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## American Political Campaigns: COSTS, TECHNIQUES & TECHNOLOGY

John Hudak, Ph.D.

**I**t is no secret that American presidential elections are the most expensive in the world—and getting more expensive with each passing cycle. In 2012, Mitt Romney and Barack Obama raised and spent about \$1 billion (USD) *each*. Those figures do not include money raised and spent directly and independently by parties and other party organizations, nor does it include spending from outside political action committees (PACs and SuperPACs). Those figures do not include the tens of millions of dollars spent by Republican candidates other than Mitt Romney who sought the Republican presidential nomination. Those figures also exclude the *billions* of additional dollars spent on Congressional, gubernatorial, state legislative, and other races across the United States that year.

As staggering as those figures are to international observers and to Americans themselves, they pale in comparison to what the 2016 election will mean for campaign spending. With a competitive Republican primary for president, and a likely Democratic nominee with an established, elaborate fundraising network, fundraising and spending will be historic in

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2016. Each nominee is expected to spend well over \$1 billion each, surpassing the parties' standard bearers from 2012. Like 2012, the Republican Party will feature a wide open primary, in which more than a dozen serious, well-funded candidates may pursue the nomination. They include former Governors Jeb Bush (Florida), Mike Huckabee (Arkansas), Rick Perry (Texas); Senators Marco Rubio (Florida), Ted Cruz (Texas), Rand Paul (Kentucky), Lindsay Graham (South Carolina); Governors Scott Walker (Wisconsin), John Kasich (Ohio), Chris Christie (New Jersey), Bobby Jindal (Louisiana), Mike Pence (Indiana); Former



Senator Rick Santorum (Pennsylvania), and Maryland surgeon Ben Carson.

In addition, American voters will elect candidates in 435 races for House of Representative, 33 races for Senate, and numerous governors, state legislators, and other state and local officials. Recently, *The Hill*—a Washington, DC-based newspaper—interviewed fundraisers from both parties who estimated that the presidential election alone may cost as much as \$5 billion.

Figures from 2014 suggest that presidential elections are not the only races with burgeoning bank accounts. Races for US Senate in 2014 were among the most expensive in history.<sup>1</sup> About one third of the Senate races topped \$50 million in spending, including races in which more than \$100 million was spent. In Alaska—a state with a population of about 700,000—over \$60 million was spent just to elect a Senator!<sup>4</sup>

While there exist numerous caps on the amount of money campaigns can raise from individuals or individual sources, recent actions by all three branches of the US government have facilitated increased spending. The 2010 Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United v. FEC*<sup>2</sup> opened the doors to substantial flows of outside spending in a variety of political campaigns, namely reserved for spending independent of candidates' own campaigns, but often times in support of or opposition to specific candidates.

In a follow up case in 2014, the Supreme Court ruled in *McCutcheon v. FEC*<sup>3</sup> that overall caps on individuals' ability to contribute to federal campaigns were unconstitutional, dramatically increasing the

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capacity of people to donate money directly into candidates' campaign coffers. In addition and per usual, the Federal Election Commission—an executive branch regulatory agency that governs elections and spending—raised donation caps to be indexed for inflation.<sup>4</sup>

In December 2014, Congress passed a massive spending bill—popularly called the “Cromnibus”—and formally entitled, “The Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015.”<sup>5</sup> In it is a provision that dramatically lifts the limits on campaign donations to party organizations. One group called the policy change “The Most Corrupting Campaign-Finance Provisions Ever Enacted.”<sup>6</sup>

The result of all of this is a system of elections that continues to become continually more expensive year-over-year, and is assisted by an expansive legal foundation that facilitates more money in politics. Some find this practice entirely corrupting, especially when the practice lacks disclosure requirements.<sup>7</sup> Others argue that

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the discontinuation of spending restrictions are consistent with speech rights protected in the 1st Amendment to the US Constitution.<sup>8</sup> Regardless, expensive campaigns are a reality in the American system, and unpacking that reality—understanding how and why so much money is spent and what the future holds—is even more important than reading the ledger sheets at the conclusion of each campaign season.

This paper will review some of the details of what drives the expense of American elections. First, I will discuss some of the natural or organic forces that make elections in the US costlier than they would be in many other countries. Second, I offer a counter-view and highlight why those organic forces do not fully explain the dramatic increases in campaign spending. Third, I illustrate how technology can both save money in campaigns and also rapidly drive up costs. Finally, I offer a blunt assessment

of the future of campaign spending in the US and address the likelihood of cost-lowering reforms.

### **1** *Why American Elections Are Naturally Expensive*

**B**eyond efforts of high dollar donors to pour money into the coffers of candidates, party organizations, and political action committees, there are several legitimate reasons why American elections—and particularly presidential elections—are so expensive. There are unique, unavoidable characteristics of the United States and the design of its political system that can contribute to those high costs.

First, the US is a populous country. With over 300 million citizens, the US Census Bureau estimated that in November 2012 there were over 235 million Americans over the age of 18.<sup>9</sup> Political campaigns are about reaching voters, communicating messages (particularly messages that will resonate with key demographic groups and sub-groups), and motivating them to turn out to vote. Efforts to reach voters are elaborate and costly and in places with large populations, efforts to visit, talk to, and advertise before, often multiple times during an election cycle, increases dramatically.

In addition to a large population, the US is geographically immense. At nearly 4 million square miles, it is the fourth largest country in Earth, with a population scattered throughout. While modern communication systems, technological innovation, and air travel

<sup>1</sup> Wallack, G. and J. Hudak. “How Much Did Your Vote Cost? Spending Per Voter in the 2014 Senate Races”. *Brookings*. 7 November 2014. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Supreme Court of the United States. *Citizen United v. Federal Election Commission*. October 2009. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Supreme Court of the United States. *McCutcheon et al. v. Federal Election Commission*. October 2013. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Federal Election Commission. *Price Index Adjustments for Contribution and Expenditure Limitations and Lobbyist Bundling Disclosure Threshold*. 2 March 2015. Web. 22 April 2015

<sup>5</sup> Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives. *Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, 2015*. 9 December 2014. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Berman, R. “The Most Corrupting Campaign-Finance Provisions Ever Enacted”. *The Atlantic*. 10 December 2014. Web. 22 April 2015. The legislation formally funded all federal agencies through September 30, 2015, with the exception of the Department of Homeland Security which was funded through late February 2015.

<sup>7</sup> The Washington, DC-based Sunlight Foundation often takes the lead in campaign finance issues from this perspective. See their response to the Citizens United decision in: “Corporate Money in Politics”. *The Washington Post*. 9 May 2010. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>8</sup> One perspective on campaign spending as a speech right comes from the Heritage Foundation, see Spakovsky, H. A. von. “Citizens United and the Restoration of the First Amendment”. *The Heritage Foundation*. 17 February 2010. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Eligibility to vote in the US begins at age 18. It is important to note that there are not 235 million individuals eligible to vote, however. There exist restrictions on voting eligibility for reasons such as felony convictions that would lower that number. For the best discussion of the difference between VAP (voting age population) and VEP (voting eligible population), see McDonald, M. P. “The Turnout Rate Among Eligible Voters for U.S. States, 1980-2000.” *State Politics and Policy Quarterly* 2: 2. (2002.): 199-212. Print.



Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in 2008 Electoral Campaign, New Hampshire.

have made presidential campaigns far better equipped to blanket the large country, the fact remains that a candidate himself or herself can only be in one place at one time, and there are limits on how quickly one can get from point A to point B. In effect, it is much easier geographically to run for President of Uruguay than for President of the United States.

The length of the presidential campaign also makes the race for the White House more expensive. In advance of the 2008 campaign, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, as well as several Republican candidates formally launched their campaigns in the early months of 2007, ensuring the campaign would last nearly two years. Already in advance of the 2016 election, candidates are forming political action committees, informally but transparently focused on upcoming presidential runs. Many of these candidates have been unofficially running for president since November 2012. Because of the competitiveness of these elections, entering a race long after your opponents puts you at a distinct disadvantage in

terms of organization, hiring staff, fundraising, messaging, and media coverage. It seems that in the US, people are constantly running for president, and the same is true in Congress. Such behavior drove my colleague Tom Mann and his coauthor Norm Ornstein to call the activity, *The Permanent Campaign*,<sup>10</sup> noting that elected officials' behaviors are driven by the desire and need to campaign on a continuous basis, from the day they win (or lose) an election until the following Election Day.

Historically, presidential races did not seriously begin until the spring or summer of an election year, leaving candidates only a few months to campaign. Stretching that schedule to a year, to a year and a half, and now to nearly two years means that candidates must raise and spend tremendous sums of money just to keep up for that duration

Next, because of the US' geographic and population size and the length of the campaign, candidates depend heavily on paid media—print, mail, radio, especially television, and increasingly, internet—to advertise and

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communicate with voters. The price of postage has increased in the US—50% in 20 years.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the real bump in cost has come from television advertising—both in terms of base price and the number of buys. For Americans who live in areas being targeted by presidential campaigns with paid television advertising, commercial breaks can feature four or five political ads in a row—a practice that continues for months.

To put into perspective how pervasive television advertising was in 2012, research by political scientists Erika Franklin Fowler and Travis Ridout show that over 1.4 million television ad spots aired just for the presidential race (another 1.6 million ads aired for House and Senate races).<sup>12</sup> This figure also fails to count internet popups and right rail ads, radio spots between songs and talk radio, and glossy ads stuffed into mailboxes across the US.

Finally, the institutional design of the US presidential election makes the race costly, as well. Rather than a national plebiscite to elect its chief executive, the US relies on a decentralized electoral college. The result is a unique one. Rather than one large, nationwide, singular presidential election, the US actually chooses a president through 50 individual, state-level elections.<sup>13</sup> While presidential campaigns employ large, systematic, and refined national strategies, they also must employ granular, state-level

strategies, hire staff at the state-level, comply with a variety of different election laws across the country,<sup>14</sup> and target messages to state-specific interests and demographics. Rather than the path to the White House focusing on boosting national turnout, candidates must focus on the states. And the 2000 presidential election showed the world how the institutional design of the Electoral College can create very bizarre outcomes such as the candidate who wins the most votes nationwide loses the election. The lesson is that states—not a national focus—is how presidential elections are won and lost in the US, and that can impose substantial, additional costs on an election.

## 2 Why American Elections should be Less Expensive than They Initially Appear

In the previous section, I highlighted why there are legitimate bases for why US presidential elections can become so costly. It is not to say those reasons—geography, demography, election structure, the length of elections, and advertising costs—alone explain the explosion in the price tag on a White House race. In fact, three of those explanations have more or less been part of the US for its existence

<sup>11</sup> Figure based on first class mail rates.

<sup>12</sup> Fowler, E. F. and T. N. Ridout. "Negative, Angry and Ubiquitous: Political Advertising in 2012." *The Forum, A Journal of Applied Research in Contemporary Politics* 10: 4. (2012): 51-61.

<sup>13</sup> In reality, the election is composed of 51 state/sub-national races, as the District of Columbia provides three electoral votes.

<sup>14</sup> This requirement exists because while the presidential election is national in scope, each state administers its own election and candidates are subject to specific state laws governing that process. That is true at both the primary and general election levels.



## *There are reasons why elections should and could be less expensive*

and the expense of presidential elections has been a more contemporary phenomena. It is surely a perfect storm of forces that combine to drive up costs. Despite those costly forces, there are also reasons why American elections could be even costlier—that is, there are reasons why elections should and could be less expensive.

First, not all candidates compete in all states. This is another odd characteristic in the practice of US presidential elections, and one entirely attributable to the institutional design of the Electoral College. I noted in the previous section that the design of the Electoral College puts an upward pressure on campaign costs, as campaigns need to focus on states. However, the realities of the Electoral College also mean that candidates do not need to compete in every state.

In my book, *Presidential Pork: White House Influence over the Distribution of Federal Grants*,<sup>15</sup> I explain that because of the Electoral College, there are three types of states that presidential candidates face. I call them swing states, core states, and lost cause states. Swing states are highly competitive states in presidential elections and ones that many Americans and citizens across the world know to be decisive in the race for the White House. They include Ohio and Florida. In these states—typically there are between 10 and 14 states that fall into this category—both Democratic and Republican candidates compete heavily for voters' support—and ultimately the state's electoral votes. Most campaign spending, candidate visits, and other electoral activity takes place in these states.

Other states are different. What I call “core states” are ones that a given candidate is

essentially assured of winning. This assurance exists because of historical tradition and demographic and partisan characteristics that drive the underlying voter support in those states. It is from this that we have “red states” and “blue states.” Blue states like California, New York, Connecticut, and Hawaii consistently vote for Democratic presidential candidates (at least in the current partisan and political alignment), and Democrats need not waste time or money to secure these states' electoral votes.

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Similarly, in those blue states, Republican candidates know that added spending, attention and effort will almost surely be fruitless, as winning is difficult or impossible. For Republicans, blue states are what I label “lost cause states.” At a minimum, campaign funds could be more effectively spent in other states—swing states. It is more likely that those funds would have zero effect on the ultimate winner in those states.<sup>16</sup>

The result: candidates do not have tremendous operations in 50 states. They may have lean operations in many, relying more heavily on volunteers than paid staffers in states they are certain to win or certain to lose. In swing states, operations are large, heavily staffed,

and become the recipient of most campaign spending. Yet, as noted above, those states number around a dozen and in a year like 2012, had a voting age population of between 60 and 70 million voters, far short of the nationwide electorate. In this way, the Electoral College can drive down the population and geographic focus of campaigns and does so in dramatic ways. The alternative, a nation of all swing states, where campaigns would need to open and maintain robust operations in 50 states would surely be much costlier—or at least each state would receive less attention than they currently do.

Second, even within states—swing states—presidential candidates do not try to reach every voter or every geographic area. In a state like Pennsylvania, for instance, Democratic and Republican presidential candidates campaign in very different ways and in very different places. Democrats know in the vast, rural, central portion of the state live deeply conservative voters who hold views on social issues like abortion and gun rights and on economic issues like spending and taxes that are inconsistent with the Democratic platform. Democrats do not expect much support out of this area. Instead, Democratic candidates look to Pennsylvania's two big cities—Philadelphia and Pittsburgh—for a large portion of their support. They target advertising and grassroots efforts heavily in those areas because they know their voters reside there and the key to winning the state is to turn out your supporters. Republicans tend to look elsewhere, often in the precise places Democrats ignore. There also exist competitive, swing or demographically divided areas—such as the Philadelphia suburbs where *both* candidates will target attention in an effort either to turn out “their” voters or to change minds among the ever-shrinking group of undecided voters.

Political scientists, economists, and others have written extensively about this topic, in an effort to understand how elected officials

*Different types of media, like internet advertising, can drive down costs in some campaigns*

and candidates for office target campaign attention. The most seminal engagement of this issue comes from Avinash Dixit and John Londregan in a 1996 paper, but others have written on the issue or employed such theories in other work.<sup>17</sup>

The point of the litany of research in this area boils down to a basic point: candidates have to target strategies that focus on some but not all voters. In this way, even within the handful of swing states, where presidential candidates focus almost all of their energy (and money), they are pinpoint only a subset of the population. This further shrinks the target electorate for a campaign and reduces the relative costs of campaigning vis-à-vis a race in which candidates must reach every voter in a state.<sup>18</sup>

Third, different types of media, like internet advertising, can drive down costs in some campaigns. While the effectiveness of internet advertising is unclear—truth be told the effectiveness of most advertising is the subject of much research—it is generally quite cheap. This is particularly true when compared to the base and production costs of television advertising or the base, production and postage costs of mail advertising. While internet advertising is surely not going to supplant television advertising as the chief medium by which presidential campaign communicate messages, the past two presidential election cycles have seen dramatic

<sup>15</sup> “Presidential Pork: White House Influence over the Distribution of Federal Grants”. *Brookings*. 27 February 2014. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>16</sup> In almost every state, electoral votes are awarded by a winner-take-all method, meaning a candidate receives all 55 of California's electoral votes if they win the state's popular vote by a single ballot or by 2,291,000 votes as Barack Obama did in 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Dixit, A. and J. Londregan. “The determinants of success of special interests in redistributive politics”. *The Journal of Politics* 58 (1996): 1132-1155. Print.

<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that such strategies work well for grassroots campaigning (i.e., get-out-the-vote efforts or campaign rallies), radio advertising, and print advertising. However, for television advertising, media markets are so large and, in most states, so few, that such ads will surely reach both targeted and un-targeted voters.



Obama asking for votes in Virginia, 2012.

growth in its use and sophistication and offer some advertising cost efficiencies in a world and market seeing unprecedented cost increases.

Fourth, microtargeting is an important, growing, and increasingly sophisticated part of presidential (and other) campaigns. Microtargeting is an election tool by which campaigns gather substantial data on individuals—voting registration, party affiliation, group membership, consumer behavior, etc.—to try to estimate (or guess) whether they are voters likely to support one candidate, another candidate, or whose vote may be up-for-grabs.<sup>19</sup> Microtargeting also helps campaigns better understand the type of message a given voter will be receptive of.

What microtargeting can do is ensure that campaigns are reaching voters in a much more effective way. It can ensure that the messaging in television advertising is reaching

the right audience, watching the right show, at the right time of day.<sup>20</sup> Rather than targeting entire cities or counties within a state, microtargeting can ensure that phone calls, mail materials, and door-to-door campaign outreach is targeted to portions of a city, neighborhoods, specific streets, and even specific households. The technique saves costs—time, personnel, production materials, etc...

In fact, microtargeting is increasingly key for messaging. For example, imagine a campaign is focusing on a given street and they identify three households that include voters likely to support a Democrat. They include a single woman, a young couple who work in the technology industry, and a retired couple who are former labor union members. Each of those households may support the Democratic nominee, but the message that needs to be communicated to each is quite different.

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Microtargeting can, in some cases, voters receive the precise message likely to influence them and ultimately bring them to the voting booth.

In 2008 and 2012, the Obama campaigns' microtargeting efforts were unprecedented, technologically sophisticated, data-driven, and successful.<sup>21</sup> However, both parties engage in the practice, and to varying degrees, down-ballot candidates benefit from or employ their own efforts. Each of these characteristics of presidential campaigns focus on shrinking the electorate from the massive 235 million voting age population to a more manageable group of target voters that allow campaigns to spend less and get more bang for their buck.

have such offsetting cost features. As was discussed at the end of the previous section, microtargeting is a powerful and widely-used tactic in presidential campaigns to generate efficiencies in advertising and outreach. However, microtargeting is an expensive.

Microtargeting demands that campaigns collect tremendous sums of data—both on voters who are ultimately targeted and voters who ultimately are not. Some data are available for free, but much of them, like consumer data, are not. They are costly and a single set of data is insufficient. Campaigns need multiple types and sources of data on a variety of behaviors of which consumer spending is just one. A team has to be assembled that includes data analysts, IT specialists, and database managers, to name a few. Those data need to be organized, analyzed, and ultimately translated into what it means for voter behavior. That translation requires campaign specialists who know voters and what they like.

Each of these activities and the personnel involved cost money. This activity happens at the national-, state-, and local-level and as a result, in a presidential campaign, an effective microtargeting effort is substantial in size and as a result, substantial in cost. The goal is to introduce efficiencies to campaign strategy

### 3 *How Technology Saves a Campaign Money—and Also Raises Costs*

It is true in many industries, and campaigns and elections are no different. Technology saves money in some places and drives up costs in others. While campaigns benefit dramatically from technological innovation in terms of sophistication, reach, and scope, it's not free. In fact, it's not cheap, either. This section will discuss a few technologies that

<sup>19</sup> Calling it "Dark Magic," *Campaigns and Elections Magazine* highlighted the use of microtargeting, its goals, and campaigns' focus on its use in a 2010 article, available in: Drechsler, A., J. Rivlin, M. Meyers, and B. Allen. "Explaining the 'Dark Magic' of Microtargeting". *Campaigns and Elections*. 22 August 2010. Web 22 April 2015.

<sup>20</sup> In a 2012, *New York Times* article Tanzina Vega reviews how the practice is used in political advertising. Available in: "Campaigns Use 'Microtargeting' to Attract Supporters". *New York Times*, 2 December 2012. Web. 1 October 2015.

<sup>21</sup> MIT's *Technology Review* offers a comprehensive look at the Obama team's data operation that focused on all aspects of the campaign as well as the innovative and experimental nature of some of its practices in a story entitled, "The Definitive Story of How President Obama Mined Voter Data to Win a Second Term." Available in: Issenberg, S. "How President Obama's Campaign Used Big Data to Rally Individual Voters". *MIT Technology Review*, 19 December 2012. Web. 22 April 2015.



and behavior. However, some of those efficiencies exist in the ability of the campaign to reach the “right” voters and avoid—at all times—the “wrong” voters. All the while costs may not necessarily be saved as much as they are redirected to more effective efforts. Or, ironically, microtargeting may well raise the cost of campaigns as the infrastructure behind it grows in scale.

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Like microtargeting, polling is another technologically savvy and increasingly sophisticated method by which campaigns seek to gain an advantage. For years, campaigns have relied on polling to understand their position in a race, but polling has become more advance and scientific. Campaigns are asking different questions that reveal more useful information than the basic “who are you supporting?” New polling techniques use the internet, call cell phones, and sample populations in innovative (and often proprietary) ways. Polls are conducted more often, as campaigns strive for near-real time measures of public opinion on relevant issues in relevant areas.

Polling can be used to help campaigns spend money in ways that are more useful. It can help campaigns avoid spending money in areas and on activities that may not produce expected outcomes, while funneling money toward more productive uses. However, as polling becomes more sophisticated, it also becomes more expensive. Presidential candidates rely on multiple polling firms who field surveys in multiple states. As campaigns seek any bit of a competitive advantage on voters’ preferences, polling becomes a near addiction, and in the world of elections, there are always plenty of pushers with plenty of product. Top tier pollsters can charge campaigns substantial amounts, and campaigns are more than happy to pay those fees. That tremendous demand, particularly in a presidential election year, drives up prices and ultimately costs to the campaign. The result is an amusing one. Campaigns use pollsters in an effort to avoid wasting or misappropriating money, and in the end, spend exorbitant sums on the activity itself.<sup>22</sup>

Technological innovation has not simply emerged through microtargeting and polling. It affects huge portions of campaigns of all kinds, particularly presidential campaigns. Communication strategies and techniques benefit from constant updating and the use of new media and techniques. The manner in which campaigns relate to and use the mainstream media is part of the ever-changing world of elections, constantly being improved through new technologies and learned experience. Improved IT systems assist campaigns in remaining secure and better able to communicate in reliable and effective ways. The rise of the internet and innumerable outlets of open source information has assisted campaigns in collecting real-time information about what is being said about campaigns in every corner of the country.

Even beyond the types of technologies we tend to think of as new and important—often centered in IT—other areas of modern

campaigning can dramatically drive up costs. Advertising is among them. Television ads, particularly in presidential campaigns, have production values as high as any multinational corporation’s product placement. That requires high caliber marketing, advertising, and production professionals. Radio advertising is no different. Print advertising requires the work of teams of graphic designers and high-end printing processes that can produce bulk product quickly. Internet advertising requires web designers and webmasters. Advertising has always been an important part of political campaigns. However, modern campaigns require a diverse army of creative, marketing, and production professionals to work around the clock.

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All of these and many other types of technologies that assist—and really power—campaigns have also given rise to an industry, the campaign industry. Never without work, particularly in the era of the permanent campaign, professionals with diverse and wide-ranging skillsets sell their wares to the thousands of campaigns that rage on every year. The best (and sometimes others) clamor up the chain from local to state to federal elections, many seeing work on a presidential. Often, work on such campaigns, or increasingly for organizations operating alongside formal presidential campaigns, is also a goldmine for such individuals and companies.<sup>23</sup>

While a burgeoning industry allows for great competition, which should have some downward pressure on prices, the constant drive for reinvention and innovation means that individuals and firms try to distinguish their product as unique and are able to sell it at inflated

prices. Campaigns, realizing they have substantial needs and very little time to engage in trial and error, are often only in a position to buy. And they do. They purchase services, technology, advice, knowledge, and time from thousands of sources, each of which promises the campaign an edge over the competition.

The competitive marketplace of campaign contracting has ballooned in unprecedented ways over the past several election cycles, and as candidates raise more money, as outside organizations engage in high-level electioneering, and as political action committees pop up by the hundreds, there is plenty of funding to keep the industry afloat. It would be inappropriate to argue that the rise of the

industry has driven up the cost of campaigns. Similarly, it would be wrong to claim that the funds flowing to campaigns have given rise to the industry. Instead, it is more likely a circular process by which each incrementally powers the other, resulting in ever- or perhaps endlessly-increasing expense in American elections. And nowhere is that expense more obvious than a US presidential campaign.

#### 4 *The Blunt Truth about the Future of American Elections*

**T**he American public is a bit bipolar when it comes to its views on American elections. In poll after poll, Americans support restrictions on campaign finance. For example, Gallup published a poll in 2013 in which half of Americans supported publicly-funded elections, as opposed to the current system of donations.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For perspective, *The Weekly Standard* reported that the Obama campaign spent \$2.6 million on polling in the month of June 2012 alone! See Halper, D. “Obama Campaign Spends More Than \$2.6 Million for polling—in June”. *The Weekly Standard*. 21 July 2012. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>23</sup> In fact, *The Economist* reported in 2012, the extent to which campaign staff from previous Obama campaigns spurred an explosion in technologically savvy startups selling their services based on their activities and performance in presidential contests. Available in: “The Obama Start-Ups”. *The Economist*. 1 December 2012. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Saad, L. “Half in U.S. Support Publicly Financed Federal Campaigns”. *Gallup*. 24 June 2013. Web. 22 April 2015.

CBS News in conjunction with New York Times showed that nearly two-thirds of Americans supported limits on campaign spending in races by capping contributions.<sup>25</sup> The Associated Press issued poll results in 2012 showing that majorities of Americans wanted limits on both corporate and individual donations to political campaigns.<sup>26</sup> Finally, a 2014 poll issued by the left-leaning Huffington Post found that a majority of Americans supported a constitutional amendment that would limit money in politics.<sup>27</sup>

Overall, the results suggest Americans are fed up with the amount of money flowing into political campaigns. In fact, that same Huffington Post poll found that a majority of Americans believe that money in politics affected the results of the 2014 midterms. My colleagues Tom Mann and Tony Corrado argue that the current campaign finance system in the US has even more damning effects. In a July 2014 paper, they note that campaign finance contributes to polarization in American politics and in Congress.<sup>28</sup> In a different paper, Helios Herrera and his colleagues find similar results, ultimately arguing that campaign spending and polarization are associated with the decrease in voter turnout in the US.<sup>29</sup>

Despite public opinion and the perceived effects of campaign spending, it is going to remain a reality in American politics for a multiple reasons. **First, while campaign finance reform is an issue many Americans agree on, it is not a salient issue.** That is, the topic is not driving the US public to the streets, organizing them in mass rallies that demand change, nor is it dominating the media conversation in a systematic and continuous way. In the US, policy change is difficult and in an area like campaign finance reform both

public support and public *passion* would be required for change to be realized.

**Second, the system is biased toward the status quo**—or even more, biased toward loosening campaign finance restrictions. That occurs because the system, and those elected officials who serve as leaders on and gatekeepers to policy change, often benefit the most from the existing construct. President Obama laments the role of money in politics, but no American has ever raised and spent more money in politics than he.

Congressional elections keep getting more expensive and the need for sitting members to have access to huge sums of campaign funds, to transfer and coordinate funds, and to raise funds for other and prospective candidates is essential. It keeps members in office; it boosts their profile within the party and among the public; it positions them to seize on what political scientists call “progressive ambition”—the interest in using one elected position to move to higher and higher positions. Congress does not simply want a looser system of campaign finance; in many ways, Congress *requires* it.

Although Republicans seem to be the public face of policies like removing campaign fundraising and spending limits, Democrats are often just as comfortable and equally complicit in the practice. Why? Because Democrats and Republicans depend on the same practices. Democrats have voted for legislation that removes contribution caps. While in power, Democrats were unable to pass legislation that had any real impact on the campaign finance or campaign disclosure processes. It is true some of loudest voices opposing the current system are Democrats; however, there are too few of them to matter. And in an age where SuperPAC and

<sup>25</sup> Montopoli, B. “Poll: Most Want Limits on Campaign Spending”. *CBSNews*. 18 January 2012. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Little, M. “Poll: Americans Largely in Favor of Campaign Spending Limitation”. *Los Angeles Times*. 16 September 2012. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Edwards-Levy, A. “Most Americans Support Giving Congress More Power to Limit Campaign Spending”. *The Huffington Post*. 13 November 2014. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Mann, T. and A. Corrado. “Polarization and Campaign Finance”. *The Brookings Institution*. July 2014. Web. 22 April 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Herrera, H. D. K. Levine; and C. Martinelli. “Policy Platforms, Campaign Spending, and Voter Participation.” *The Journal of Public Economics* 92 (2008): 501-513. Print.