

Campaign Finance Reform: The Issue that Won't Catch Fire

It's the issue that isn't: While campaign finance reform has commanded vast quantities of sound bites and printers' ink this election year, it still just doesn't rate as a public priority.

It's not unpopular. Two-thirds of Americans favor campaign finance reform, and most think it would do at least some good to reduce the influence of money in politics, according to a new national survey by ABC News and the Washington Post.

But that doesn't make it important to them. Only a third of Americans say the issue is "very important" in their vote for president, ranking it dead last in a list of 15 issues. That's right where it's been since last September, despite all the attention it's received.

One reason: It just doesn't hit home. The top voting issues directly affect people's daily lives: education, Social Security, crime, patients' rights and the economy. Lower priority issues – like campaign finance, foreign affairs and the death penalty – are a step or more removed from everyday concerns.

WOULD IT WORK? – There also are significant questions in the public's mind about how well campaign finance reform would work, and whether it's truly needed.

On the former, just a quarter of Americans believe campaign finance reform would do "a lot" to reduce the influence of money in politics. Another 38 percent think it would work, but just "somewhat."

There's also no majority consensus on whether new laws actually are needed. Forty-nine percent say new, stricter laws are the best way to reduce improper campaign fundraising. But 40 percent think stronger enforcement of current laws is the answer.

POLITICAL ADVANTAGE – It's a close call as to which presidential candidate has the political advantage on campaign finance reform. Forty-four percent trust George W. Bush to handle it, and slightly fewer, 39 percent, trust Al Gore.

Bush has gained 10 points in public trust on this issue since March, part of his overall improvement on issues as he's put the bruising primary campaign behind him. Gore's support for finance reform echoes the popular view, but he's failed to capitalize on the issue, perhaps because of his own fundraising missteps.

| | | |
|---------|--|------|
| | Public trust to handle campaign finance reform: | |
| | Gore | Bush |
| 4/2/00 | 39% | 44 |
| 3/11/00 | 39 | 34 |

The issue was back in the news today, in another race: The watchdog group Common Cause filed a complaint charging that the political parties had established illegal “soft money” accounts to benefit New York Senate candidates Hillary Clinton and Rudolph Giuliani.

BY PARTY – Majorities of Democrats, independents, and Republicans alike support stricter campaign finance laws. But only about a quarter of Republicans say it’s very important, compared to 40 percent of Democrats and 35 percent of independents.

When it comes to the best solution to the problem, most Republicans prefer enforcing existing laws, while most Democrats and independents favor passing stricter laws. Two reasons: Republicans are less likely to think stricter laws will work, and more likely to oppose increased government regulation in general.

| | | | | |
|--|-----|-------|-------|-------|
| | All | Dems. | Inds. | Reps. |
| Support stricter laws | 66% | 67 | 70 | 63 |
| Campaign finance reform "very important" | 34 | 40 | 35 | 27 |
| Prefer: | | | | |
| Passing stricter laws | 49 | 55 | 55 | 39 |
| Enforcement of existing laws | 40 | 35 | 35 | 50 |
| Stricter laws reduce influence of money | 63 | 66 | 70 | 56 |

METHODOLOGY - This ABC News/Washington Post poll was conducted by telephone March 30-April 2, 2000, among a random national sample of 1,083 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Field work by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:

<http://www.abcnews.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

Here are the full results:

4. How important will (READ ITEM) be to you in deciding how to vote in the 2000 presidential election in November - very important, somewhat important, not too important or not important at all?

B. Reforming election campaign finance laws

| | | | | | |
|----------|-----------------|----------|----------------------|------------|-------|
| | ---Important--- | | ----Not important--- | | No |
| | Very | Somewhat | Not too | Not at all | opin. |
| 4/2/00 | 34 | 36 | 16 | 11 | 3 |
| 10/31/99 | 40 | 38 | 14 | 5 | 3 |
| 9/2/99 | 30 | 40 | 17 | 11 | 1 |

5. Which presidential candidate, (Gore) or (Bush), do you trust to do a better job on each of those issues? First is (INSERT ITEM)

B. Reforming election campaign finance laws

| | Gore | Bush | Both (vol.) | Neither (vol.) | No opin. |
|----------|------|------|----------------|-------------------|-------------|
| 4/2/00 | 39 | 44 | 2 | 8 | 8 |
| 3/11/00 | 39 | 34 | 3 | 17 | 8 |
| 10/31/99 | 38 | 44 | 2 | 9 | 7 |

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

| | Support | Oppose | No opin. |
|--------|---------|--------|----------|
| 4/2/00 | 66 | 28 | 7 |

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?)

| | NET | -----Reduce----- A lot | Somewhat | Not reduce | No opinion |
|--------|-----|---------------------------|----------|---------------|---------------|
| 4/2/00 | 63 | 25 | 38 | 33 | 4 |

22. 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 |
|--------|---------------|-------------|------|---------|---------|
| 4/2/00 | 49 | 40 | 4 | 2 | 5 |

END