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Campaign Finance Reform

Campaign finance reform became a main issue largely as a result of the efforts of the two popular candidates who didn't make it to the general election, John McCain and Bill Bradley. They were concerned about the influence of special-interest money in U.S. politics and wanted to level the playing field for vying candidates. To the relief of many Americans, the issue has remained high-interest despite McCain and Bradley's elimination from the race.¹ Proposed ways of accomplishing their goal include restricting contributions to the candidates and their parties, providing equal air time for political ads, and making campaigns mostly government-financed. I find this debate to be an important one, even approaching a constitutional level: Should wealth determine political power?

One of the most important "technical" aspects of campaign finance reform involves so-called "soft money" contributions. Called "the principal loophole in the federal campaign spending law,"² soft money consists of donations supposed to fund the party in general (instead of funding a specific candidate, which is prohibited during election times). However, soft money ends up being used for things like "office overhead, the purchase of expensive computer equipment, and other behind-the-scenes expenses – thus freeing up other contributions to the party to be used directly to support candidates."³

Vice President Al Gore said at the first presidential debate, "The first bill I will send to Congress is the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform bill."⁴ This would ban all soft money contributions. In addition, he would require lobbyists "to publicly disclose information on all of their activities"⁵ and he wants it to be mandatory that all political ads disclose their funding source. He is also in favor of a \$7 billion "Democracy Endowment" that would fund congressional and presidential campaigns with money from tax-deductible non-partisan contributions.

¹ Harshbarger, Scott. "Reform Message Outlives Messengers." Shadow Conventions 2000.
<http://www.shadowconvention.com/cfr/s062000.htm> (4 Nov. 2000).

² "Background on 'Soft Money.'" Center for Responsive Politics.
<http://www.opensecrets.org/pubs/glossary/softmoney.htm> (4 Nov. 2000).

³ "Background on 'Soft Money'" (see previous)

⁴ qtd in "Presidential Candidates' views on Campaign Finance Reform." Issues 2000.
http://www.issues2000.org/Government_Reform.htm (4 Nov 2000).

⁵ "Al Gore's Issues: Campaign Finance Reform."
www.algore.com/campaign_finance_reform/cfr_agenda1.html (4 Nov 2000).

Governor Bush hopes to ban soft money contributions only from corporations and unions, to “enhance the role of individuals.”⁶ He would also establish “paycheck protection” preventing labor union bosses from making political contributions without workers’ consent. Additionally, he would prohibit lobbyists from making contributions while Congress is in session and require that all donations to each party be disclosed weekly over the internet.⁷ Finally, he wants to *raise* the limit on individual contributions from \$1000 to \$3400 “for inflation.”⁸

An interesting twist in this election is that almost a year ago Gore apparently asked Bush if he would agree to ban soft money from their campaigns. Bush has repeatedly refused that offer because he still supports allowing individuals to make soft money contributions. Perhaps this is because he has received more than \$100 million in individual donations. That’s more than twice Gore’s \$45 million. (See chart on p.4.) On the other hand, Bush has included a plan to “prevent incumbents from transferring excess funds from a prior federal campaign to a subsequent campaign for a different federal office.”⁹ Perhaps this is because Gore has received \$83 million in federal funds while Bush has only received \$67 million.¹⁰

The candidates’ positions on lobbyists, political ads, and disclosure aren’t particularly contradictory — they’re just completely different. They offer a little reform here, a little there. Disclosure of funding is basically a non-issue because that information is already required by the government and already posted on the internet.

Al Gore’s proposed “Democracy Endowment” is the main point of dissension between the candidates. “Accessible to every qualified congressional and presidential candidate who agree[s] to accept no other donations, the ambitious, \$7.1 billion plan would take effect in 2008 and rely on 100 percent tax-deductible donations.”¹¹ Although the plan is backed by many, there are some doubts about its feasibility. It seems that people wouldn’t have much incentive to make contributions when they don’t even know who they’re funding. “I’m not quite

⁶ “George W. Bush for President Official Site: Issues.” www.georgebush.com/issues/campaignfin.html (4 Nov 2000).

⁷ “George W. Bush for President Official Site: Issues.” (see previous)

⁸ Issues 2000 (see previous)

⁹ “George W. Bush... Official Site” (see previous)

¹⁰ Data in this paragraph from “All Presidential Candidates: Source of Funds.” Center for Responsive Politics. <http://www.opensecrets.org/2000elect/source/AllCands.htm> (5 Nov 2000)

¹¹ “Gore unveils campaign finance proposal.” CNN.com. <http://www.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/03/27/gore.campfin/index.html> (5 Nov 2000)

sure how you raise that kind of dough,” said one analyst.¹² But Gore insists, “As president I will work aggressively to secure the funding of this endowment and I will seek the help of every corporation, every union... every other citizen of the US.”¹³

Bush asserted in the first presidential debate that “[Gore] is for full public financing of congressional elections. I’m absolutely, adamantly opposed to that.” His main reason for opposition seems to be that the endowment “would cost the federal treasury \$2.1 billion in lost tax revenue.”¹⁴ (The reasons for that cost are unclear.) Bush has also made stabs at Gore’s credibility on the issue of campaign finance because of the Buddhist temple incident of 1996.¹⁵ Possibly because “the endowment would be administered by a board of trustees chosen by the president and approved by the Senate,”¹⁶ Bush calls the proposal “a taxpayer-financed government takeover of campaigns.”¹⁷

Although both candidates’ proposals regarding campaign finance reform are basically reasonable, I feel that Gore’s plan has better underlying principles, is more of an actual reform, and has more potential. Bush’s principles are to “promote disclosure,” “preserve the role of individuals,” and “eliminate involuntary contributions.”¹⁸ All of these are petty trivialities compared to Gore’s resounding pledge to “create fairer and more open elections, break the link between special interests and political influence, and give democracy back to the American people.”¹⁹ What’s more, Gore has a long track record of working towards campaign finance reform and promises that the McCain-Feingold bill will be his first priority. Compared to the competition, Gore obviously cares more about this important issue and is much more likely to follow through with it.

¹² Frank Clemente, as qtd. in “Gore proposes campaign finance reform.” [ABCNEWS.com](http://more.abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/dailynews/gore_cfr000327.html).
http://more.abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/dailynews/gore_cfr000327.html (5 Nov 2000)

¹³ As qtd. in “Gore unveils campaign finance proposal.” (see previous)

¹⁴ “Gore to propose ending soft money with an ‘endowment’” [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/03/27/gore.campfin.cnn/).
<http://www.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/03/27/gore.campfin.cnn/> (5 Nov 2000)

¹⁵ This seems pretty ridiculous considering that the questionable money raised in the “scandal” was less than 0.05% of Gore’s total campaign money so far.

¹⁶ “Gore to propose ending soft money with an ‘endowment’” (see previous)

¹⁷ “Gore proposes campaign finance reform.” (see previous)

¹⁸ “George W. Bush... Official Site” (see previous)

¹⁹ “Al Gore’s Issues: Campaign Finance Reform.” (see previous)

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http://dailynews.yahoo.com/full_coverage/us/presidential_elections_2000/