















The reformers' arguments, then, hinge on a link between cynicism toward government and the financing of campaigns. This link seems to be a slam dunk for the reformers. John McCain, in introducing his proposal for campaign finance reform to the Senate in 1998, stated eloquently:

Mr. President, no Washington pundit thought that the House would actually pass campaign finance reform, but it did. It was not an easy fight. But those in favor of reform prevailed. I hope the majority in the Senate that favors reform will be able to prevail here. A majority in the House passed reform because the American people demand it. Members of the House recognized that the current system is awash in money, exploited loopholes, and publicly perceived corruption. It is a system that no Member of Congress should take pride in defending. . . .

As I mentioned, Mr. President, yesterday was primary day in Arizona. Turnout was an all-time low, indicating another record-setting low turnout election day. I have no doubt whatsoever that the way in which we finance our campaigns has in no small measure contributed to the abysmal commentary of the health of our democracy. The people's contempt—there is no more charitable way to describe it—for us and for the way in which we attain our privileged place in government cannot be sustained perpetually. We will someday pay a high price for our inattention to this problem. We will forfeit our ability to lead the country as we meet the complicated challenges confronting us at the end of this century because we have so badly squandered the public respect necessary to persuade the Nation to take the often difficult actions that are required to defend the Nation's interests.

Our ability to lead depends solely on the public's trust in us. Mr. President, *people do not trust us today*. And that breach, that calamity, is what the supporters of campaign finance reform intend to repair. I beg all of my colleagues to join in this effort and give our constituents a reason to again trust us, and to take pride in the institution we are so proud to serve. (U.S. Senate 1998, emphasis added)

When he introduced his legislation in 2001, McCain stated that “surely frequent campaign finance scandals and their real or assumed connection to misfeasance by public officials are a major part of the problem” (McCain 2001).

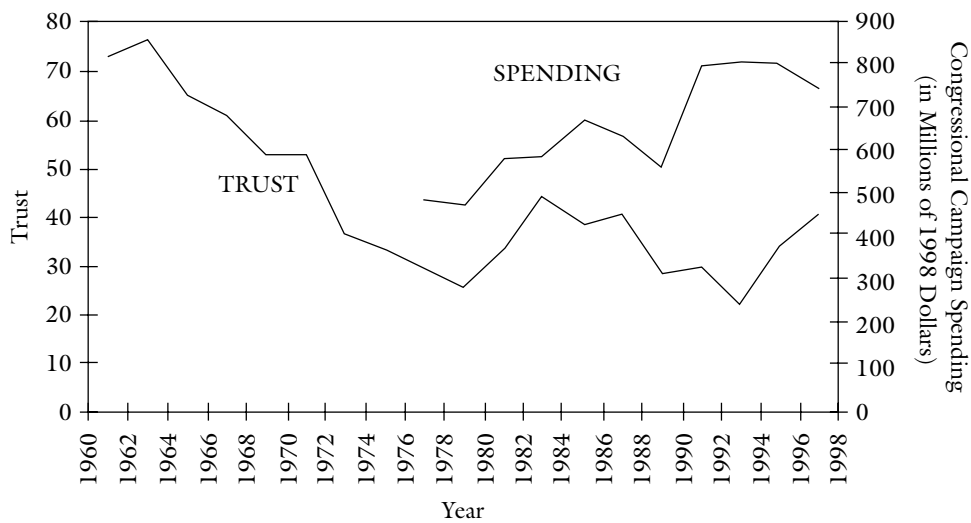
McCain is not the only senator to make unsupported claims. On the campaign finance section of his Web site (at <http://thompson.senate.gov/issues/finance-reform.htm>), Senator Fred Thompson (R-Tenn.) writes, “Americans have less and less faith in their government. One of the main reasons is that they are distrustful of the system we have in place to elect our political leaders.” On “Meet the Press,” January 7, 2001, he reiterated the importance of getting campaign finance legislation on the agenda because passage of such legislation could help to restore confidence in the system: “I think that President-elect Bush will work with McCain and others of us

who think we ought to do something in this regard, that big money has gotten out of control and played too much of a role in American politics. . . . for the first time, we have an opportunity of coming up with something that I think is good and will help restore a little bit of confidence of the American people in our system.”

Journalists make similar claims. In her book on the corruption of American politics, Elizabeth Drew writes that in large part the “dangerously low” trust in government has resulted from “the enormous and ever-growing role of money in our political campaigns—with corruption now outpacing even that of the Nixon era” (2000, viii). She offers little evidence for her claim, however, perhaps because the evidence, examined dispassionately, demonstrates that no such link actually exists.

Reformers are confident that the public wants reform and considers it of central importance; Senator McCain has *no doubt*. Reformers are also certain that campaign finance is a major cause of the public’s distaste for politics. These claims, however, are overblown. Yes, citizen trust in government is low, and, yes, campaign spending has increased. Examining the time-series relationship between trust in government and overall spending as shown in figure 1, however, one would be hard-pressed to perceive a relationship between the two data series.

**Figure 1**  
**Trust in Government and Campaign Spending**



*Sources:* Trust measure: National Election Studies at the University of Michigan, congressional campaign spending: Federal Election Commission press releases.

*Note:* The National Election Studies at the University of Michigan is a biannual survey of political attitudes and trends. Every two years, the researchers ask, “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?” *Trust* is usually defined as answering “just about always” or “most of the time.” For further information, see [http://www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/toptable/tab5a\\_1.htm](http://www.umich.edu/~nes/nesguide/toptable/tab5a_1.htm).

Before drawing any conclusions, let us pause for a moment to be precise about what the reformers are claiming. They believe that increases in campaign spending have caused declining trust in government. Two of John Stuart Mill's famous three tenets for asserting causality are temporal precedence, which can be restated as "if  $x$  follows  $y$ , then  $x$  is not the cause of  $y$ ," and concomitant covariation, or the idea that  $x$  must change in relationship to  $y$ .<sup>16</sup> Put differently, temporal precedence means that a cause (in this case, rising campaign spending) must precede an effect (declining trust). Concomitant covariation means in this case that if the reformers are correct, trust in government should go down as campaign spending goes up. The advocates of new regulations are asserting that statistically an inverse correlation between campaign spending and trust in government exists. Such correlations are measured on a scale from +1 to -1. If the reformers were completely correct, we would find a strong inverse correlation between spending and trust, indicated by a -1.0 coefficient of correlation. Anything else is a weaker relationship. A moderate-to-strong negative relationship would be between -.6 and -.4.

Public-opinion data show that citizen trust in government dropped dramatically in the 1960s and early 1970s and then followed a somewhat varied path (see figure 1). Spending increased steadily in the late 1970s and early 1980s, then remain on a plateau, jumped again in the early 1990s, and remained on a plateau again.<sup>17</sup> The data show in two ways that rising campaign spending was not the cause of public mistrust of government.

First, the major drop in citizen trust took place *before* the run-up in spending, and therefore the latter could not have caused the former. Thus, McCain's and others' claims fail the temporal precedence test. Second, the evidence shows only a minute relationship between trust and campaign spending. Since the early 1980s, citizen mistrust of government has risen and fallen. Overall, we cannot say that mistrust has risen significantly over the last two decades.<sup>18</sup> The coefficient of correlation between spending (in 1998 dollars) in congressional races and trust in government is -0.007—very close to zero. Admittedly, a time-series correlation is not a completely reliable statistic; however, a picture (figure 1) is worth a thousand words.

The cynicism toward politics is clearly rooted in something far deeper than campaign contributions, more likely in the Watergate and, to an extent, the Vietnam debacles, which were clear-cut examples of corruption, deceit, and chicanery that changed the face of American politics. In other words, the public responded to

16. The other is that there is no third variable that can explain the relationship between  $x$  and  $y$ .

17. Because these data are for congressional campaign spending and do not account for the run-up in soft money spending in the mid-1990s, they understate the support for my findings because trust increased in the 1990s, the very time when soft money spending was skyrocketing.

18. Similarly, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse conclude: "The clear message is that in the twenty years between 1975 and 1994, confidence in the three major institutions of the federal government moved neither up nor down" (1995, 33). Federal election law dates from 1971 and was amended in 1974 and 1979.

actual events, not to some general sense that democracy had faltered.<sup>19</sup> The claim that money drives cynicism toward politics on a macro, historical level is simply false.

Even if these data are not convincing, consider a cross-sectional analysis from two questions in the 1997 CRP survey. When asked if they were satisfied with the political process, 59 percent of respondents said that they were not. Of those, only 14 percent said that the reason for their dissatisfaction was the perception that politicians are corrupt or that special interests “buy” political outcomes. This evidence indicates that of the polled population, fewer than 10 percent make a direct link between their overall view of the system and money in politics.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, two political scientists at the University of Wisconsin, John J. Coleman and Paul F. Manna, recently used data from the 1994 and 1996 U.S. House elections to demonstrate that campaign spending had no effect on levels of trust in government or on views about political efficacy. Moreover, the authors write that, overall, “the effects of campaign spending lie more on the side of democratic boon than democratic bane” (Coleman and Manna 2000, 757). Therefore, there is evidence at both the macro level (overall trust over time in the United States) and the micro level (the 1997 CRP poll as well as the Coleman-Manna study) that trust and spending are not closely linked.

What about the connection between media coverage of campaign finance and the level of citizen trust? In the 1997 CRP survey, 60 percent of Americans who had heard at least some information about questionable fund-raising were dissatisfied with the political process, compared with only 45 percent of those who had heard little or nothing, a statistically significant difference. At the very least, this relationship is more plausible. The media’s fascination with money has grown in recent years, and the media’s ability to help define what is important for the public is a well-known phenomenon. The real link between public opinion and campaign finance, then, may lie with the mass media’s emphasis on campaign finance rather than with any significant public concern.

## Conclusion

Public opinion is especially important on the issue of campaign finance because a main justification for reform is that the public demands it or that it will restore faith in democracy. I have demonstrated here, however, that although campaign finance arouses great passion among governing elites, the general public does not much care about the issue. Even during the Enron scandal, which was heralded for causing public outcry that spurred the passage of pending reform legislation, the public was uninterested in the issue. Further, there is no link between trust in government and the

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19. Further, trust in nearly *all* institutions has been declining since the 1960s, and the news media currently are less trusted than Congress in some polls.

20. This assessment is a generous one. The responses coded “direct link” are tenuous at best.

amount of campaign spending, which suggests that reforms will have little effect on how Americans view government.

Campaign finance reform will remain on the political agenda, and many more battles will be fought in the coming years. It would be disingenuous to assert that because public opinion is wishy-washy on the issue, further reforms should not occur. In a representative democracy, the desires of the majority are not always enacted, and reasonable people can disagree on how closely elected officials should adhere to the wishes of their constituents. However, those carrying the mantle of reform often claim a groundswell of public support for their positions, which flies in the face of the evidence. The debate on this issue needs to shift away from claims that the public clamors for reform and move toward other reasons why campaign finance reform might improve our democracy.

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