

Roots of outside campaign funding run deep

October 9th, 2012

By Jeff Brindle

Many lament the blitzkrieg of outside political spending in recent years.

Some blame it on the 2010 Citizens United ruling, which allowed unlimited independent spending in federal elections by corporations and union.

But the real cause may run deeper.

The root of this phenomenon, which has infected the electoral landscape, may be a major shift in our political culture since World War II. This generational shift has laid the groundwork for the growth of independent spending. Much of it has been done in secret, usually at the expense of political parties, candidates and voters.

A comparison of the political values of the Depression Era/World War II generation to those of post-war Americans helps explain the genesis of the age of independent spending.

The World War II generation valued frugality and saving. Internationally, they supported a bi-partisan foreign policy.

Most of all, there was greater allegiance to the two political parties, which represented broad coalitions of people.

Party identification was much stronger back then. According to the Pew Research Center, 76 percent of the public identified themselves as Republican or Democrat in 1939. Only 18 percent considered themselves independent.

Now, in 2012, only 56 percent of the people consider themselves Republican or Democrat. The share identifying themselves as independent has risen to 38 percent- more than double the 1939 figure and the largest percentage ever.

The Post-World War II baby boomers faced a much different world than their parents. From the late 1940's to the 1970's, America experienced strong economic growth.

Relatively speaking, it was a period of peace and prosperity. The baby boomers experienced neither world war nor the deprivation that came with the depression.

As a result, the political culture and values changed. Whereas the World War II generation supported the political party system, the baby boomers, more formally educated than their forbears, loosened their ties with political parties and engaged to a greater extent in single-issue politics.

Baby boomers involved themselves in social movements such as the anti-Vietnam war movement, civil rights, nuclear disarmament, feminism, and ecology.

Further, the Watergate scandal increased cynicism among the emerging electorate and distrust in established institutions like political parties and government.

Certainly, many other factors contributed to the explosion of independent spending.

Independent spending started surging soon after Buckley vs Valeo declared in 1976 that wealthy individuals were not bound by federal contribution limits if they spent independently. The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002, better known as McCain Feingold, greatly accelerated this trend when it banned soft money contributions to national parties. Instead, the money poured into independent groups.

But without the broader cultural shift, these legal and legislative changes might not have had as much impact. The change in political values created a climate for outside spending to flourish.

To reverse this trend completely would mean changing the political culture. That will not happen any time soon- if ever.

Even so, there are steps that can be taken to stem the tide of independent spending.

First, national parties should be allowed to raise more money, coordinate their activities with candidates, and provide more money to the state party organizations.

Second, contribution limits to federal candidates should be raised and the Presidential Public Financing Program should be reformed and strengthened.

Thirdly, laws requiring disclosure of contributors and expenditures by independent 527's, 501c's and Super PACs should be enacted at both the federal and state levels.

While it could take years to significantly reduce the involvement of outside groups in our elections, these reforms would help offset their influence while bringing their activities out in the open.

Jeff Brindle is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission. The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.