There’s no right answer to what role money should play in campaigns—but there are lots of opinions.

BY WENDY UNDERHILL

Campaign spending reached about $2.4 billion during the 2016 presidential primaries and election. Congressional races accounted for another $4 billion. That’s a far cry from the $195 George Washington is believed to have spent for food and drinks to help him win a seat in the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1757.

With the cost of campaigns rising with every election, candidates have come to rely on contributions from a variety of sources: individuals, PACs, unions, parties and corporations. Some see this influx of money as having a potentially corruptive influence on candidates. But others view giving a donation to a political candidate as another expression of their right to free speech.

State legislators have had to balance these opposing views, while also adhering to a couple of U.S. Supreme Court decisions on the role of money in elections. All 50 states regulate the way money may be raised to cover campaign expenses, with the three most common methods being disclosure and reporting requirements, contribution limits and public financing. Because the federal government leaves elections largely up to the states, the methods used vary dramatically across the country.

All states require candidates for elective office to report the contributions they receive while conducting a campaign. Thirty-nine states restrict the amount of money that any one individual can contribute to a state campaign, and 31 restrict funds from political parties. Twenty-two states completely prohibit corporate contributions, another 22 impose the same restrictions on corporations as they do on individuals and four set separate limits on corporations.

Public financing of campaigns remains the least-used method of regulating money in elections. Only five states offer some form of public financing for legislative candidates. Some states require candidates who accept public money to demonstrate wide public support by collecting small donations from many different individuals. Others use a matching-funds model, with an upper limit.

How large a role should money be allowed to play in politics? Opinions vary. We asked two organizations, each fighting for fair, free elections, for their answers to these questions: Does the cost of campaigning concern you? What effect does this trend have on the candidate pool or, more broadly, our representative democracy? Here’s what they had to say.
GET RID OF NEEDLESS CAMPAIGN REGULATIONS

BY BRADLEY A. SMITH

Higher campaign costs are neither inherently good nor bad. They result, mainly, from tradeoffs we have chosen, wittingly or not, to make.

For example, nominating candidates through primaries, rather than caucuses or conventions, substantially raises the cost of seeking office. Would we give up primaries? Probably not. But how about reducing early voting? Just 20 years ago there was no such thing. Early voting raises the cost of campaigning, especially for state and local offices, as candidates must begin communication and turnout efforts earlier.

Here’s another possibility: create more districts. The United States has 40 percent more people than it did in 1980. But the size of most state legislatures is unchanged, so more money must be spent in any given race to reach and turn out voters. More populated districts also make traditional low-cost campaign tactics, including door-to-door campaigning, picnics and rallies, less effective, given their limited reach. Adding five or six seats to a state senate—few currently have more than 40 members—could reduce the electorate in each district by 20 percent or more. Surely a 35-member senate could function as effectively as a 30-member senate.

Remember that campaign spending has benefits. Studies by University of Minnesota’s John Coleman have shown that higher campaign spending boosts voter knowledge, especially for those least informed about politics and government. Higher spending also correlates with competitive races, which many consider a good thing. Given the benefits of higher spending, perhaps we should consider a “supply side” approach, aimed at reducing the effort needed to raise funds.

One idea is for government to pay for campaigns. Whether cash-strapped states should do this is a difficult question. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that government financing works. An Institute for Free Speech study in Connecticut found no change in legislative behavior after that state implemented public funding. More relevant to the effect of campaign financing on democracy, we studied Arizona and Maine and found that government funding did not increase the number of nontraditional candidates. Indeed, government funding was associated with a decline in the number of women legislators. Nor have studies found a link between government funding and higher

MAKE CAMPAIGN FINANCING MORE INCLUSIVE

BY MEREDITH MCGEHEE AND CATIE HINCKLEY KELLEY

Like it or not, money—or the lack of it—plays a big role in our elections. It takes money to start a campaign, to run a campaign and to win a campaign. Speculating on what is “the right” amount of money is a rabbit hole we’re not going to go down. Who’s to say, for example, too much is being spent in Arizona but Vermont has it about right? Each state is different, each race brings new challenges and each campaign is unique. Our concerns are about how the ever-increasing, high cost of campaigns—at every level of government—relates to who the money is coming from, the amount of time spent fundraising and who is excluded from running.

So, where does the money come from? Analyses of 2016 election spending show that a decreasing number of wealthy individuals make up an increasing percentage of the money raised by candidates. According to the National Institute on Money in State Politics, “contributions by donors that gave $1 million or more to candidates in the election cycle represented a quarter of all money raised by 2016 office-seekers.” This is consistent with what we’re seeing on the federal level.

Candidate fundraising is an important means of engaging with the electorate and getting citizens involved in the democratic process. But when candidates prioritize fundraising from contributors who can make large contributions—unlimited amounts, in some states—there is less time for connecting with constituents and raising small-dollar contributions.

Another important factor is that it takes time to fundraise. It’s a chore that pulls officeholders away from the jobs they were elected to do. At the federal level, the amount of time officeholders spend dialing for dollars has been well-documented—both parties have told freshmen lawmakers they should be spending roughly 30 hours per week on call time. There is less evidence about the time state candidates spend fundraising, but with only 10 full-time state legislatures, most state lawmakers are already stretched between their duties as an officeholder and other work commitments.

Indeed, the role of the parties in all of this should not be overlooked. In the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court’s Citizens United ruling in 2010, the parties have been hollowed out. Rather than serving their traditional function of providing a venue for like-

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confidence in or satisfaction with government.

If not government funding, what is the answer?

In the past decade, 18 states have raised contribution limits. But that means more have not. And almost no states have raised their limits to fully account for inflation since the limits were first imposed. Higher limits can reduce time spent fundraising.

Additionally, many states increase compliance costs (a campaign cost) and smother true grassroots campaigns with needless, and needlessly complex, regulations. People should not be discouraged from participating in politics by spoils of red tape, but too many states have intricate, confusing campaign laws that desperately need simplification.

Meanwhile, provisions of the federal government’s 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, aka the McCain-Feingold Act, have severely hampered fundraising by state and local party committees. State officials should insist that Congress amend the law to free up local parties, easing the burdens of candidate fundraising and enhancing grassroots participation.

Efforts to lower spending through limits and regulation have been unsuccessful—after all, we have far more regulation than 40 years ago. Lower spending also comes at the expense of voter knowledge. Doing away with needless regulations, and thinking about things such as early voting or restructuring legislative chambers, will make it easier and less costly to run for office, without limiting political speech.

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