

Most See Campaign Finance Abuses, but Demand for Action Is Low

Campaign finance reform has broad support but not broad urgency: It continues to rank very low in public priorities, despite a widespread belief that abuse underlies the current system.

Three-quarters of Americans support stricter campaign finance laws, up a bit from two-thirds a year ago. Much of the increase is among Republicans, possibly reflecting George W. Bush's recent support of some type of reform, as well as John McCain's more longstanding efforts.

One reason for reform's popularity is the level of perceived abuse. Nearly all Americans, 93 percent, think politicians do special favors for their campaign contributors; 80 percent think it happens "often."

And the public isn't happy about it. Eight in 10 call it a problem; 62 percent a "big" problem. More than two-thirds think special favors for contributors tend to be unethical, although fewer, 42 percent, think they tend to be illegal.

| | Special favors for political contributors |
|-----------|--|
| A problem | 81% |
| Unethical | 68 |
| Illegal | 42 |

All the same, many people doubt that new campaign finance laws would solve the problem: Just a quarter of Americans are convinced that stricter laws would do a lot to reduce the influence of money in politics. Those people give it a high priority – but there just aren't that many of them.

Moreover, a significant minority, 42 percent, think stronger enforcement of current laws is the better approach. Given this option, 54 percent prefer new, stricter laws – considerably fewer than the three-quarters who support the concept more generally.

LOW PRIORITY – These doubts help explain why campaign finance reform consistently rates so low on the public's agenda. In this poll only 18 percent say it should be the "highest priority" item for Bush and the Congress, ranking it last out of six issues tested, far below heavy-hitters such as education, the economy and Social Security.

| | Highest priority for Bush and Congress |
|----------------------------|---|
| Improving education | 53% |
| Keeping the economy strong | 47 |
| Protecting Social Security | 42 |

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Cutting taxes | 29 |
| Environmental protection | 27 |
| Campaign finance reform | 18 |

The ranking of campaign finance reform hasn't budged, regardless of the Senate debate of the McCain-Feingold reforms that began last week. In January campaign finance reform ranked 16th out of 18 issues tested for public priority. Last fall it was 16th of 16. Even in the New Hampshire Republican primary, which lifted John McCain to stardom, just nine percent of voters cited campaign finance reform as the most important issue in their vote, placing it fifth out of seven issues tested. And it did no better on the Democratic side.

BY PARTY – Large majorities of Democrats, independents, and Republicans alike think politicians often do special favors for their campaign contributors, and support stricter campaign finance laws in principle. But the parties diverge in their assessment of the extent of the problem and, as a result, the level of priority they assign to it.

Republicans are less likely than Democrats and independents to call politicians' favors a "big" problem or to think these favors are unethical or illegal. Not surprisingly, Republicans also are less likely to give the issue a high priority.

Republicans also have more faith in laws that are already on the books. Most Democrats and independents favor passing stricter laws, while Republicans are evenly split between passing stricter laws and enforcing existing ones.

| | All | Dems. | Inds. | Reps. |
|--|-----|-------|-------|-------|
| Politicians "often" do special favors for contributors | 80% | 83 | 80 | 78 |
| Support stricter laws | 74 | 73 | 73 | 74 |
| Favors are unethical | 68 | 75 | 68 | 63 |
| Favors are a big problem | 62 | 67 | 67 | 52 |
| Favors are illegal | 42 | 46 | 46 | 33 |
| Campaign finance reform highest/high priority | 45 | 47 | 50 | 38 |
| Prefer: | | | | |
| Passing stricter laws | 54 | 59 | 55 | 48 |
| Enforcement of existing laws | 42 | 36 | 42 | 49 |

METHODOLOGY - This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone March 22-25, 2001, among a random national sample of 903 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Fieldwork by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Daniel Merkle.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet, at:
<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/PollVault/PollVault.html>

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Here are the full results:

*= less than 0.5 percent

3. We'd like to know what kind of priority you want to see George W. Bush and the Congress give to some issues. For each one, please tell me if it should receive the highest priority, a high priority but not the highest, a middle priority, or a lower priority.

3/25/01

Summary Table:

| | -----High----- | | | | | (Vol.) | No op. |
|---|----------------|---------|------|------|-------|--------|--------|
| | NET | Highest | High | Mid. | Lower | | |
| a. Keeping the economy strong | 89 | 47 | 42 | 9 | 2 | * | 0 |
| b. Protecting the Social Security system | 83 | 42 | 42 | 13 | 3 | 0 | * |
| c. Improving education and the schools | 89 | 53 | 35 | 8 | 3 | 1 | * |
| d. Protecting the environment | 69 | 27 | 42 | 25 | 5 | 0 | 1 |
| e. Reforming election campaign finance laws | 45 | 18 | 26 | 33 | 20 | 1 | 2 |
| f. Cutting taxes | 63 | 29 | 34 | 23 | 12 | 0 | 1 |

Trend:

a. Keeping the economy strong

| | -----High----- | | | | | (Vol.) | No op. |
|---------|----------------|---------|------|--------|-------|--------|--------|
| | NET | Highest | High | Middle | Lower | | |
| 3/25/01 | 89 | 47 | 42 | 9 | 2 | * | 0 |
| 1/15/01 | 95 | 47 | 48 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 0 |

b. Protecting the Social Security system

| | -----High----- | | | | | (Vol.) | No op. |
|---------|----------------|---------|------|--------|-------|--------|--------|
| | NET | Highest | High | Middle | Lower | | |
| 3/25/01 | 83 | 42 | 42 | 13 | 3 | 0 | * |
| 1/15/01 | 88 | 46 | 42 | 10 | 3 | 0 | * |

c. Improving education and the schools

| | -----High----- | | | | | (Vol.) | No op. |
|---------|----------------|---------|------|--------|-------|--------|--------|
| | NET | Highest | High | Middle | Lower | | |
| 3/25/01 | 89 | 53 | 35 | 8 | 3 | 1 | * |
| 1/15/01 | 91 | 49 | 42 | 5 | 2 | 1 | 0 |

d. Protecting the environment

| | -----High----- | | | | | (Vol.) | No op. |
|---------|----------------|---------|------|--------|-------|--------|--------|
| | NET | Highest | High | Middle | Lower | | |
| 3/25/01 | 69 | 27 | 42 | 25 | 5 | 0 | 1 |
| 1/15/01 | 71 | 27 | 45 | 21 | 6 | * | 2 |

e. Reforming election campaign finance laws

| | -----High----- | | | | | (Vol.) | No op. |
|---------|----------------|---------|------|--------|-------|--------|--------|
| | NET | Highest | High | Middle | Lower | | |
| 3/25/01 | 45 | 18 | 26 | 33 | 20 | 1 | 2 |
| 1/15/01 | 54 | 20 | 34 | 29 | 15 | 1 | 1 |

f. Cutting taxes

| | -----High----- | | | | | (Vol.) | No op. |
|--|----------------|--|--|--|--|--------|--------|
|--|----------------|--|--|--|--|--------|--------|

| | NET | Highest | High | Middle | Lower | None | op. |
|---------|-----|---------|------|--------|-------|------|-----|
| 3/25/01 | 63 | 29 | 34 | 23 | 12 | 0 | 1 |
| 1/15/01 | 65 | 26 | 39 | 24 | 9 | 1 | 2 |

19. On another subject, do you support or oppose stricter laws controlling the way political campaigns can raise and spend money?

| | Support | Oppose | No opin. |
|---------|---------|--------|----------|
| 3/25/01 | 74 | 23 | 3 |
| 4/2/00 | 66 | 28 | 7 |

20 and 21. Do you think stricter campaign finance laws would reduce the influence of money in politics, or not? (If yes: Would it reduce it a lot or just somewhat?)

| | -----Reduce----- | | | Not | No |
|---------|------------------|-------|----------|--------|---------|
| | NET | A lot | Somewhat | reduce | opinion |
| 3/25/01 | 66 | 25 | 39 | 31 | 3 |
| 4/2/00 | 63 | 25 | 38 | 33 | 4 |

22 and 23. Do you think politicians do special favors for people and groups who give them campaign contributions, or not? (If yes: Do you think that happens often or only sometimes?)

| | -----Happens----- | | | Does | No |
|---------|-------------------|-------|-----------|------------|----------|
| | NET | Often | Sometimes | not happen | opinion. |
| 3/25/01 | 93 | 80 | 13 | 6 | 1 |

24 and 25. (If happens) Do you think this is a problem or not a problem? (If problem: Would you call it a big problem or not?)

| | -----Problem----- | | | Not a | No |
|---------|-------------------|-----|---------|---------|---------|
| | NET | Big | Not big | problem | opinion |
| 3/25/01 | 88 | 67 | 20 | 11 | 1 |

Net Table:

| | -----Problem----- | | | Not a | It doesn't | No |
|---------|-------------------|-----|---------|---------|------------|---------|
| | NET | Big | Not big | problem | happen | opinion |
| 3/25/01 | 81 | 62 | 19 | 10 | 6 | 3 |

26. (If happens) When politicians do special favors for contributors, do you think those favors tend to be ethical or unethical?

| | Ethical | Unethical | No opin. |
|---------|---------|-----------|----------|
| 3/25/01 | 20 | 74 | 6 |

Net Table:

| | Ethical | Unethical | It doesn't | No |
|---------|---------|-----------|------------|----------|
| | | | happen | opinion. |
| 3/25/01 | 19 | 68 | 6 | 7 |

27. (If happens) Do you think those favors tend to be legal or illegal?

| | Legal | Illegal | No opin. |
|---------|-------|---------|----------|
| 3/25/01 | 48 | 46 | 7 |

Net Table:

| | Legal | Illegal | It doesn't | No |
|---------|-------|---------|------------|----------|
| | | | happen | opinion. |
| 3/25/01 | 44 | 42 | 6 | 8 |

28. What do you think is the best way to reduce improper campaign fundraising: passing stricter campaign finance laws, or the enforcement of existing laws?

| | Stricter laws | Enforcement | Both | Neither | No opin |
|---------|---------------|-------------|------|---------|---------|
| 3/25/01 | 54 | 42 | NA | NA | 4 |
| 4/2/00 | 49 | 40 | 4 | 2 | 5 |

END