



## About that \$6 billion campaign bill

By CHARLES C.W. COOKE - November 7, 2012

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All in all, the 2012 presidential campaign cost around \$6 billion, which translates to around \$45 spent on each likely voter. Given the size of the country, the diversity of the population and the sheer number of ads, leaflets and other sundry propaganda inflicted on American voters over the past year, that doesn't look like too bad a deal.

But many have a different word to describe the tab: "obscene."

Especially among Americans who lean leftward, there's a vague sense that there is "too much money" in our politics. Indeed, this was a favorite theme of President Obama and of his campaign — in 2010, he chastised the Supreme Court for opening the "floodgates" of money in politics.

Oddly (or perhaps not), it is rarely connected to the fact that Obama broke fund-raising records in 2008 and this year outspent Mitt Romney by \$30 million.

In fact, there's no reason to be alarmed by the rising cost of US campaigns. The number of TV, radio, and Web ads increase dramatically each year as Americans become more connected and attention on each race grows. Studies have repeatedly shown that the more money spent on campaigns, the more knowledgeable about the issues at stake the electorate becomes.

Moreover, as this election has shown, America is a 50-50 nation — split straight down the middle. As a result, get-out-the-vote efforts have become increasingly necessary and progressively sophisticated — and sophisticated and necessary mean *expensive*. Naturally, there are legitimate questions about the propriety of mixing money and politics. But they are generally overwrought. "Every systemic study conducted of legislative voting behavior has concluded that campaign contributions have little or no effect on that behavior," argues the Cato Institute's Bradley Smith.

Besides, were a problem to exist, it would be better resolved by limiting what government does rather than what the people may contribute. The First Amendment codifies the right of the people to “petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” With the much-maligned Citizens United decision, the Supreme Court recognized, to paraphrase President Herbert Hoover, that you can’t control people’s spending without controlling their speech.

Especially come election time.

During last year’s Occupy Wall Street protests, I heard a lot of blather about money and politics. “Get money out of politics! Return America to the people!” I was told, somewhat incessantly. But few appeared to have considered what this would mean.

Sure, some people have more money than others. ’Twas ever thus. But the instinct is less about money and more about a general inequality that one will never remove from society.

After all, some people have more *influence* than others: Lady Gaga, for example, has almost 31 million followers on Twitter, and regularly attracts tens of thousands of people to her shows. She has a reach that “average Americans” will never match. Should her speech be limited around election time? If not, why not? And what about Bruce Springsteen and Jay-Z?

Critics of the high cost of American campaigns often point to countries that fund campaigns publicly, as if this serves as a magic bullet. This is an option that the Founding Fathers explicitly rejected. Just as it is the right of all Americans to support whichever candidate they prefer, it has long been regarded as a violation of their rights to force citizens to support those that they disdain.

“To compel a man to furnish contribution of money to the propagation of opinions to which he does not agree is sinful and tyrannical,” wrote Thomas Jefferson. (This is why “matching funds” have a minimum threshold, and taxpayers can opt out of contributing on their return.)

In an average year, Americans spend \$96 billion on beer, \$83 billion on cigarettes, \$10 billion on romance novels, and \$1.4 billion on teeth-whitening strips. In 2011, St. Patrick’s Day alone cost \$4.14 billion.

Given our paens to democracy and pride in our free and fair institutions, the question must be: Can we honestly call spending \$6 billion on an election “obscene” and keep a straight face?

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