

Don't Follow the Money

By David Brooks, *The New York Times* Opinion Pages, Oct 18, 2010

Prompts for Guided Reading: As you read the following article, pay special attention the following. Provide thoughtful written responses to the following prompts.

1. What reasons does Brooks give for why media consultants and partisans believe money is important to elections?
2. What evidence does Brooks provide to support the claim that money doesn't have much of an effect on elections?
3. What is "independent spending" and, according to Brooks, why shouldn't we be concerned about it?
4. What does Brooks mean when he writes, "Year after year, independent money follows passion but doesn't ignite it."
5. Under what conditions does Brooks say money is most likely to have an important impact?

Over the past few months, there's been a torrent of commentary about political donations and campaign spending. This lavish coverage is based on the premise that campaign spending has an important influence on elections.

I can see why media consultants would believe money is vitally important: the more money there is the more they make. I can see why partisans would want to believe money is important: they tend to blame their party's defeats on the nefarious spending of the other side. But I can't see why the rest of us should believe this. The evidence to support it is so slight.

Let's start with the current data. The vast majority of campaign spending is done by candidates and political parties. Over the past year, the Democrats, most of whom are incumbents, have been raising and spending far more than the Republicans.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, Democrats in the most competitive House races have raised an average of 47 percent more than Republicans. They have spent 66 percent more, and have about 53 percent more in their war chests. According to the Wesleyan Media Project, between Sept. 1 and Oct. 7, Democrats running for the House and the Senate spent \$1.50 on advertising for every \$1 spent by Republicans.

Despite this financial advantage, Democrats have been sinking in the polls. I suppose they could argue that the conditions could be even worse if they didn't have the money edge, but this is a weak case. It's more plausible to argue that the ad buys just didn't make that much difference.

After all, money wasn't that important when Phil Gramm and John Connally ran for president. In those and many other cases, huge fund-raising prowess yielded nothing. Money wasn't that important in 2006 when Republican incumbents outraised Democrats by \$100 million and still lost. Money wasn't that important in the 2010 Alaska primary when Joe Miller beat Lisa Murkowski despite being outspent

10 to 1. It wasn't that important in the 2010 Delaware primary when Mike Castle, who raised \$1.5 million, was beaten by Christine O'Donnell, who had raised \$230,000.

The most alarmed coverage concerns the skyrocketing spending of independent groups. It is true that Republicans have an edge when it comes to outside expenditures. This year, for example, the United States Chamber of Commerce is spending \$22 million for Republicans, while the Service Employees International Union is spending about \$14 million for Democrats.

But independent spending is about only a tenth of spending by candidates and parties. Democrats have a healthy fear of Karl Rove, born out of experience, but there is no way the \$13 million he influences through the group American Crossroads is going to reshape an election in which the two parties are spending something like \$1.4 billion collectively.

Moreover, there's no real evidence that independent expenditure is any more effective than candidate expenditure. Year after year, independent money follows passion but doesn't ignite it. In 2008, Democrats had a huge independent advantage; now the Republicans do.

The main effect of this money is to make the rubble bounce. Let's say you live in Colorado. Conservative-leaning groups have spent \$6.6 million attacking Michael Bennet, the Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate, according to OpenSecrets.org, a nonprofit site that monitors spending in politics. Liberal-leaning groups have spent \$6.9 million attacking his Republican opponent, Ken Buck. Over all, there have been 5,358 pro-Democratic ads and 4,928 pro-Republican ones in their race, according to the Wesleyan Media Project.

This isn't persuasive; it's mind-numbing. No wonder voters tune it all out. Amid this onslaught, there is no way a slightly richer ad campaign is going to make much difference.

Political scientists have tried to measure the effectiveness of campaign spending using a variety of methodologies. There is no consensus in the field. One large group of studies finds that spending by incumbents makes no difference whatsoever, but spending by challengers helps them get established. Another group finds that neither incumbent nor challenger spending makes a difference. Another group finds that both kinds of spending have some impact.

But there's no evidence to suggest that campaign spending has the outsize role that the candidates, the consultants and the political press often imagine.

So why is there so much money in politics? Well, every consultant has an incentive to tell every client to raise more money. The donors give money because it makes them feel as if they are doing good and because they get to hang out at exclusive parties. The candidates are horribly insecure and grasp at any straw that gives them a sense of advantage.

In the end, however, money is a talisman. It makes people feel good because they think it has magical properties. It probably helps in local legislative races where name recognition is low. It probably helps challengers get established. But these days, federal races are oversaturated. Every federal candidate in a close race has plenty of money and the marginal utility of each new dollar is zero.

In this day and age, money is almost never the difference between victory and defeat. It's just the primitive mythology of the political class.

