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Focus on: Citizens and Public Choice
A Question for the Public to Decide: What to Do about Money and Politics

By Patty Dineen

Last November, I was happy to be part of a team that presented some findings from the forums held around the country using the NIF Money and Politics issue book to a number of groups in Washington, D.C. Doble Research Associates had put together an insightful report about what people in the forums had said and how they had said it, and our meetings in Washington were to be based on the report, as has been done in years past with other issues.

As the time to meet in Washington approached, we anticipated, mostly via E-mail, that the people who would be hearing our report might question how much interest the public could possibly still have in money and politics since the events of September 11. We certainly had that question ourselves, and we were right that those hearing our report would ask it.

I think it's an interesting and important question for us to consider: A great deal of time, effort, and energy goes into the preparation of issue guides, convening of forums, and reporting about what was said. The attempt to report on "Money and Politics" right after September 11 threw into vivid relief the idea that the public's attention and priorities might be so unpredictable as to make all this deliberative democracy work something that we are trying to do in a solid way while standing on shifting sands.

There must be an interesting study in all this about how completely the public's attention can shift from one issue to another and whether the public can manage to "walk and chew gum" at the same time, in spite of all the distractions. It would be an interesting question for those of us in the National Issues Forums Network at any time, but even more so in light of events in recent months.
On December 1, I sent an article I had written for *Civic Life* (formerly the *Deliberator*) to Sarah Rickman. I had been asked to write something about the "Money and Politics" issue. I titled it "Money and Politics: A Year in the Life of an Issue" because I thought it had been an interesting year to look at the ebb and flow of the prominence of a particular issue on the national scene and how convenors and moderators had dealt with that. But now — how much more complex things have become!

The question a few months ago was, "How interested is the public in money and politics now that September 11 has happened?" Now, we could just as well ask, "How interested is the public in terrorism now that Enron has happened?" Of course, the answer is that they are interested, even intensely interested, and concerned about both, but with one crucial difference with respect to money and politics (especially for the NIF Network): While public deliberation about how officeholders should proceed in dealing with the threat of terrorism will be difficult and very important, there is no reason to believe that they are in any way conflicted about where their loyalties lie. But when it comes to making or changing policy about money and its impact on politics, we see officeholders as both the source of and solution to the problem. It looks like an impossible dilemma if left to the officeholders alone. The public must get involved in the discussion of what to do about money and politics, or there is a good chance that nothing will change. In fact, there's a good chance that things will get worse.

Enron's money and influence extended to both political parties, and some have questioned whether it is possible for Congress or its appointees to conduct an honest investigation. What is possible is an honest conversation about money and politics and what we can do to curb abuses. If ever there were a need for a national conversation (that could happen in a nonpartisan, nonbiased way) about a national problem, this is the time. And if ever there were a time, and a need, for citizens to take responsibility for working on an issue, this is it.

Some national columnists have pointed out that while Washington seems to be holding its breath to see if the Enron scandal becomes a political scandal (meaning whether people in high offices will be proven to have done something illegal), those who are waiting anxiously for the answer to that question are missing the most important point. It's not whether the system has been involved in something that's illegal (well, yes, that's important, too); it's whether the system has been involved in something that is simply a bad idea, and bad for the country and its citizens.

That is exactly what the public had to say about "Money and Politics" in the Doble report. This is what the report said about whether the public connects to this issue in the way conventional wisdom suggests it does:
What can be done about the impact of money on politics?

Here are some of the major themes that emerged in the NIF Report on the Issues — Money and Politics: Who Owns Democracy?

- Participants in National Issues Forums on “Money and Politics” saw the influence of money on the political system as damaging and harmful in three ways: 1) money warps political decision making, subordinating the public interest to special interests; 2) it skews the election process, giving well-financed candidates a great and unfair advantage; 3) it alienates ordinary Americans, who often feel their voices don’t count.

- Forum participants defined the issue of money and politics in terms of the public’s right to hear. Money, they said, corrupts the public dialogue, limiting the voices that people hear and amplifying some at the expense of others. As a result, many people do not hear leaders who speak to their concerns or articulate their deepest values.

- Participants identified five ways that the news media exacerbate the problems caused by money: 1) they further limit the voices the public hears by filtering information so people do not hear directly from public leaders; 2) they do not present issues fairly; 3) they do not help people sort through manipulative, deceptive ads; 4) they focus too much on overly personal information; 5) they intensify cynicism.

- Participants felt we should reduce the influence of money by “leveling the playing field” in terms of elections. They felt all candidates should have roughly an equal chance of being heard and considered by the public and that voters should have an opportunity to consider all candidates and all points of view.

- Participants in most forums talked about the need for access to the media and how that relates to the problems caused by the influence of money on politics. The need for so much money, many said, is driven by the high cost of advertising, especially on television. A large majority of the participants said that the way to “level the playing field” is to give all major candidates for public office free or low-cost airtime on television and radio.

- Most participants said that the best way to ensure that all candidates have a roughly equal chance of being heard is through a system of public financing of political campaigns.

- Participants felt that lobbyists and special interests have too much political influence, and they wanted to curb their power. At the same time, as people deliberated, their antipathy toward lobbyists and special interests declined as they learned more about the role of both groups, and realized that they themselves might well be represented by one or both.

- Almost without exception, participants favored full, immediate disclosure of all campaign contributions, including disclosure in the media and on the Internet. Participants, however, felt that such disclosure would not really curb the influence of money or remedy the problems they had identified.

- Most forum participants favored the idea of giving the public a more direct say in running public affairs, but many saw problems with the idea as well, giving it only qualified support.

- Participants saw “money and politics” not as one single issue but as several interconnected issues, among them campaign finance, media accessibility, an alienated and cynical public, and the lack of qualified leaders willing to serve the public interest.
Participants in this year’s National Issues Forums were troubled, not so much about the narrow issue of “campaign finance reform” but about the broader issue of “money and politics” as an underlying cause of the public’s alienation, cynicism, and feeling of disconnection from the political system. “There’s a cancer in American politics. And that cancer is money,” said a man at a forum in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Participants defined the issue as encompassing not only campaign contributions but also the day-to-day influence of money on governmental decision making, usually at the federal level, and the impact of money on what we will call “the public dialogue.”

I can’t imagine anything being much more on target in terms of the light it sheds on the significance to the public of the Enron collapse and Enron’s dealings with the political system. While many of the people who heard the report in Washington last fall were listening for only the parts pertaining to campaign finance reform, I hope that some of the other things they heard or read in the report are now echoing in their heads and suddenly sounding like they make a whole lot of sense.

I think all of this points out the tremendously important niche that NIF fills — or, at the very least, has the potential to fill — by giving people a way to talk about, and take responsibility for, the problems that probably aren’t going to get fixed in any other way.

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