8. Is there too much money in politics today?

There certainly is a lot of money in politics. Concerns about political money tend to focus on two aspects of the process the costs of running for office and the funds that interest groups allocate to lobbying members of Congress.

Candidates for Congress don’t win unless they spend a lot of money and the more they spend the more likely they are to win. In recent years, House incumbents have spent more than $800,000 on average to get reelected. Their challengers in these races spent about one-quarter that amount, but still in excess of $200,000 on average. And as mentioned, spending has a big impact on the likelihood of victory. If a challenger spends less than $200,000, for instance, the probability of a win is almost zero. Indeed, campaign expenditures by a challenger typically have to top $500,000 before the challenger has even a 25 percent chance of victory. Running for the Senate is even more expensive. Senate races tend to cost five to ten times as much as House races, depending on the size of the state.

Interestingly, although concerns about the quantity of money in politics usually emphasize the costs of campaigns, the really big money is in lobbying. The process through which individuals and groups attempt to influence the legislative process in Washington. We don’t know for sure how much money is spent on lobbying. But according to one credible estimate, interest groups spend more than $1 billion per year on lobbying, much more than they contribute to congressional candidates running for office. The money goes to mobilizing grassroots support for or against pending legislation, bringing interest group members to Washington to speak with members and staff, hiring Washington firms to formally represent their interests on Capitol Hill, and so on.

It comes as no surprise, then, that public opinion polls indicate that most citizens view Congress as awash in special interest money. Still, there are several factors that merit consideration.

First, congressional candidates spend a lot of money on their campaigns because running for office is expensive. To get their messages to voters, they need to communicate with them, and, increasingly, that means using television. Television time is expensive. So are radio spots, newsletters, newspaper advertisements, and the other forms of communication.

Second, half of the money donated to campaigns comes from individual citizens who cannot contribute more than $2,000 to individual candidates for the House or Senate per campaign. Political action committees, the source of another 40 percent of donations to campaigns, are limited to $5,000 per candidate per campaign. The total amount of campaign contributions and expenditures is high, in other words, but the money tends to get collected in relatively small chunks from a large number of sources.

Third, challengers in congressional campaigns are usually woefully underfunded compared to incumbents and that is one reason why they usually lose. The problem here might not be too much money in congressional campaigns, but excessive funding for incumbents and not enough for challengers.

Fourth, everything is relative. There is a lot of money in congressional politics, but Americans tend to spend more every year taking care of their pets and buying iPods. What happens in congressional campaigns and in the legislative process is important, and, as a society, we should be willing to allocate considerable sums of money to these activities.

Fifth, although interest groups spend a billion dollars a year or more on lobbying, on most major issues both sides of the dispute are usually mobilized and represented in Congress. Much of the lobbying that occurs probably cancels itself out.

Still, the quantity of money in congressional politics is high and merits careful scrutiny by Americans and their representatives in Congress. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the role of money is the quantity of time that incumbent House members and Senators must spend raising funds to run for reelection. We don’t have precise data, but a good estimate would be that the typical member of Congress must spend two or more hours per day when the Congress is in session on the phone talking to potential donors, trying to raise money for their campaigns. The time spent fundraising would more properly be allocated to drafting legislation, studying issues, reviewing the actions of the executive branch, and conducting other aspects of the people’s work. In the end, the most significant negative consequence of the huge quantity of money in congressional politics may be this diversion of the attention of our representatives away from the core responsibilities of governing.

* STATISTICS CITED IN THIS PARAGRAPH ARE FROM GARY C. JACOBSON, THE POLITICS OF CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS, 6TH ED., (NEW YORK: PEARSON LONGMAN, 2004), CHAPTER 3.