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HEADLINE: STUDY SHOWS CAMPAIGN SPENDING IS A SILVER LINING IN  
THE FUND-RAISING CLOUD

BYLINE: John J. Coleman and Paul F. Manna

BODY:

Advocates of campaign finance reform were dealt yet another defeat in Washington this month. Despite the efforts of Wisconsin Sen. Russ Feingold and Arizona Sen. John McCain, a filibuster ended the most recent round of Senate debate on the issue, moving Majority Leader Trent Lott to declare campaign finance ''dead for the year.''

Adding insult to injury, a Gallup poll released last week showed that the public favors campaign finance reform but does not want Congress to make it a high priority.

Criticisms of the current system are well known. Forced to engage in a perpetual money chase, members of Congress devote inordinate energy and time wooing potential donors. Contributors to candidate war chests, who tend to be better off and better organized than the average citizen, get both the ear and the helping hand of legislators.

If campaign fund raising is bad, the story goes, campaign spending may be even worse. Money deters quality challengers and is deployed in cynical, negative and misleading campaign advertisements. The results? A public that is distrustful, cynical, confused and discouraged from participating in the political process.

Despite their political appeal, our research suggests that these criticisms about spending miss the mark. Campaign spending is more a democratic boon than democratic bane.

We analyzed public opinion and campaign spending in congressional districts with incumbent candidates for the 1994 and 1996 U.S. House elections. To make sure we were detecting the influence of money, we accounted for other factors that might affect knowledge, trust and involvement.

Our results were encouraging. We found that campaign spending increases public awareness of the candidates and boosts the public's ability to identify candidate issue positions and ideology. As spending increases, citizens become more confident in these judgments. These effects are particularly strong for challengers.

For incumbents, campaign spending produces an additional benefit by improving the accuracy of citizen perceptions of the incumbent's overall record. Most incumbents spend money not to fool the voters but to set the record straight.

Surprisingly, campaign spending did not adversely affect public attitudes toward the political system. Whether low, high or somewhere in between, the level of spending in a district did not systematically increase or decrease public trust in the political system or attention and interest in campaigns.

The upshot of our research is that campaign spending improves the quality of elections while not damaging public trust or involvement. If campaign fund raising is a cloud on democracy, campaign spending is the silver lining.

These results complicate the reform of campaign finance. If we cut down on money going into campaigns, we may sacrifice some of the knowledge and awareness that spending creates while not doing much to improve trust and involvement.

Limited public financing, as Wisconsin provides for state legislative races, makes good democratic sense. Would a system that provides a baseline for every congressional candidate to run a credible campaign lead to the defeat of many incumbents? Probably not. Incumbents are, on average, exceptionally skilled, and they would still have financial advantages in most races.

The democratic yardstick should not be whether challengers win or lose, but whether potential voters have a reasonable chance to learn something about their options. Our concern is more with elections as an important forum for democracy than about the job prospects of any particular candidate.

No doubt, the next round of campaign finance debate is not far off. We encourage a careful discussion that is sensitive to both the potential advantages and disadvantages created by reform. Critics should not throw out the campaign spending baby with the campaign fund raising bath water.

NOTES:

Coleman is an associate professor of political science at UW-Madison, where Manna is a doctoral candidate in the department of political science.

GRAPHIC: John Coleman Paul Manna

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