

Voters are not blindly cynical about money in politics

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Recent years have seen growing concern over the role of money in politics, with many Americans seemingly believing that campaign money represents *quid pro quo* corruption. But in new research which uses survey experiments, [Todd Donovan](#) finds that people think about campaign money is based on both its source and the amount; Democrats and Republicans see donations to their own party as honest, and to the other, as dishonest. They also found that when money is seen to be spent on negative campaign ads, respondents were more likely to view it as corrupt compared to spending on ads in general.



The US has weak regulations on campaign spending, and a public highly cynical about money in politics. Campaign finance regulations were eroded in the past decade by the [Citizens United](#) decision and [other rulings](#) that weakened some disclosure requirements and allowed unlimited independent expenditures directly from union and corporate funds.

In [recent research](#), [Shaun Bowler](#) and I use survey experiments to examine how Americans look at about campaign money in the post *Citizens United* context. We tested how and when people view legal campaign money as having either an honest or corrupting influence on Congress. We find people think about campaign money based on the source, and the amount. We show further that Democrats and Republicans have substantially different views on whether campaign money is honest or corrupt. Our results also suggest perceptions of corruption associated with campaign money may lie, in part, with people being fed up with spending on negative TV ads.

Americans were deeply cynical about money in politics before the era of ‘dark money’ and Super PACs. Polls from 2002 showed a near consensus on the idea that contributions to parties, candidates, and independent expenditures on behalf of candidates, earned donors special considerations by Members of Congress. By [some measures](#) over 80 per cent of Americans believe that campaign money represents *quid pro quo* corruption. We also know opinions about campaign finance are based on [low understanding](#) about what is legal.

How then, do people reason when given information about contributions and expenditures? We study this by manipulating information about sources of funds, the amount contributed, and what the money was spent on. We also tested the effect of providing information about how much political advertising actually costs in the US.

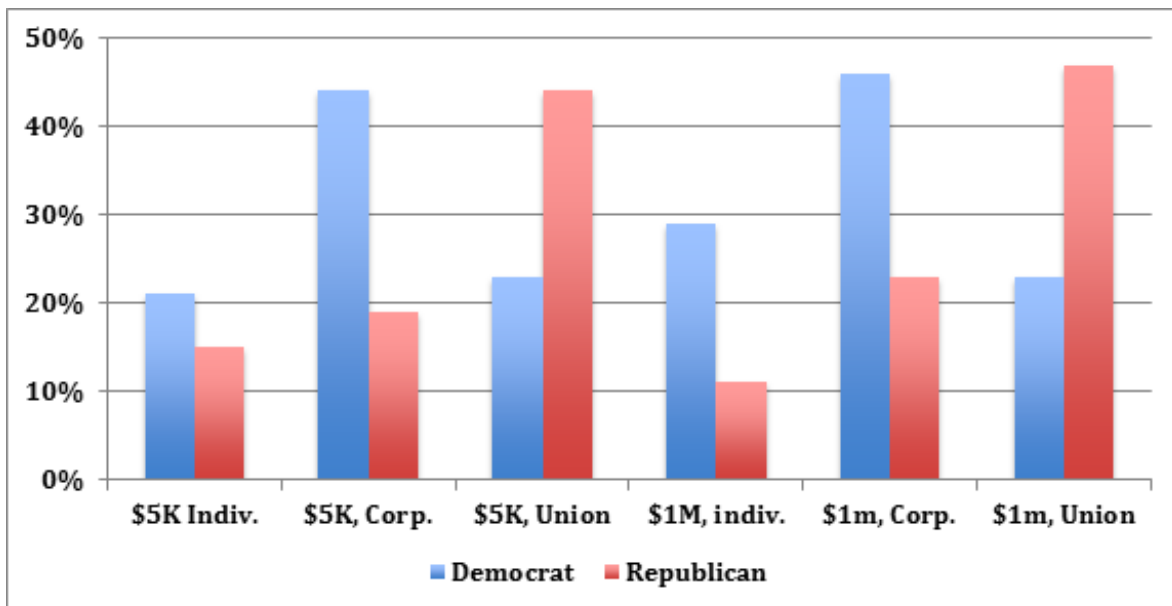
Reasoning about sources of funds

Prior to *Citizens United*, the [Supreme Court reasoned](#) that, given the capacity of unions and corporations to amass cash, these actors could be subject to regulations that might not apply to individuals.

One of our experiments found Americans also differentiated between the perceived corrupting influence of money in a manner similar to the pre-*Citizens United* Court. A bare majority of respondents in a 2012 [Cooperative Congressional Election Study](#) experiment thought a direct, \$5000 contribution from an individual to candidate was ‘somewhat corrupt’ or ‘corrupt.’ Two-thirds thought the same of \$5000 from a corporation or a union. We find the same pattern when asking about a \$1 million independent expenditure from these groups, regardless of a person’s party affiliation.

Beyond these perceptions, there was also a major partisan effect. Figure 1 illustrates that Republicans viewed union money (that generally benefits Democrats) as corrupt, whereas Democrats saw corporate money (that tends to go to Republicans) as corrupt.

Figure 1 – Probability of \$5K to candidate or \$1m independent expenditure seen as corrupt



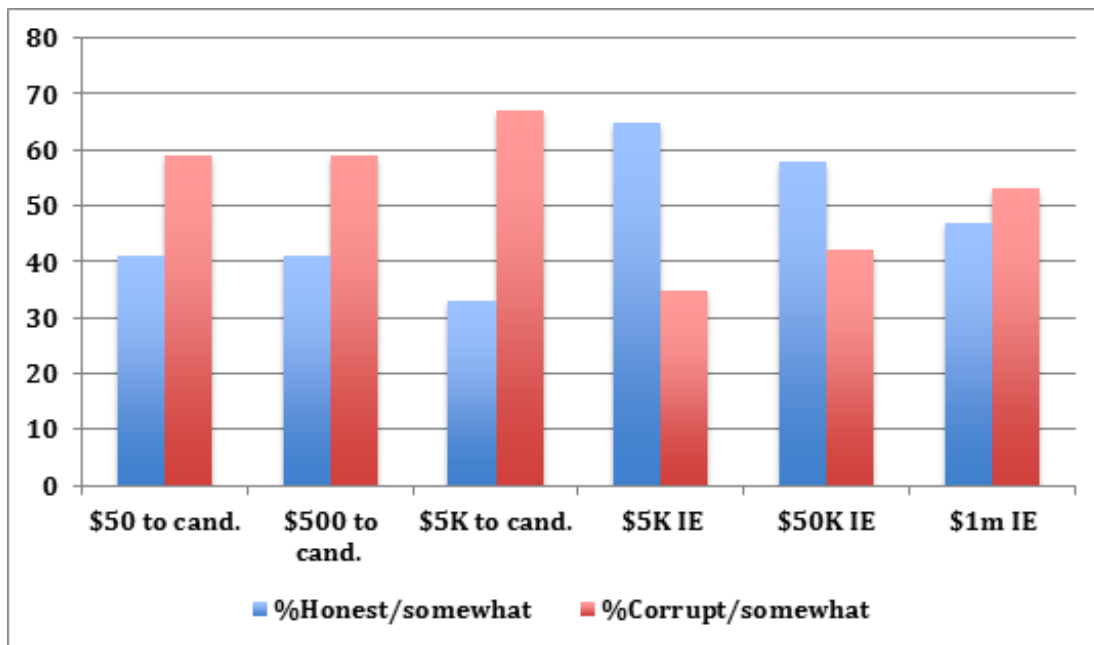
The amounts of money

One might expect that people would view small, \$50 contributions as less corrupt than a \$5000 contribution (the legal maximum in congressional races at the time). An experiment asking about money from a generic ‘someone’ found otherwise. Majorities in an [Mechanical Turk \(MTurk\) sample](#) found a \$50, \$500, or \$5000 a *direct contribution to a candidate to fund the candidate’s TV ads* as ‘somewhat corrupt’ or ‘corrupt,’ regardless of the amount they were informed about.

This result may reflect our attempt at keeping the amounts under the \$5000 limit to present a legal scenario. A different MTurk experiment increased the amount, and asked about ‘someone’ spending \$5000, \$50,000 or \$1,000,000 *on independent TV ads that benefited a candidate*. This allowed varying information about far larger amounts of money, but it required we asked about independent spending in order to describe something legal.

Figure 2 shows that under this ‘independent spending’ scenario, 52 percent of respondents said \$1,000,000 was corrupt or somewhat corrupt, whereas only one-third viewed \$5000 in those terms. It is noteworthy that these experiments suggest that, while a narrow majority of MTurk respondents found \$1 million spent on independent TV ads as corrupting, the previous experiment found that even respondents viewed a direct \$50 contribution as corrupting.

Figure 2 – Perceptions of campaign money, by amount



Another view: Are people sick of negative ads?

Surveys finding high levels of cynicism about political money are conducted in a vacuum of information. Our experiments demonstrate this cynicism is moderated by information about the sources and amounts of money, and conditioned by partisan self-interest.

Scenarios in all the experiments presented above informed people money was spent on “TV ads” that “criticized” a candidate. This being constant, we are confident our experiments establish that attitudes about campaign money respond to the information we provided. That said, the constant description of money being used on ‘critical’ TV ads may inflate levels of cynicism we measure. A disproportionate amount of campaign money in the US is spent on negative TV ads.

TV ads vs. Negative TV ads

This raises questions about whether survey questions about political money capture attitudes about money corrupting politicians, or also reflect frustration about what the money is spent on. Do high levels of cynicism simply reflect concern about *quid pro quo* corruption, or might they also reflect a public that is frustrated with being on the receiving end of billions of dollars in spending on negative TV ads?

Another Mturk experiment held constant the source (‘someone’ giving money to a candidate) and amount of money (\$5000), but randomly assigned different information about whether the money was spent on ‘campaign ads’, ‘TV ads’ or ‘negative TV ads.’ The effects were striking. Under this scenario, only 19 percent said money to ‘pay for ads’ was ‘somewhat corrupt’ or ‘corrupt,’ and just 25 percent said money ‘for TV ads’ was. But when respondents were told the money was to ‘pay for negative TV ads’, 73 percent viewed it as somewhat corrupt or corrupt.

The need to spend and costs

Our final experiments kept the source and amount of money constant, said nothing about the tone of ads, but informed subjects that ‘candidates needed to tell people what they stand for.’ Respondents were then randomly assigned information about how much TV and mail ads really cost. Again, we see what might be a bias against TV ads that is linked to perceptions that campaign money is corrupt. One experiment found respondents were more likely to agree that candidates needed to raise money when told about the cost of mailing, but not when told about (an equal) cost of TV ads. A second experiment prompting people about (equal) costs of mail versus TV

demonstrated that information about the cost of mail reduced perceptions of corruption, but information about the cost of TV ads did not.

More research to be done

Surveys find overwhelming cynicism about campaign finance in the US, but we find these attitudes are not unmovable. People make distinctions about who the money is from, and how much is spent, and partisans tend to see their party's sources of money as honest. This suggests that a measure of reasoning that is not simply blind cynicism.

People don't just experience campaign finance via tales of donors receiving special treatment. They also experience campaign money first hand when they are targeted with negative ads, ads that many people may find highly distasteful.

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