing even that of the Nixon era” (2000, viii). She offers little evidence for her claim, however, perhaps because the evidence, examined dispassionately, demonstrates that no such link actually exists.

Reformers are confident that the public wants reform and considers it of central importance; Senator McCain has *no doubt*. Reformers are also certain that campaign finance is a major cause of the public’s distaste for politics. These claims, however, are overblown. Yes, citizen trust in government is low, and, yes, campaign spending has increased. Examining the time-series relationship between trust in government and overall spending as shown in figure 1, however, one would be hard-pressed to perceive a relationship between the two data series.

**Figure 1**  
**Trust in Government and Campaign Spending**



*Sources:* Trust measure: National Election Studies at the University of Michigan, congressional campaign spending: Federal Election Commission press releases.

*Note:* The National Election Studies at the University of Michigan is a biannual survey of political attitudes and trends. Every two years, the researchers ask, “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?” *Trust* is usually defined as answering “just about always” or “most of the time.” For further information, see [http://www.umich.edu/~nes/neguide/toptable/tab5a\\_1.htm](http://www.umich.edu/~nes/neguide/toptable/tab5a_1.htm).

Before drawing any conclusions, let us pause for a moment to be precise about what the reformers are claiming. They believe that increases in campaign spending have caused declining trust in government. Two of John Stuart Mill's famous three tenets for asserting causality are temporal precedence, which can be restated as "if  $x$  follows  $y$ , then  $x$  is not the cause of  $y$ ," and concomitant covariation, or the idea that  $x$  must change in relationship to  $y$ .<sup>16</sup> Put differently, temporal precedence means that a cause (in this case, rising campaign spending) must precede an effect (declining trust). Concomitant covariation means in this case that if the reformers are correct, trust in government should go down as campaign spending goes up. The advocates of new regulations are asserting that statistically an inverse correlation between campaign spending and trust in government exists. Such correlations are measured on a scale from +1 to -1. If the reformers were completely correct, we would find a strong inverse correlation between spending and trust, indicated by a -1.0 coefficient of correlation. Anything else is a weaker relationship. A moderate-to-strong negative relationship would be between -.6 and -.4.

Public-opinion data show that citizen trust in government dropped dramatically in the 1960s and early 1970s and then followed a somewhat varied path (see figure 1). Spending increased steadily in the late 1970s and early 1980s, then remain on a plateau, jumped again in the early 1990s, and remained on a plateau again.<sup>17</sup> The data show in two ways that rising campaign spending was not the cause of public mistrust of government.

First, the major drop in citizen trust took place *before* the run-up in spending, and therefore the latter could not have caused the former. Thus, McCain's and others' claims fail the temporal precedence test. Second, the evidence shows only a minute relationship between trust and campaign spending. Since the early 1980s, citizen mistrust of government has risen and fallen. Overall, we cannot say that mistrust has risen significantly over the last two decades.<sup>18</sup> The coefficient of correlation between spending (in 1998 dollars) in congressional races and trust in government is -0.007—very close to zero. Admittedly, a time-series correlation is not a completely reliable statistic; however, a picture (figure 1) is worth a thousand words.

The cynicism toward politics is clearly rooted in something far deeper than campaign contributions, more likely in the Watergate and, to an extent, the Vietnam debacles, which were clear-cut examples of corruption, deceit, and chicanery that changed the face of American politics. In other words, the public responded to

16. The other is that there is no third variable that can explain the relationship between  $x$  and  $y$ .

17. Because these data are for congressional campaign spending and do not account for the run-up in soft money spending in the mid-1990s, they understate the support for my findings because trust increased in the 1990s, the very time when soft money spending was skyrocketing.

18. Similarly, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse conclude: "The clear message is that in the twenty years between 1975 and 1994, confidence in the three major institutions of the federal government moved neither up nor down" (1995, 33). Federal election law dates from 1971 and was amended in 1974 and 1979.

actual events, not to some general sense that democracy had faltered.<sup>19</sup> The claim that money drives cynicism toward politics on a macro, historical level is simply false.

Even if these data are not convincing, consider a cross-sectional analysis from two questions in the 1997 CRP survey. When asked if they were satisfied with the political process, 59 percent of respondents said that they were not. Of those, only 14 percent said that the reason for their dissatisfaction was the perception that politicians are corrupt or that special interests “buy” political outcomes. This evidence indicates that of the polled population, fewer than 10 percent make a direct link between their overall view of the system and money in politics.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, two political scientists at the University of Wisconsin, John J. Coleman and Paul F. Manna, recently used data from the 1994 and 1996 U.S. House elections to demonstrate that campaign spending had no effect on levels of trust in government or on views about political efficacy. Moreover, the authors write that, overall, “the effects of campaign spending lie more on the side of democratic boon than democratic bane” (Coleman and Manna 2000, 757). Therefore, there is evidence at both the macro level (overall trust over time in the United States) and the micro level (the 1997 CRP poll as well as the Coleman-Manna study) that trust and spending are not closely linked.

What about the connection between media coverage of campaign finance and the level of citizen trust? In the 1997 CRP survey, 60 percent of Americans who had heard at least some information about questionable fund-raising were dissatisfied with the political process, compared with only 45 percent of those who had heard little or nothing, a statistically significant difference. At the very least, this relationship is more plausible. The media’s fascination with money has grown in recent years, and the media’s ability to help define what is important for the public is a well-known phenomenon. The real link between public opinion and campaign finance, then, may lie with the mass media’s emphasis on campaign finance rather than with any significant public concern.

## Conclusion

Public opinion is especially important on the issue of campaign finance because a main justification for reform is that the public demands it or that it will restore faith in democracy. I have demonstrated here, however, that although campaign finance arouses great passion among governing elites, the general public does not much care about the issue. Even during the Enron scandal, which was heralded for causing public outcry that spurred the passage of pending reform legislation, the public was uninterested in the issue. Further, there is no link between trust in government and the

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19. Further, trust in nearly *all* institutions has been declining since the 1960s, and the news media currently are less trusted than Congress in some polls.

20. This assessment is a generous one. The responses coded “direct link” are tenuous at best.

amount of campaign spending, which suggests that reforms will have little effect on how Americans view government.

Campaign finance reform will remain on the political agenda, and many more battles will be fought in the coming years. It would be disingenuous to assert that because public opinion is wishy-washy on the issue, further reforms should not occur. In a representative democracy, the desires of the majority are not always enacted, and reasonable people can disagree on how closely elected officials should adhere to the wishes of their constituents. However, those carrying the mantle of reform often claim a groundswell of public support for their positions, which flies in the face of the evidence. The debate on this issue needs to shift away from claims that the public clamors for reform and move toward other reasons why campaign finance reform might improve our democracy.

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