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Money doesn't buy elections, evidence shows

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It's like the weather; everyone complains about money in politics, but no one does anything about it. But a close look at spending in the 2016 presidential election shows that ultimately, money doesn't buy elections.

"In the early days of the 2016 election cycle pundits were expecting the most expensive election ever," writes David Boaz for the Cato Institute. "There were predictions of a \$2 billion Hillary Clinton campaign and a \$5 billion total for all presidential candidates. In the end, the campaigns spent less than expected, and less than in 2008 and 2012, and the winning candidate spent much less than the runner-up."

In fact, the total spending for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton was under \$1 billion. But as Boaz points out, the winner spent far less than the loser.

Trump spent \$334.8 million, winning 63 million votes. That works out to about \$5 per vote.

Clinton, on the other hand, spent nearly double that - \$623.1 million, garnering 65.8 million votes. That works out to about \$9 per vote.

"All told, Clinton spent substantially more than Trump," Boaz points out. "She did get 2 percent more in the popular vote, but that wasn't much return on the extra half-billion dollars."

The fact that she lost, while spending much more, is a testament to her abysmally bad campaign and strategy.

Still, the point is that money didn't buy this election - or any other. Arguments for "getting money out of politics" are arguments for fairness. They're arguments for control.

"Advocates of further regulating political speech are making demonstrably false claims that call into question the legitimacy of electoral outcomes," points out Alex Baiocco, writing in The Hill in March. "When Donald Trump first claimed that the election was "rigged" as a candidate, critics were quick to suggest that making such a claim was a threat to democracy. Why? Because it called into question the legitimacy of our election results."

But that's the behavior the left is engaging in right now.

"This anti-speech coalition of nonprofits will continue to spend millions of dollars each year telling Americans that our political system is corrupt and undemocratic because other citizens are also spending money on speech," Baiocco says. "That is their right. Furthermore, adopting speech restrictive policies based on these activists' claims would do more to damage our democracy than any false rhetoric itself ever could. A vibrant democracy requires that citizens be

able to speak freely, particularly about political issues. And spending money on speech is essential for bringing attention to and gaining support for issues, especially those that are initially unpopular.”

And as Boaz points out, there’s another aspect of “money in politics” that no one is talking about.

“When presidential candidates promise free college or a trillion dollars for infrastructure construction, they are clearly understood to be appealing for votes,” he writes. “When Republicans vote for \$60 billion in ‘Hurricane Sandy recovery aid,’ including money for Alaskan fisheries and activist groups, aren’t they buying votes?”

Our political system isn’t perfect. But the problem isn’t money in politics.