



National experts debate campaign finance reform in Elkins Park

Published: Sunday, April 19, 2015

By Stephen Pileggi
21st Century Media News Service

Cheltenham - Two national experts took to the local stage to discuss money's role in political elections.

Craig Holman of Public Citizen and John Samples of the Cato Institute sat down with WHY? and NewsWorks Philadelphia's Chris Satullo for a moderated civil discourse about campaign finance reform.

The forum "Money + Politics: Does Money Make Policy?" was held at Beth Shalom Congregation in Elkins Park April 8.

According to the project website, Dina Wolfman Baker founded the project in 2012 with help from the rabbis at Beth Shalom Congregation to honor the memory of her father, Professor Bernard Wolfman. The evening's forum marked the third annual installment of the project.

Unlike traditional debates, civil discourse forums emphasize productive, respectful conversation in order to come to a better understanding of the subject matter.

Holman, a government affairs lobbyist, explained the case for campaign finance reform, while Samples, publisher and vice president of the Cato Institute, presented his reasoning behind his opposition to campaign finance regulations.

Those who had registered for the event were provided with a pen and notepad and were encouraged to write down and send up questions for Satullo to discuss with each expert.

According to Satullo, many people in the audience voiced their concern about the amount of money that goes into "toxic, mudslinging" advertisements that are often seen and heard on TV and radio during election season.

Holman explained that he was part of an experiment at the Brennan Center for Justice called

“Buying Time 2000” during the advent of the 2000 presidential election. The group had rented an old, unused Navy satellite to monitor TV commercials for campaign ads and found that the advertisement sponsor’s closeness with a political candidate was the X-factor in determining the message behind the advertisement

“The farther away from the candidates the sponsor of the TV ad is, the more negative the ad is,” Holman said. “So candidates will more often than not tend to run positive ads talking about how good they are, political parties will be 50/50 on how good their candidates are and how evil their opposing candidates are and Super PACs and nonprofit groups just almost always do attack ads.”

Samples then explained the necessity of occasionally shifting away from ads that only focus on the positive aspects that candidates might bring to their position.

“You want people to be critical,” Samples said. “You want people to point to the failures or the problems or the character flaws of the people who are already in office or running for office. Negative ads have been found to be very informative for people; they tend to increase people’s information and they also tend to make it harder for incumbents to run.”

Another question presented by audience members asked each speaker to reveal who their organizations are being funded by.

Samples did not provide an immediate answer, but instead retorted with a question of his own.

“If you knew that,” Samples said, “what exactly would that tell you about what Craig has said tonight or what I have said tonight? How would it affect what I just said? Would it tell you that it’s true or that it’s false? Doesn’t the substance matter at all?”

Both Holman and Samples eventually explained that Public Citizen and the Cato Institute are each funded by and large by member dues and contributions with only a small percentage coming from foundations and corporations. Neither organization accepts government funds.