

How to Talk About Money in Politics

This brief memo provides the details you need to most effectively connect with and engage voters to promote workable solutions to reduce the power of money in politics. For additional resources, see the longer version of this memo online at everyvoice.org/briefingbook2016. This memo provides tools in four sections:

1. *Polling*
2. *Talking Points*
3. *Policies for your Platform*
4. *Responding to Attacks*

1. POLLING: Voters Overwhelmingly Agree The System is Broken and Needs to Be Reformed

A broad, bipartisan majority of Americans agree the current campaign finance system is broken. They support policies to fix it and they want politicians to show leadership on the issue.

- **Americans agree that money in politics is a problem:** Eighty-four percent of Americans believe money has too much influence in politics (New York Times/CBS News, June 2015).
- **Voters are “mad as hell:”** Ahead of the presidential caucuses in Iowa, voters there—arguably some of the most engaged in the political process—are angry about money in politics. A full 93 percent of likely Democratic caucus-goers and 91 percent of Republicans said they were unsatisfied or “mad as hell” about the issue of money in politics. (Bloomberg News/Des Moines Register, August 2015).
- **Voters support efforts to reform the system:** A full 85 percent of voters think we need fundamental changes or to completely rebuild the system. (New York Times/CBS News, June 2015).
- **Voters support small donor public financing:** Seventy-two percent of Americans support small-donor solutions, like matching funds, to overhaul our broken system (Every Voice, December 2015).
- **Voters are more likely to support candidates who pledge to change the system:** Nearly two-thirds of voters (63 percent) react positively to a message from a Democratic candidate embracing reforms, including 61 percent of Independent voters and 81 percent of voters under age 30 (Every Voice, December 2015).

2. TALKING POINTS: How to Connect with Voters on Money in Politics

Key to understand:

1. **The debate about the influence of money in politics is over.** Americans are so convinced money has corrupted politics and our government that nine in ten don't believe we can do anything about it (even though large majorities support policies to reduce the influence of money in politics).
2. **To alter this narrative, we must begin to tell a very different story—one that is focused on solutions** rather than one that deepens cynicism through broadsides against corrupt politicians and institutions.
3. **Connect with voters on this issue by using inspiring, active language** that focuses on lifting the voices of everyday people while pivoting away from over-diagnosis or heated language of the problem.

Here are some messages that work according to years of public opinion research.

Every Voice Matters

- We need to build a democracy where everyone participates, every vote is counted, and everyone's voice is heard; where people from all walks of life can run for and win office, not just the wealthy and well-connected.
- America is a nation of teachers, caregivers, inventors, entrepreneurs, and workers, founded on the belief that we are all created equal. Our country's strength is grounded in our ability to take many perspectives and work together as one. That's why we believe every voice should be heard in our political process, not just the wealthy and well connected.

Breaking Down Barriers

- Money's influence in our politics is a significant barrier preventing talented leaders from our community, regular people we know and trust, from seeking office. It keeps regular people like you and me from being elected and representing our communities. To create a more representative government, and to have the ability to elect the best people, we need to address the barriers that prevent ordinary Americans from running for office.
- See the next section in this memo, Platform Policy, for talking points on solutions, such as:
 - We must amplify the voices of everyday Americans by supporting legislation that empowers small donors with matching funds in [state/local] elections. Our vision for American democracy is a nation in which all people, regardless of their income, can participate in the political process and can run for office without needing to depend on large contributions from the wealthy and the powerful.

American Ideals

- The Founders envisioned that in a democracy, the government is supposed to be of, by, and for the people. But right now, we don't have that. There are straightforward steps we can take to raise the voices of everyday people, reduce the power of big money, and ensure that everyone has an equal say in our government.
- See the next section in this memo, Platform Policy, for talking points on solutions.

The Future

- We all want our children and the next generation to have a better life and more opportunities than we did, but there's something wrong when millions of hardworking Americans are scraping by. That's what happens when wealthy special interests have too much power and make the rules—working families get left behind.
- To make sure our children have a free and fair America, we must come together to make our democracy work for all of us, through commonsense reforms that would empower everyday people and reduce the influence of wealthy donors.
- See the next section in this memo, Platform Policy, for talking points on solutions.

The Price We Pay

- There's a personal price we all pay for the money flowing through politics: When our representatives become dependent on funding from big-moneyed interests—who employ thousands of lobbyists and spend millions of dollars to protect their own agendas—it leaves them unable to solve the problems of the American people. If we don't do something to fix the systemic influence of big money that generates a democracy out of balance and out of touch with the wishes of everyday people, progress will continue to be blocked on critical issues of all kinds. And we, the American people, will personally suffer the consequences—to our health, our financial stability, our environment, our economy, and our opportunities to get ahead.
- See the next section in this memo, Platform Policy, for talking points on solutions.

3. PLATFORM POLICY: The Fight Big Money Agenda

Key to understand:

- **These policies are organized by values because it is critical to frame each using values-based language**, in order to most effectively connect with voters and begin with a talking point to use when talking to voters about them.
- **No single solution will solve all the challenges our democracy faces**, but this comprehensive agenda, endorsed by leading democracy organizations and experts, will effectively reduce the influence of money in politics and enable you to make a strong case to voters that you share their concerns and values.

Everyone participates and everyone's voice is heard:

Encourage and amplify the voices of everyday Americans by legislating a system of public funding for qualified candidates, meaningful contribution limits, and measures to reduce barriers to the ballot box and increase turnout.

- **Small donor public financing:** We must amplify the voices of everyday Americans by supporting legislation that empowers small donors with matching funds in state/local elections. Our vision for American democracy is a nation in which all people, regardless of their income, can participate in the political process and can run for office without needing to depend on large contributions from the wealthy and the powerful.
- **Voting rights:** We must make it easier to vote, not harder. That means bring our democracy into the 21st century by expanding early voting and vote-by-mail, implementing universal automatic voter registration and same day voter registration, ending partisan and racial gerrymandering, and making Election Day a national holiday. And we must fight against discriminatory voting laws that disproportionately burden young voters, diverse communities, people of color, low-income families, people with disabilities, the elderly, and women.

Everyone knows who is trying to influence our democracy:

Implement robust, real-time disclosure of political contributions and expenditures through legislation, rulemaking.

- **Disclosure:** We need to end secret, unaccountable money in politics by requiring, through executive order or legislation, significantly more disclosure and transparency—by outside groups, government contractors, and public corporations to their shareholders.

Everyone plays by fair commonsense rules and is held accountable:

End the mockery of existing campaign finance rules through legislation to shut down

individual-candidate super PACs and effectively prevent coordination between candidates and outside groups; ensuring enforcement agencies have the funding and authority the need; increasing penalties for violations to be strong deterrents; and protecting every voter's access to the ballot box.

- **Prohibiting coordination:** We need to fight to eliminate super PACs and outside spending abuses.
- **Strengthening enforcement:** We need to ensure election regulators have the funding and authority to ensure real enforcement of campaign finance laws. Big money is drowning out the voices of everyday Americans, and we must have the necessary tools to fight back and safeguard our electoral and political integrity

4. RESPONDING TO ATTACKS:

Key to understand:

- *The American people are so fed up with the way things are right now, they are strongly embracing substantial, substantive reforms like the ones outlined above, and they don't trust politicians who refuse to support them.*
- *Voters are so angry that their voices aren't being heard in politics because of the influence of big money, that even though many are sympathetic to many of these attacks, the vast majority still favors small donor public financing and other campaign finance reforms over the status quo.*
- *You have an advantage over anyone who prefers the status quo. Respond to attacks about reform by pivoting back to your values.*
- *Don't get caught up in the details of a particular proposal. You will be most successful by sticking to values-based messaging and painting a picture of the contrast between the status quo and a 21st Century democracy that works for all of us.*

Here is a short set of expected attacks and poll-tested responses.

Attack 1: We can't afford taxpayer-financed elections, or welfare for politicians. Politicians can raise their own money to run for office.

Response: We are all paying a huge price for the current system, because decisions made in by politicians benefit lobbyists and the special interests they work for. Politicians pay attention to the donors, not regular people. Until and unless voters' voices are heard, wealthy special interests are going to call the shots, shutting the rest of us out. They exact a far higher price in back room deals than any citizen-funded election program will ever cost.

Attack 2: Money will always find a way into politics, so trying to get rid of its influence is a fool's errand.

Response: I'm not opposed to money in politics. But I am opposed to the dependence candidates have on the wealthy special interests providing it. That's the problem to solve. We need to transform the way our elections are funded, so that candidates have the option to run with solely with the support of everyday voters they wish to represent instead of big-money donors.

Attack 3: You criticize outside groups and want them to be transparent, but you're benefiting from that money, too.

Response: I would love for all the outside money to go away, I want the people in charge of elections, not the big spending shadowy front groups who are running more negative ads than the two of us combined can afford. I'm ready to work to make this the last election cycle that voters have to deal with secret money and these unaccountable, secret campaign groups.

Attack 4: There are some good reasons to allow anonymous donations by certain special

interests groups, if they fear being targeted or threatened for their political beliefs.

Response: A billionaire funding attack ads in a presidential race is a far cry from a small donor being targeted for intimidation by those holding opposing views. We can craft disclosure laws that protect small and individual donors while still bringing into the light the secret and shadowy figures who are funding the vast majority of independent political TV ads and lobbying our elected officials. The American people deserve to know who's funding our elections and what those donors expect in return.

Attack 5: Campaign finance reform always leads to unintended consequences. We pass one reform and another loophole opens up. We pass something to close that one, and a third one opens. There's no stopping the flow of money in politics.

Response: The true challenge of reforming our campaign finance system is not to stop all the money flowing into our elections. It's to bring the people back in. People have lost faith the ability of politicians to address their concerns because they think our elected officials only listen to the big-money donors and special interests. In order to rebuild public trust, we have to turn not simply to efforts to stop money from buying access and influence, but also to efforts to increase the role that regular people can play in our democracy. The answer is not to throw up our hands and say, "We can't fix this." The answer is to come together, roll up our sleeves, and get to work putting people back in charge of their democracy.

Attack 6: Organizations should be able to speak out on the issues they and their members care about. That's not just free speech, it's the freedom to assemble and associate. People who want to limit money in politics want to shut down the First Amendment rights of those who simply disagree.

Response: I agree that organizations, individuals, and candidates should be able to speak out on issues they care about. But no one should be able to do so in a way that drowns out the voices of everyone else, or in ways that are anonymous and unaccountable, or without being willing to abide by simple rules. Right now, wealthy special interests can dump in a million dollars or more to any campaign and we'd never know who they are. The answer is in proposing real solutions to address these problems, not throwing up our hands and saying there's nothing we can do to fix it.

Attack 7: Americans should have the right to contribute to the candidate of their choice or to help elect that candidate without the government telling them whether it's appropriate. When it comes to free speech, we need to err on the side of caution and have fewer limitations.

Response: I believe the First Amendment belongs to all of us—not just billionaires able to write big checks. Right now, regular Americans can exercise their free speech rights, but unless they've won the lottery or run a Wall Street hedge fund, few people will hear them.