

How to Talk About Campaign Finance Reform

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Voter Perception

Vitriol towards money in politics appears to be more intense now than at any time in recent memory. The vast majority of Americans (84%) say that money is too influential in political campaigns.¹ This sentiment is shared across the political spectrum, with 90% of Democrats, 80% of Republicans, and 84% of Independents agreeing. In our own public opinion research, voters told us that they were as worried about special interests having too much power in our political system as they were about a terrorist attack on American soil—the two things which topped their list of anxieties.²

Concern over money in politics isn't just an abstract fear that voters have, it's something they feel affects their everyday lives. When we asked voters which policies would benefit them the most personally, "getting money out of politics" ranked second, light years ahead of raising the minimum wage, making community college free, or breaking up Wall Street banks.³ Voters think our system of campaign finance creates a situation in which politicians are living in a bubble, attentive to the needs of the rich without understanding what the middle class thinks, experiences, or needs. Two-thirds of voters believe that the wealthy have a greater chance of influencing elections than non-wealthy Americans, and 55% say politicians promote policies that favor their campaign donors most of the time.⁴ In short, most voters no longer feel represented by their representatives in government.

Voters also believe that money in politics is a source of partisanship, polarization, and gridlock. Considering that all three of those have risen at the same time that spending on elections has exploded, who can blame them? It's important to note that voters largely blame Congress for the problem, because in voters' minds, Members of Congress are the ones

who make the rules and create and perpetuate the system. In fact, when we asked voters who was stacking the deck against people like them, more pointed to “politicians” than “rich people.”⁵ One voter in our public opinion research echoed the sentiments of many when she posited that to reduce gridlock we must “change campaign financing so that politicians aren't rewarded for focusing on raising money for the next election cycle.”

How to Appeal on Money in Politics

It's clear that voters want to see action. Three-quarters think we should change the rules to get money out of politics, with 59% strongly in favor.⁶ Nearly half of voters think our system for funding political campaigns needs to be completely rebuilt, while another 39% say fundamental changes are necessary.⁷ With that in mind, criticizing *Citizens United* is fine, but it is not nearly enough to respond to voter concerns on this issue. Most Americans don't believe that passing a constitutional amendment is a realistic solution. Instead, focus on things that can be accomplished now, including legislation that Congress has the authority to pass today.

It's important to note that repeatedly declaring how badly the system is rigged or how corruption is pervasive is likely counter-productive. Reform at the federal level can only happen if Members of Congress take action, and those messages imply that nothing can be done due to the special interests' stranglehold on Washington. Americans are already acutely aware of the problem, and reinforcing how bad things are can make them feel it is futile to try and fix it. Currently, only 39% of voters are optimistic that changes will be made to improve campaign finance, while 58% are pessimistic.⁸ So instead of bemoaning the problem, talk about how the system is out of balance and needs to be readjusted. Focus on solutions and try to instill a sense of hope. One good way to do this is to point to the successful reform efforts that are happening all across the country. Voters in Seattle,

Washington, overwhelmingly passed an initiative in 2015 that establishes a program where the city gives every citizen four \$25 “democracy vouchers” that can be donated to candidates.⁹ In Maine, an initiative to strengthen the state’s clean elections program and disclosure laws passed by ten points.¹⁰ And in New York, a six-to-one small donor matching program is considered a success.¹¹

Advice for Talking About Specific Legislative Proposals

Speaking to Voters about FEC Reform

Voters are frustrated by gridlock and partisanship in Washington, and there’s no place more dysfunctional than the Federal Election Commission, which is evenly split between Republicans and Democrats. Election spending is skyrocketing, but practically no one is getting punished for breaking the rules. The FEC can’t offer clear guidance on the rules or impose meaningful penalties for breaking them, and it urgently needs reform.

- We need to put a cop back on the beat of money in politics to ensure that someone is enforcing the campaign finance rules we have. The Federal Election Commission was set up to be equally divided, and that’s just not a practical system for enforcing the rules. Nearly every other independent federal commission has an odd number of members, and many of them have far less enforcement authority than the FEC. The FEC needs to be able to break ties, make clear what the rules are for everyone to follow, and punish those who break them.

Speaking to Voters about Super PAC Coordination

Super PACs have existed under an outdated framework since day one. They are supposed to operate completely independent from candidates, but no one updated the rules

about what counts as coordination. That's a problem, but it's a problem that can be fixed.

- When the law about who could spend money on campaigns was changed, the FEC was supposed to update the rules, but it never did. Super PACs are supposed to be independent from candidates and not coordinate with campaigns at all, but that's clearly not what is happening. Because of huge loopholes, they are basically acting as political slush funds, and even the *Citizens United* Supreme Court didn't intend that to be the case. There's plenty of room to strengthen the rules and stop super PAC shenanigans.

Speaking to Voters about Transparency

Transparency is a cornerstone of our campaign finance system. It's important to focus on closing loop-holes, but also talk about how the system should be more "user friendly" to make it easier for voters to get information on political spending.

- Voters have a right to know who is spending money to influence our elections. Anonymous political donors shouldn't be able to hide behind shadowy entities created by loopholes, the true funders of advertising should be disclosed to the public. Organizations that spend money on elections should have to disclose the source of that money. Congress should make it easier for donors to find out who is behind political advertising. Advertisements should list the top donors that funded them, so voters swamped by a deluge of advertising can more easily understand who is trying to influence their vote.

Speaking to Voters about Public Financing

The term "public financing" connotes older systems, some of which have been tried and have failed, so using the term may turn off some voters by reminding them of defunct systems. If talking about the concept broadly, it is more effective to

use phrases like “citizen funding” or to focus on a specific method of small-dollar financing, like vouchers, tax credits, or small-dollar matching systems.

- We need to get more people into the political system, both as donors and candidates. America’s democracy works best when everyone has a voice, and our campaign finance system should reflect that. Everyday people should be able to participate in our system, and we should be breaking down barriers for them to do so. Citizen funding is the best way to accomplish that.

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END NOTES

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