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Summary

Many people are concerned by the amount of money spent on political campaigns. This has led to numerous campaign finance reform laws. Because they are based on incorrect assumptions, these reforms haven't accomplished their goals. Portland's politicians should stay away from such laws and instead focus on the real problem: the size of government.

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Campaign Finance Reform Won't Reform

by *Tim Keller*

In mid-August, Portland's City Council will consider a plan for campaign finance reform. The proposed system would allow candidates to receive taxpayer dollars for their campaign. In return, those using public money would agree not to use more than a set amount of private dollars. Proponents claim this will eliminate the influence of money in politics.

The key assumption of such reformers is that money buys elections and the votes of legislators. However, this is far from the truth. While there is a strong correlation between campaign spending and victory, there is no reason to believe that spending large sums of money buys votes.

Michael Malbin of the Rockefeller Institute of Government explains, “Having money means having the ability to be heard; it does not mean that voters will like what they hear.” Money can buy access to voters and officials, but it cannot ensure that they will do what donors want.

Instead of leveling the playing field, spending limitations unfairly benefit incumbents and lead to political stagnancy. Numerous studies have shown that challengers benefit more than incumbents from each additional dollar they spend. Current officials have a major advantage because they are typically better known. Challengers must spend more in order to build the recognition that incumbents already have. So, money serves to equalize candidates and increase competitiveness.

Because reform efforts are based on faulty premises, it is no surprise that they do not work. Arizona's 1998 reform is often cited as a model for other communities to follow. The results are in and they are undeniable: Competitiveness has not increased, campaign spending is up and voting patterns have remained the same.

The Goldwater Institute examined the effects of Arizona's law. The study showed that there is no significant difference in the way publicly and privately

funded legislators vote. According to the author, Robert J. Franciosi, the law “had no great impact after its first election cycle.”

Even if reform laws did work, there are still strong reasons to oppose such laws. The most important reason campaign reform should be opposed is because it violates the First Amendment. Because candidates would be publicly funded, taxpayers would be forced to support candidates they do not agree with.

When the Founding Fathers declared that government shall “make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech,” they were especially concerned with political speech. In his *Bill for Religious Freedom*, Thomas Jefferson sums up this concern by stating, “To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical.” Clearly, campaign reform laws infringe upon our freedoms.

These laws are inefficient because they only treat symptoms. The real problem is not money in politics; the problem is that the government has too much power. Why is so much money spent on political races? The answer is easy: The government doles out favors. Between corporate welfare and protection of unions, those in government reward their friends at the expense of taxpayers. The treatment for this condition is to reduce the size and scope of what government officials can do. If officials don’t have the power to give handouts, campaign spending will fall.

Arizona’s experience indicates that campaign reform laws don’t work—and that’s a good thing. This evidence should lead rational people to reject these reforms. If anything, such reforms have the opposite effect than the intent. They further entrench the political system and reduce accountability to voters. More importantly, many reform laws currently in place violate constitutional rights. Portland’s leaders should carefully examine the consequences of campaign finance reform before bringing it to Oregon.

Tim Keller is a research intern at Cascade Policy Institute, a Portland, Oregon think tank.

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Please contact:

Nicole Williams
Director of Publications
Cascade Policy Institute
813 SW Alder Street, Suite 450
Portland, Oregon 97205

Phone: (503) 242-0900
Fax: (503) 242-3822

www.cascadepolicy.org
nicole@cascadepolicy.org