Money Is Still the Name of the Game

Michael Parenti | Dec 09, 2010Common Dreams

For years certain pundits and political scientists have insisted that money is not all that important in winning elections. Large sums expended on campaigns glean only an extra percentage point or two in votes, we are told, and often the candidate who spends the most ends up losing anyway.

"Other Variables"

In 2010 Republican candidate Meg Whitman smothered the California gubernatorial contest with $142 million of her own money but still lost to Jerry Brown who spent a mere $24 million, along with another $27 million or so put up by independent groups. Such results are seized upon by those who argue that money does not guarantee victory. They insist that other variables--such as party affiliation, incumbency, candidate's image, and key issues--may be the deciding factors.

True, but we should remember that these "other variables" themselves are most likely to gather form and substance within a well-financed campaign. Feeding on large sums, a candidate can promote his image in a highly favorable light and advertise (or bury) the issues as best suit him, all the while casting mean shadows upon his financially weaker opponent.

Getting back to California's Meg and Jerry show: candidates who win while spending less than their opponents, as Jerry Brown did, still usually have to spend quite a lot, about $50 million in his case. While never a surefire guarantor of victory, a large war chest--even if not the largest--is usually a necessary condition. In sum, money may not guarantee victory, but a serious lack of it almost always guarantees defeat.

No Money, No Game

Without large sums, there is rarely much of a campaign, as poorly funded "minor" candidates have repeatedly discovered. A candidate needs money for public relations consultants, pollsters, campaign travel, meals, canvassers, poll watchers, office space, telephones, computers, faxes, mailings, and, most of all, media advertisements.

Indeed what makes someone a "minor" candidate is the lack of a sufficient war chest--which leads to the lack of sufficient campaign visibility. Conversely, someone with a huge war chest is likely to be treated by the media as a "major" candidate. So money not only influences who wins, but who runs and who is taken seriously when running. Rich candidates sometimes are backed by party leaders explicitly because they have personal wealth and can use it to wage an effective campaign.

One of my favorite examples is Steve Forbes who ran unsuccessfully for the GOP presidential nomination in 2000. Of lackluster personality and fuzzy program, Forbes had never held public office in his life and had no close links to Republican Party regulars. But being able to spend $30 million of his personal fortune (back when $30 million was still an exceptional amount for a presidential primary), Forbes was immediately treated by the media as a serious contender. He even won Republican primaries in two states.

Money Primary, Media Primary, and Voting Primary

In all, there are three primaries not one. There is the voting primary, the one we all know about and sometimes participate in. But before that is the media primary and before that the money primary.

Decades ago, candidates used to play down how much money the private interests were pouring into their coffers. It was understood that a heavily financed candidate would owe a lot of favors to a lot of fat cats and could hardly promote himself as a champion of the ordinary voters.

Today candidates openly flaunt the size of their war chests at the early stages of a primary in the hope of taking on an appearance of invincibility, thereby discouraging other candidates. This triumphalist imaging, in turn, attracts backing from still other big contributors.

During the 2000 Republican presidential primaries, George W. Bush won the money primary by raising $50 million four months before the first voting primary in New Hampshire. That sum came from just a small number of superrich donors. Several other GOP primary opponents dropped out after they discovered that most of the fat cats had already fed their checkbooks to Bush.

By the time Bush won his party’s nomination in July 2000, he had already spent over $97 million--and the campaign against his Democratic opponent had yet to begin. Thus, well before the actual election, a handful of superrich contributors winnow the field, predetermining who will run in the primaries at what level of strength and with what plausibility. Only the very rich get to “vote” in the money primary.

The candidates who lose the money primary swiftly lose the media primary also. This is especially true if they have progressive politics. Consider the valiant campaign waged in 2008 by Representative Dennis Kucinich for the Democratic presidential nomination. His advocacy of progressive reforms left him with little access to big money. As a poorly funded candidate he was immediately labeled in the media primary as a “minor” candidate.

The media label was self-fulfilling. Defined as a minor candidate, Kucinich was accorded hardly any serious media exposure. Having lost the money primary, he would now lose the media primary. One scarcely knew he was participating in debates with “major” candidates. Deprived of media exposure, Kucinich achieved near invisibility and consequently was unable to reach many voters who otherwise might have been interested in what he had to say.

Big Spenders = Big Winners

Let’s face it, candidates who are the bigger spenders may not always win but they usually do, as has been the case over the last fifteen years in more than 80 percent of House and Senate contests. Even in “open races,” with no incumbent running, better-funded candidates won 75 percent of the time.

According to a Public Citizen report on the 2010 midterm elections, in 58 of the 74 contests in which power changed hands, the winning candidates rode enormous waves of cash, outspending their opponents with funds from “shadowy front groups, giant corporations and the super rich.”

This does not establish a simple one-to-one causal relationship between money and victory. But given the central role money plays in launching a campaign and defining who is and who isn’t a “serious” candidate, how can we say it is without decisive impact?

The reactionary judicial activists on the Supreme Court do their best to advance the role of big money in politics. In decisions like the 2009 Citizens United case, the Court’s reactionary majority repeated its arcane contrivance that (1) rich corporations are “persons” with human rights and (2) money is a form of speech. By imposing spending limitations we supposedly are restricting free speech and violating the First Amendment. Some years ago Justice Stevens took issue with this fanciful fabrication, reminding us that “Money is property; it is not speech.”

But money is the kind of property that feeds into and mobilizes all sorts of other power resources. I haven’t mentioned the other influential roles that money plays beyond election campaigns: ownership of print and broadcast media, control of jobs, financing research institutes, recruiting and training conservative activists, bankrolling lobbyists, and the like.

Heed not the system's apologists who treat a money-driven political process as a matter of no great moment. Truth be told: if you're not in the money, you're not much in the game. It's time we faced up to the plutocracy that masquerades as democracy.