

Are US elections too expensive?

Elections in the United States of America have always been an expensive practice, and although they are continually getting more expensive, they are not too expensive. The question regarding the vast amounts of money spent during election campaigns is one which is strongly debated, and has been for many years, but none of the 'solutions' have been successful to date, and the spending on elections ever increases.

In the United States of America, there is an election campaign happening somewhere all of the time, therefore the spending on elections is non stop, and with the cost of American elections getting more and more each term, there is no doubt that the cost of elections is ridiculously high. For example, the 2004 presidential election campaigns for both Bush and Kerry exceeded party records, with Bush raising over \$365 million and Kerry raising just over \$320 million and the total cost of the elections in 2004 totalling over \$3.9 billion, compared to the \$3 billion spent in 2000. And the 2008 election is heading to break these records.

The 2006 mid term elections also reached all time highs, the total cost of the mid term elections topped up to a total of \$2.7 billion . One of the biggest problems in the cost of elections was the availability of soft money, soft money was money that was obtained by a candidate through an illegal means, the problem of soft money is still present today, but it has been made more difficult. The 1970's tried to solve the problem of soft money with the introduction of the Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) in 1971, which was amended in 1974 to put legal limits on the maximum amount that an individual could donate to a candidate. It was amended for a second time in 1976 in response to the ruling that the provisions were unconstitutional by the case of Buckley v. Valeo. Then amended for a third time in 1979 to allow the unlimited spending of hard money, by parties on activities like increasing voter turnout and registration. The McCain Feingold bill in 2002 effectively banned the use of soft money, and imposed new rules on the use of "issue ads", advertisements sponsored by groups boosting the campaign of an individual candidate by supporting the same ideas and beliefs of said candidate.

These restrictions on the funding of election campaigns made it more difficult to introduce soft money, but loopholes still existed in the rules. The setting up of Political Action Committees (PAC's) by large businesses like General Motors allowed them to donate large sums of money without breaking any of the rules, PAC's are effectively small businesses set up by a larger business to fund election campaigns for them, giving the large business a lot of influence over the campaign, but these committees were still subject to limitations.

Therefore 527 groups were created, these are basically like charity groups, they are not subject to taxing and therefore are not limited in their spending on elections, but because they are not regulated by the FEC, they cannot make expenditures to directly advocate the election of any candidate, but there are no limitations on the contributions that the 527 groups can accept, nor on the sources of these contributions.

Money has been and probably will always be one of the most important things when campaigning, and it seems that the candidate(s) with the most financial backing comes through to win the election. The constant competition to raise the most money and to have the strongest campaign will keep pushing the cost of elections up and up,

making the cost of elections rocket, and are beginning to increase to levels at which they are deemed too expensive by some.

It is very difficult to account for where all of the money is being contributed from because of the huge amounts that are being dealt with, which could put further reason to the elections becoming too expensive, these are accompanied by the varied rules of the McCain Feingold bill in 2002, which in practice, does not stop all of the soft money used in elections from being spent. This added to the numerous elections that are happening in the United States of America at any one time, make accounting for the soft money used in elections near on impossible.

The influence of money in election campaigns is made more evident by the huge incumbency rate within Congress, for example, in the 2004 senate elections, 31 Senate incumbents had raised over \$170 million, whilst 59 challengers only managed to raise \$31 million, and with average incumbency rates higher than 80% in Congressional elections, the money involved in these elections can only increase. Because of the high cost of elections, only a few candidates are able to raise enough money to reach the levels needed to campaign on a grand enough scale, for example, in the 2004 congressional elections, just one senator managed to raise over \$27 million, this is way out of reach for some of the other competitors.

The problem of the section 527 committees is a large contributor to the overspending in American elections, because of their strange legal position on taxation. Because 527 groups are not registered with the FEC they are not permitted to donate any money directly to any candidates or parties, but there are no regulations on 527 groups as to a limit on the magnitude of the money contributed by any individual to a 527 group, nor as to where that money is funded from. In the 2006 mid term elections, one donator gave \$10 million to a 527 group who supported the causes of the Republican Party.

Any group or organisation funding large amounts of money towards an election campaign are not predominantly just being generous, most who contribute large amounts of cash to support a candidate or party will want something in return, and with many companies all wanting a return for the money they have donated, a corrupt President/Congress/Governor/etc is produced, and the large amounts put into the campaign by large organisations only contributes to the overspending in elections.

Election costs in America are not too expensive, money needs to be spent on elections because of the sheer size and mixed population in the United States of America, and especially in presidential election campaigns, candidates will have to raise a lot of money for travelling around the country to each state, placing ad campaigns in national newspapers and on the television, and hundreds of other costs. It would not be democratic if there was not a lot of money spent on the elections.

Spending on campaigning is very important in the election process and keeping it democratic, having large amounts of money spent on elections allows lesser known candidates to build up their reputation to level the playing field with the other candidates who are known before the campaign, for example, Bill Clinton in the 1992 election, was relatively unknown, and through heavy fund raising managed to defeat his Democrat opponents in the primary elections, and then go on to win the Presidency over George Bush.

The election spending cannot purely be blamed on the candidates and parties; the majority of the money spent comes from interest groups etc, who play a very important part in the campaigning and communication between the candidates and their potential voting supporters. 527 committees show their support of an issue

addressed by the candidate whom they support by paying out for television adverts and billboards and other advertisements that show their support for the cause. These committees cannot directly donate money towards election campaigns, but by putting a “We want to lift the ban on stem cell research to cure devastating diseases.” billboard up in the middle of New York would show their support for Hillary Clinton.