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The Presidential Nominating Process, Campaign Money, and Popular Love”

Robin Kolodny¹

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Abstract Could it be that money doesn't matter in American elections? A fixation on campaign finance reduces the influence of money on politics as purely transactional. But what if you are self-financed or don't spend very much money on campaigns, yet still draw enormous media attention? Donald Trump's candidacy forces us to reexamine the roots of success in American politics. What Trump lacks in campaign money, he more than makes up for with claims to great personal wealth and the exhortation of capitalism and favorable markets as a panacea for America's ills, especially the ills defined by Trump. Over the years, Trump cultivated an aspiration to consume as he did, despite failed businesses and failed marriages. These events lead us to reexamine traditional views about the relevance of campaign cash in American campaigns.

Keywords Campaign finance · Presidential campaigns · Presidential popularity · Super PACs · Donald Trump · Mass media

*Tell me that you want the kind of things
That money just can't buy
I don't care too much for money
Money can't buy me love (McCartney 1964)*

The Beatles' lyrics, quoted above, came to mind on the eve of the South Carolina primary, when it became clear that Jeb

Bush – former governor of Florida, brother of one former president, son of another, and beneficiary of the largest super PAC of the 2016 presidential primary season – was headed for certain defeat and humiliation. Bush seemed to have everything – establishment backing, huge name recognition, a successful governing record, and solid formal and informal fundraising capacity. He lacked only the interest of Republican primary voters, the “love” that seemed to go to Donald Trump, Florida Senator and one-time protégé Marco Rubio (Barbaro 2015), and Texas Senator Ted Cruz. Trump, who mostly self-funded and raised and spent the least amount of money of any of the major contenders, ultimately earned the love of some 40 % of Republican primary voters and caucus attendees.

Trump's success raises the question: Could it be that money doesn't “matter” in American elections? As a scholar of campaign finance, I find it extremely odd that the attention of social scientists and journalists often focuses on the tallies of campaign funds collected by candidates and on the composition of the donor bases that produce this result. A fixation on campaign finance reduces the influence of those with money on politics to a transactional one: those who want favors from politicians “buy” them with campaign cash. This view ignores the substantial power of those who do not engage in such observable transactions. Other social scientists, especially sociologists, have done a better job of revealing the basis of the distorting power of rich people on American politics.

Money: Campaign Donations

To run for president in the United States, you need to establish a personal campaign operation. Since 1974, the USA has prohibited the major political party organizations from running their candidate's campaign in the general election.

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Also, since 1972, both major political parties have embraced a nominating system that asks ordinary citizens to register their preferences for their party's nominee for president via primaries and caucuses, replacing the party elites who previously had ultimate authority. This system is distinctive: in most parliamentary democracies, candidates for prime minister are selected by members who have been elected to parliament. The American system of nomination and election of presidents demands that candidates have their own fundraising operation.

Candidate committees must report all contributions and expenditures to the Federal Election Commission (FEC). Contributions from individuals, political parties and political action committees (popularly known as PACs, the political arms of interest groups) are legally limited to very modest amounts because large, unlimited contributions would give the appearance of undue influence from a particular donor on a particular candidate. Through traditional PACs, interest groups have two major ways to influence elections: they can donate directly to candidates or political parties, or they can conduct independent expenditure campaigns (Boatright 2011). There is a widespread belief that most PACs are affiliated with corporations and flood Washington with campaign money, leading to grave concerns about corporate America's ability to corrupt the political process. However, David Hart finds that not all firms that do business with the government, and do substantial business at that, have PACs at all. He looks at high-tech firms' PAC formation and finds that while more of them do form PACs over time, it is in response to increased transactions with the government (e.g. sales, regulation, research/development funds) in the policy arena, not as a result of pressure from lawmakers about the rising cost of campaigns. On average, most PACs in the high-tech sector were rather modest in size. The presence of a national lobbying office in Washington D.C. proves to be a larger factor in firm success than PAC activity (Hart 2001).

While money given directly to candidates is limited by law, the rights of others (individuals and interest groups in particular) to express their views have led to a series of clever workarounds that essentially allow outsiders to spend unlimited amounts of money on elections. One vessel for such spending is a super PAC, an invention made possible by the Supreme Court ruling *Citizens United* in 2010. Super PACs have existed since the 2010 cycle and have been most noticeable in U.S. Senate races. The 2012 presidential election was the first in which super PACs were used. In 2016, most observers expected super PACs to dominate the financing of the nominating contests and general election.

However, Fig. 1 tells a different story. The blue bars indicate the amount of money the candidates have raised for their own campaign committees up to June 7, 2016. These amounts include self-donations as well as donations from others. The Democratic candidates, former Secretary of State Hillary

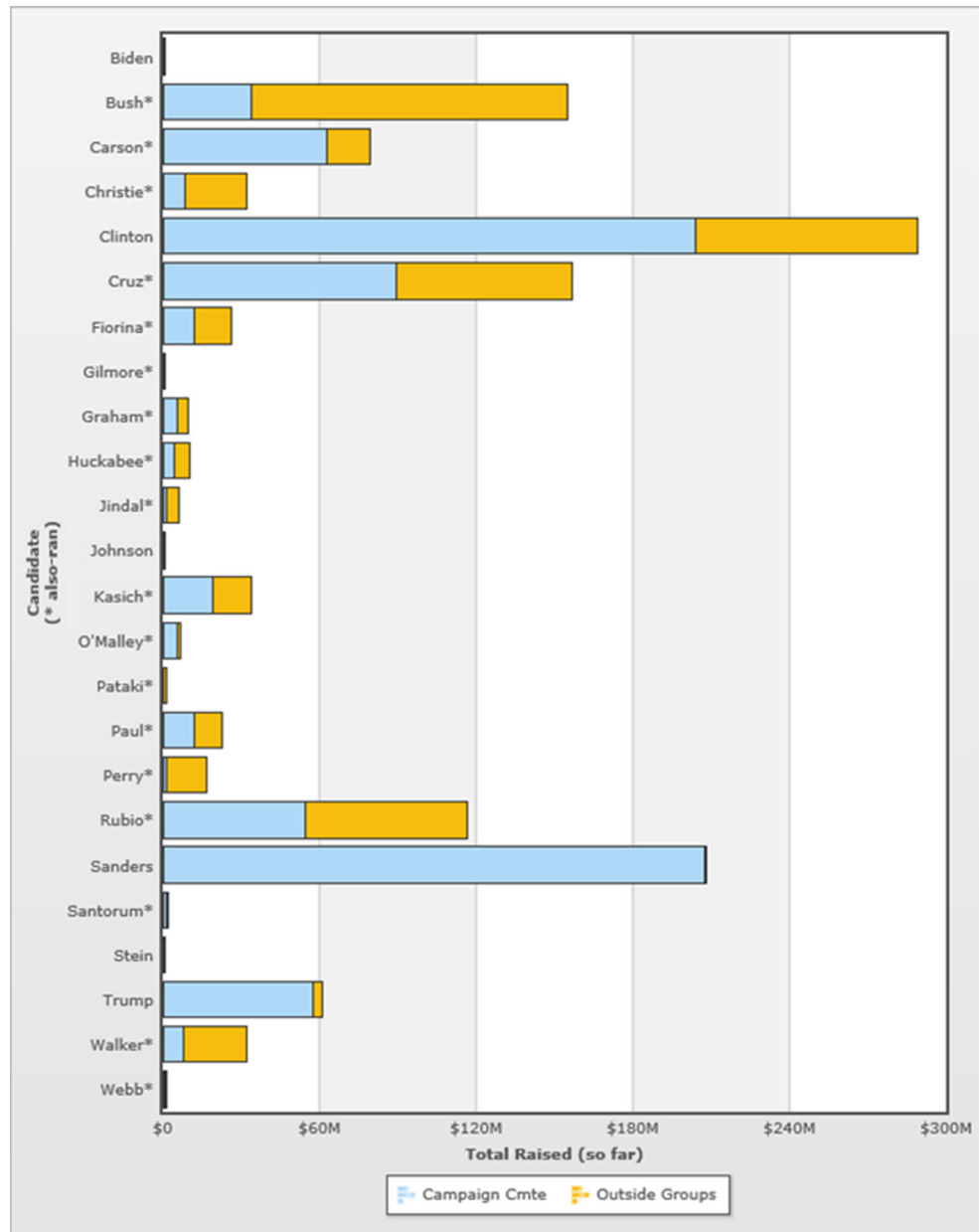
Clinton and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, have collected the most by far. On the Republican side, the competitive candidates with the most to the least in their candidate committee funds were Cruz, retired surgeon Ben Carson, Trump, Rubio, Bush, and Ohio Governor John Kasich. In addition, nearly every candidate has a yellow bar next to their blue bar, indicating the amount collected by a super PAC on their behalf, but not coordinated directly with them. Now, the picture changes, for the candidate benefiting most from a super PAC was Bush, followed by Clinton, Cruz and Rubio. Two candidates with unexpected success, Sanders and Trump, achieved it with little to no super PAC money.

The absence of super PAC support for Trump in particular leads some to question the importance of money in politics. This illustrates the shortcomings of the "transactional" approach to campaign finance. When we focus on the transactions of campaign donations, we reduce everything in the political world to be about the election accounts of politicians who are only interested in retaining office, which is an "insider" strategy. Likewise, super PACs that support presidential candidates signify the interest of a very few wealthy donors in a particular candidate. The assumption is that money used to dominate the airwaves will shower (positive) attention on the super PAC's preferred candidate, which will lead the electorate to give their support. While there is no question that donations illustrate either an existing relationship between donor and candidate or an aspirational relationship between donor and candidate, the 2016 presidential nominating cycle shows the limitations of our previous assumptions about the power of campaign donations.

Money: Self-Financing or Self-Love

Sometimes very wealthy candidates decide to underwrite their run for office with their own money and forego fundraising entirely. Conventional wisdom holds that self-financed candidates will have a huge advantage over candidates who need to hit the pavement for money because procuring funds takes away precious time from campaigning. Jennifer Steen's extensive study of self-financed candidates eviscerates many of these assertions. Self-funded candidates do not win very often – while they discourage some competitors from running, they typically do quite poorly with voters. One reason for this is that fundraising does not, in fact, detract from a successful campaign. Instead, it is a form of campaigning itself, especially with community opinion leaders. Steen also finds that if a self-financed candidate wins office, the candidate never self-finances the reelection bid, having learned important lessons about what fundraising can do (Steen 2006). Adam Brown underscores the central problem with candidate-as-donor in his study of self-financed gubernatorial candidates. He finds that donors are rather strategic when selecting which

Fig. 1 Total raised by candidate campaigns and supporting outside groups as of June 7, 2016



Source: Center for Responsive Politics, http://www.opensecrets.org/pres16/raised_summ.php

candidates will gain their contributions. They examine candidates' policy positions as well as their likelihood of winning. Brown found one exception to this rule: "...there is one type of donor that doesn't ever seriously ask herself which

candidate to give her money to: The self-financed donor (Brown 2012, 27)."

Figure 2 shows that as of the most recent FEC filing, Trump has given his campaign committee over \$43 million,

Fig. 2 Source of funds – Donald Trump as of May 23, 2016

Individual Contributions	\$13,857,206	(24%)
- Small Individual Contributions	\$10,514,404	(18%)
- Large Individual Contributions	\$3,446,622	(6%)
PAC Contributions	\$0	(0%)
Candidate self-financing	\$43,454,544	(75%)
Federal Funds	\$0	(0%)
Other	\$350,241	(1%)
Total	\$57,661,991	

Source: Center for Responsive Politics, "Donald Trump," <https://www.opensecrets.org/pres16/candidate.php?id=N00023864> accessed 6/15/16.

75 % of its total receipts of nearly \$58 million. In contrast, Clinton has raised more than \$204 million, none of it from personal funds. All we can conclude from this so far is that Trump is personally invested in his campaign. However, even Trump conceded that he cannot (or will not) personally finance the general election campaign contest. In May, Trump entered into a joint fundraising deal with the Republican National Committee (RNC), though many Republican-affiliated big donors have stated their intention not to donate to Trump (Haberman et al. 2016).

Money: Buying Support from Politicians?

While there has been an enormous amount of scholarship focused on whether PAC donations buy votes in Congress (in short, they don't appear to do so), Hall and Deardorff offer a view of group influence that is largely unrelated to the size of PAC donations. Indeed, they argue that the donations received by politicians from any particular PAC are so small that politicians would be practically giving away their votes. Instead, they focus on the legislative labor offered to members of Congress by professional lobbyists: "Interest groups today spend over a billion dollars a year lobbying Congress, more than they spend in PAC contributions and independent expenditures to congressional campaigns combined" (Hall and Deardorff 2006, 69).

Those who write about campaign money often overlook corporate investment in lobbying. They make the assumption that any interest that donates to politics must also have an established lobbying office. Lobbying and campaigning are thought to be two sides of the same coin. As *Politico* writer Kenneth Vogel puts it:

Though I'd spent years watching deep-pocketed interests interface with government, big giving never struck me as a particularly effective way for billionaires to get what they wanted. Savvy CEOs with major interests before government consider lobbying a more effective way to boost or protect their interests. Lobbying, in other words, is for financial gain, while big campaign contributions are mostly for passion or ego (Vogel 2014, 22).

One irony of Trump's past political behavior is that he has made significant donations to politicians on both sides of the aisle, though he has donated exclusively to Republicans since 2010 (Singer 2016). During the Republican debates, Trump claimed that politicians took donations and then did his bidding. Now that he is seeking donations, will he acknowledge that he is controlled by money? That is highly unlikely, as his professed independence from money's effects up until the present has made his candidacy possible.

Love: the Making of the Pre-2016 Trump

What Trump lacks in campaign money, he more than compensates for with claims to great personal wealth and exhortations for capitalism and favorable markets as a panacea for America's ills. Many have written about Trump's deficiencies as a politician and his strength as a reality TV star. However, Trump attracts "love" like no other candidate due to his constant coverage by the media. Much of the coverage is not flattering. Obviously, this makes no difference in his supporters' eyes.

Like so many reportedly self-made men, Trump's Horatio Alger story, false though it may be in his case, attracts attention because of the American notion that anyone can make it in America. Trump has built his narrative as someone who took a little money and made a lot as a result. In Trump's long-running reality TV show, *The Apprentice*, the mogul was the judge of success, deciding each week which contestant should be eliminated on account of deficient business skills. In addition, Trump's ability to label someone a "loser" in a one-hour show makes the determination of complex traits of business skill look "obvious" – as they seem to be to Trump. Simplicity is a very attractive quality, and Trump perfected it then and continues it now, adding to his media allure.

Scholars of reality television and popular culture identified Trump's distinctive quality some time ago. In 2007, Lisa Perks wrote of the "royal" yet relatable imagery of Trump:

Trump's commodification has become so omnipresent that he is now referred to in popular press as "The Donald." The Donald's ability to profit from the free market's invisible hand has even elevated him to divine status (at least on the show). As he descends an escalator in his eponymous towers, "royal" trumpets sound in the background (23 September 2004). The top of the escalator may have originated in heaven judging by the imagery shown before the final scene of the 4 November 2004 episode: Fast-moving clouds are shown jetting across the New York City skyline and a crescendoing [sic] chorus is heard before a tuxedoed Trump steps into the board room for the firing. As a divine figure, Trump possesses the ability to define the lives of his apprentices: In this episode, he privileges industry over workers explaining, "It's not personal, it's just business. (Perks 2007, 110)

Trump makes the "just business" aspect of his success seem attainable. The show's setup implies that any person willing to work hard can achieve the wild financial success Trump displays. They need only display the determination the eventual winners do in the show's contrived situations. Jim McGuigan, a scholar of cultural analysis, argues that shows

like *The Apprentice* draw attention away from the classic imbalance between rich and poor, toward the “cool capitalism” view that portrays the poor as legitimate competitors with the rich:

The public face of capitalism, however, has changed from its earlier, and some might argue its original, form in Protestant asceticism ... to a much more hedonistic and ‘cool’ appearance. Cool capitalism is largely defined by the incorporation of signs of disaffection and resistance into capitalism itself, thereby contributing to the reproduction of the system and reducing opposition to it. This is a vital feature of capitalism’s hegemonic dominance now... A programme like *The Apprentice*, then, performs an ideological role in projecting the values of free-market business in a seductive manner that disarms criticism. (McGuigan 2008, 309).

Trump’s use of TV shows, products, casinos, and all other branding sold seduction in spades. If not “love,” then at least an aspiration to consume like Trump became associated with him. Along the lines of the “cool capitalism” view, the journey as well as the goods matter. So, Trump has failed businesses and failed marriages, yet always seems to come out on top. Setbacks become details. Even more interesting, the tough love displayed by business leaders on reality TV becomes an asset. As Boyle and Kelly explain while analyzing the United Kingdom’s *Dragon’s Den*:

...the viewer is regularly aligned with the viewpoints of Sugar and the ‘dragons’ and is thus encouraged to draw upon the skills, knowledge and expertise put forward by these entrepreneurs before going on to judge the contestants and participants accordingly. It is also the case that these figures perform a certain ‘nasty’ role that has become appealing to audiences schooled in reality TV and which is indicative of the televisual skills they have acquired. However, this does not necessarily make them appear inauthentic, as their ruthlessness is again legitimised by their off-screen achievements within the demanding world of business. (Boyle and Kelly 2010, 337).

Political scientists seem startled at the response Trump’s nasty language and assertions get from some Americans. Apparently, some voters respect the “plain talk” on hot-button issues. If ruthlessness brings success, so be it.

Love: the Voters Vote

So, Trump has built a relatable brand. How does that translate into political support? Rapoport, Abramowitz and Stone argue

that Trump’s positions are precisely what 40 % of the Republican primary electorate want. Even supporters of other Republican candidates approved of Trump’s positions. Furthermore, when it came to candidate preference, Trump rated highly among Republicans throughout the contest. He was not simply the beneficiary of a crowded field; he was getting the love (Rapoport et al. 2016). Trump was in a strong position to win the nomination early on despite having little in the way of professional campaign staff, any real campaign experience, paid media or praise from the free press (earned media). The more outrageous his claims, the more press coverage he got, and the more “establishment” candidates such as Bush seemed to be part of a past complacency in politics.

Can Trump Spread the Love?

When all likely voters are surveyed, Trump’s issues emerge more clearly. Perhaps the most problematic tension is with the “moneyed” interests discussed at the beginning. Charles Lindblom’s classic essay, “The Market as Prison,” illustrates how corporate interests get what they want out of politicians by arguing that any particular policy they have concerns about could lead to unemployment (Lindblom 1982). Neither the employer nor the politician knows if this is true or not, but truth doesn’t matter here. Business and politics depend on a mutual understanding that economic uncertainty is troubling for the future of both. Business as a structural bloc, not as individual enterprises, is wary of the uncertainty of Trump. It’s not just about his policy positions, but also about his unconventional advisors and his inexperience with policy-making. One thing is for certain – the 2016 election will force us to examine how money and love fit into politics.

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