

February 8, 2010

Strong Campaign Finance Reform: Good Policy, Good Politics

To: Common Cause, Change Congress, Public Campaign Action Fund
From: Stan Greenberg, Jesse Contario and Andrew Baumann, GQRR
Mark McKinnon, McKinnon Media

Ratings for everyone in Washington are low and voters are deeply pessimistic about the direction the country is heading. Driving those sentiments, according to a new national survey conducted for Common Cause, Change Congress and the Public Campaign Action Fund by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner in conjunction with McKinnon Media, is the belief that special interests are still running the show and that voters' voices are being drowned out by those who help fund politicians' campaigns.

This antipathy leaves voters staunchly opposed to anything that makes it easier for special interests to influence the outcome of elections, and by a two-to-one margin they oppose the recent Supreme Court decision on Citizens United. Voters crave solutions that will put power back in the hands of the people and respond intensely to proposals that would do so.

Voters, particularly independents, strongly embrace the Fair Elections Now Act, a system that allows candidates who eschew contributions over 100 dollars to receive public matching funds for money they raise from individuals in their own state. Voters support the Fair Elections Now Act by a two-to-one margin (62 to 31 percent). Perhaps more important for congressional incumbents, support for the Fair Elections Now Act offers a significant political boost. By a net of 15 points, voters say they are more likely to support the re-election of their Member of Congress (asked by name) if he or she votes in favor of a reform package that includes the Fair Elections Now Act as well as limits on spending by foreign corporations, even after hearing messaging in opposition to the proposal.

Voters Angry About Influence of Special Interest, Especially Independents

Voters are disgusted with 'business as usual' in Washington. There is a deep and pervasive belief, particularly among independents, that special interests are running things and Members of Congress listen more to those that fund their campaigns than the voters that they are supposed to be representing. Three quarters believe that special interests hold too much influence over Washington today while fewer than a quarter believe that ordinary citizens can still influence what happens in politics. Similarly, nearly 80 percent say that Members of Congress are con-

trolled by the groups that help fund their political campaigns while fewer than a fifth believe that Members listen more to the voters.

Moreover, voters do not believe that President Obama has fulfilled his promise to reduce the influence of special interests, with majorities saying both that special interests influence has increased since Obama took office and that the president has not done enough to reduce their influence. On all of these measures, regarding both Obama and Congress, independents are even more cynical and skeptical.

■ **Table 1:** Intense Cynicism over Influence of Special Interests Prevails, Especially Among Independents

	First Statement	Second Statement	First – Second Net
	<i>Total</i>		
	<i>Independents</i>		
Limits should be placed on campaign spending OR Should not place limits on campaign spending	82	14	+67
Members of Congress are controlled by groups that fund campaigns OR Members of Congress listen to regular voters	87	11	+76
Special interests have too much influence in Washington OR Ordinary citizens still have ability to influence politics in Washington	79	18	+61
Obama has made effort to reduce influence of special interests OR Obama has not done enough to reduce influence of special interests	86	12	+74
Influence of special interests decreased since Obama took office OR Influence of special interests increased since Obama took office	74	24	+50
	81	16	+65
	35	56	-21
	27	62	-35
	32	51	-19
	25	50	-25

With voters so concerned about the influence of special interests, it is no surprise that they strongly oppose the recent Supreme Court decision in the Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission case. By a stark 64 to 27 percent margin, voters oppose this decision, with 47 percent strongly opposed. A majority of Democrats, Republicans and independents are opposed, but independents show the strongest antagonism, with 72 percent disagreeing with the ruling.

Broad Support for Reform Proposals, Including Fair Elections Now Act

Angry at Washington and deeply opposed to the recent Supreme Court ruling, voters strongly support proposals to limit corporate influence and develop a program that would allow politicians to run campaigns using small contributions from their constituents.

A majority of voters strongly favor both requiring corporations to get shareholder approval for political spending (56 percent strongly favor, 80 percent total favor) and a ban on political spending by foreign corporations (51 percent strongly favor, 60 percent total favor). A proposal similar to the Fair Elections Now Act also receives extremely high marks with 62 percent in favor versus just 32 percent opposed for a 30-point margin in favor – higher than the margin for the ban on political spending by foreign corporations.

When voters are read a short description of the Fair Elections Now Act, support holds strong at two-to-one in favor, with majority support from all segments of the political spectrum.

■ **Table 2:** Fair Elections Now Act Receives Majority Support Across Party Lines

	Support	Oppose	Net Difference
Support for Fair Elections Now Act			
Total	62	31	+31
Democrats	70	24	+46
Independents	67	30	+37
Republicans	50	40	+10

However, in an environment where voters are experiencing bailout and spending fatigue, a critique that the Fair Elections Now Act would represent nothing more than a ‘bailout to help politicians pay for TV ads’ does find some marginal traction – supported by 42 percent. Still, a 47 percent plurality reject that criticism and agree with a counter-argument that the Fair Elections Now Act is paid for without funding from taxpayers and is the best way to reduce wasteful pork spending. Moreover, even after hearing these criticisms, at the end of the survey, voters still overwhelmingly want to reward members who vote for the Fair Elections Now Act.

Voters Say They Will Reward Backers of Bold Campaign Reforms

Congressional incumbents who take seriously voters’ support for these proposals are likely to be rewarded in November at the ballot box; those who oppose these reforms do so at their own peril.

When presented with potential legislative actions that would help reduce the influence big corporations have on elections, voters strongly support reform. By two-to-one, voters believe that we must ban foreign corporations from spending money to influence our elections and that corporations should be required to get shareholder approval before spending money to influence campaigns, rather than believing that such bans would limit freedom of speech. When the pro-reform argument is made even more forceful by adding a call for a system that allows candidates to run for office without ever taking contributions over 100 dollars, support holds steady at 62 percent, despite the addition of stronger language from opponents that this approach would merely allow politicians to use taxpayer money to fund their campaigns.

A majority of Democrats, independents and Republicans alike support both plans, but it is worth noting that independents are much more supportive of the more robust proposal that includes the Fair Elections Now Act (63 percent favor the stronger reform, compared to 56 percent who favor the more limited approach). Independents are even more disillusioned with the current state of things in Washington which makes them especially receptive to bold actions to rein in special interests.

Beyond being good policy in the eyes of the voters, supporting these plans also appears to be good politics for Members of Congress. Voters are more likely to support their Member for re-election if they support these campaign finance reform proposals and are less likely to reelect a Member who opposes reform.

Members who support the more robust proposal get an extra boost in support, particularly from independent and Democratic voters.

■ **Table 3:** Vote for Overarching Reform Translates Into Re-election Votes

	More Likely To Reelect	Less Likely to Reelect	More – Less Likely
Impact of Vote for Limited Reform Proposal			
Total	25	16	+10
Democrats	21	17	+4
Independents	31	17	+14
Republicans	25	14	+11
Impact of Vote for Proposal Including Fair Elections Now Act			
Total	28	13	+15
Democrats	31	10	+20
Independents	31	13	+18
Republicans	23	17	+7

This memo is based on a survey of 805 likely 2010 voters nationwide conducted February 2-4, 2010 by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research in conjunction with McKinnon Media. The margin of error is ± 3.5 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence interval.