Campaign Finance Essay, Research Paper

Campaign finance reform has already become an issue for debate in this election

year’s primaries. This matter does not hold a large amount of interest for the

average American, it is not an issue that is going to sway a large amount of

voters. The book examines all facets of campaign finance including sources of

contributions and finance reform. The book then takes a close, hard look at the

1980 presidential election and the 1982 congressional races. The author

approaches the subject matter in a very thorough and systematic method. He makes

very insightful comments on the state of campaign finance in the early 1980’s

which are still relevant in this election year because this issue has been an

important facet of the primary debates. The book discusses the history of

campaign reform from its beginnings in the early 20th century. The book touches

on the theoretical aspects of election campaign finance, but is more a study of

hard data and facts, the history of campaign spending in a few different periods

and the actual evolution and cash explosion that now creates a truly national

spectacle. Alexander begins the book describing why such large amounts of

political campaign money is needed. "Since the Republic’s founding,

printing has been the most basic campaign expense." (Alexander, 5).

Alexander explains that printed reading materials including pamphlets, flyers,

mailings and placards represent a huge chunk of the cost of running for office.

The evolution of campaigning has drastically changed the landscape. Extensive

and intense media coverage has increased the need for a politician to be always

prepared for a direct examination by a journalist. Alexander notes that the

largest increase in campaign spending began in the 1950’s, with the introduction

of television and the advent of the commercial. Between the 1948 and the 1952

elections, enough Americans had bought television sets that the candidates in

the 1952 election began to invest in TV air time. Radio had become important in

the 1924 election, but this medium did not require the same large amounts of

cash that television did (Alexander, 10). Campaign finance reform has been an

issue that has been mumbled about and tossed around for almost a century,

however the movement did not have any significant backers until the 1960’s. The

first mention for reform was made by Theodore Roosevelt. His idea was to simply

disclose where and how candidates got there cash to run an election, and in

1907, corporations were banned from contributing, and full disclosure of funds

was enacted. Between his administration, all the way until 1961, and John F.

Kennedy, presidents had only gone on record advocating reform, while little else

changed. In that year, Kennedy established the bi-partisan Commission on

Campaign Costs. No reform came from this group, but in 1971 Congress passed the

Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA), this act would later be important in the

Watergate affair. The bill set limits on individual contributions and required

fuller disclosure of campaign finances. After Watergate, new pressures emerged

to clean up the practices of candidates running for political offices. In 1974,

Amendments to FECA introduced public financing for presidential elections which

would give matching funds to whatever total candidates could raise. It gave a

flat grant to parties and created further limitations on other expenditures.

These amendments also established the Federal Elections Committee (FEC), which

was formerly organized the next year. There were many questions surrounding

these new laws which were later answered by the Supreme Court which declared

some of the measures unconstitutional. The rule which has allowed George Bush

Jr. to go above spending limits in his primary campaign stems from this Supreme

Court opinion. The Court found that if a candidate accepted the matching public

funds they were to be offered, then they must abide by the new rules. The Court

came to this controversial conclusion after deciding that the giving of

political money was a form of free speech and should be protected under the

First Amendment. Further reforms in 1979 changed the content of some of these

laws, including limits and disclosure, but the spirit is similar to the original

set of statutes. After understanding and detailing the huge need for cash to run

an election, and the plethora of rules that go along with a campaign, one is now

ready to begin fund raising. There are two major groups of sources which the

author deals with; Individuals and groups. Both groups and individuals are

limited in what they are allowed to give. This is an issue which has become very

important in this year’s election. George Bush Jr. was able to gather a large

amount of monies from individuals, all shelling out their allowed $1000 dollars

each. The backbone of Bush’s financial support has come from the thousands and

thousands of loyal Republicans who have done so. It is typical for one person in

a certain region to solicit friends and neighbors to donate money. Bush’s main

supporters will get separate $1000 dollar checks from each member of their

family and all of their other relatives and acquaintances. This has allowed him

to amass a large enough treasury to not have to accept the matching funds offer,

and thus go over set spending limits. The other major source for funds is

groups. Alexander breaks these down into Corporations, Labor Unions, Political

Action Committees (PAC’s), Other Special Interests and Illegal Contributions.

Corporations are technically banned from making contributions, but many have

found ways to circumvent such rules. Since corporations are not allowed to

donate, other groups become very important in fund raising efforts. This

campaign season, George Bush has gotten major contributions from a number of

more conservative groups. More liberal groups have played a large role in John

McCain’s bid to become Republican nominee for the presidency by donating time

and money to his cause. The hype on campaign finance this election season

appears to me to be a bit of a smokescreen to ignore real issues. It is

important to control the amounts and types of money that potentially elected

officials are receiving and to even the playing field as much as possible. The

average American, however, is more interested in issues which will have an

impact on his or her daily life. Such abstract notions such as the millions and

millions of dollars one is dealing with when discussing this issue have

absolutely no meaning to most voters. I would like to see the candidates telling

me and everyone else what they will do for us while they are in office, not the

changes they would make when it comes time for us to vote for them again. When

compared to the amount of money budgeted to the coverage of the election by the

major networks and cable news agencies, candidates are being totally outspent.

The basic conclusion that I walk away from this book is this; Politics is big

business. I believe that the man who is going to become the president of this

country should have to be able to raise millions of dollars, this will prove to

me that he will not be a huge and drastic failure on Pennsylvania Avenue within

two weeks of taking office. To be successful running the biggest corporation in

the world, with the power to end civilization and/or kill a lot of people, my

candidate should be able to go on a modern day, 6-8 month campaign and not shed

one drop of sweat.