



Public Perception  
and the  
“Appearance of Corruption” in  
Campaign Finance

An Analysis of CCES National Survey Data

Jason M. Farrell & Nima Veisoh  
December 16, 2011



## Introduction

The Center for Competitive Politics, in cooperation with University of Missouri Professor Jeff Milyo, included several questions in the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a national representative survey of 55,400 individuals. The CCES data includes a set of common content questions given to all participants and separate team content questions developed by the University of Missouri and administered to a nationally representative subset of 1,000 persons. A battery of eight campaign-finance-related questions was included in the Missouri team content; these are listed in full in the appendix.<sup>1</sup>

We examine this data to learn what the average American thought about taxpayer-funded elections, contribution limits, the appearance of corruption, and disclosure. Since not just corruption, but the “appearance of corruption,” i.e. the public’s perception of the severity of corrupt practices in government bodies, has been given weight by the Supreme Court, we felt it was crucial to look at reliable data of a cross section of Americans and try to gain insight into their views, as well as to see how different wordings can skew the results in surveys on these topics.<sup>2</sup>

**We examine this data to learn what the average American thought about taxpayer-funded elections, contribution limits, the appearance of corruption, and disclosure.**

## Summary of Findings

Based on answers to the questions we asked as well as common content data, we have concluded from this information that:

- 1) Federal individual contribution limits may be much too low to trigger any sort of “appearance of corruption” in the public;
- 2) People who do not donate to campaigns are more likely to be concerned about the corrupting influence of money on politics;
- 3) Disclosure is generally supported by both respondents who donate and do not donate, however, neither tend to use disclosure data when making political decisions;
- 4) Americans generally do not like the idea of taxpayer-financed campaigns, even when asked with differently worded questions;
- 5) Wording matters: the public in general may not have a thorough understanding of exactly what a “clean election” system is and may respond to some surveys based on cursory or incomplete knowledge.

---

1 CCP used data from both our own submissions and common content when writing this report.

2 See also: <http://corp.yougov.com/scientific-research/cces/>

## “Appearance of Corruption”: How Much Money Causes Corruption?

One of the most interesting findings from the survey is the contrast between apparent federal individual contribution limits and the respondents’ perception of what amount is “corrupting.”

The survey asked the question:

*Candidates for Congress raise their own campaign funds from private sources. In 2008, the average campaign expenditure for a winning candidate in a U.S. race was about \$1.1 million, and the average campaign expenditure for a winning Senate seat was about \$6.5 million.*

*At what level do you think a contribution to a candidate for Congress becomes large enough to exert a corrupting influence on that candidate?*

Respondents were allowed to choose any amount, no amount, or a specific write-in dollar amount of their own. This led to a wide spread of answers ranging from as low as \$1, to as high as \$5,000,000. A significant number of responses (40.19%) claimed “any amount” raised concerns about corruption, yet a solid majority (71.34% for version A and 53.22% for version B of the public finance question) of the respondents do not support public funding of campaigns.

The current federal individual contribution limit is \$2,500, an answer chosen by only eight respondents. The median (middle) and mode (most frequently occurring) answers for those who gave a dollar amount were both \$10,000, capturing 96 out of 430 responses.

The federal individual contribution limit was set at \$1,000 by the Federal Elections Campaign Act of 1971, and is indexed for inflation in every odd-numbered year. The legislation was passed in the wake of a 1966 scandal involving the misuse of public funds by Sen. Tom Dodd (D-CT) and a general increase in interest in campaign finance reform that had been upwelling since the end of World War II.<sup>3</sup> This poll is instructive since the most popular answer is \$7,500 higher than current law allows, calling into question the “appearance of corruption” cited by the Supreme Court in *Buckley v. Valeo* and its relationship to contribution limits.

So why does public opinion in this case seem to be at odds with legal limits, especially with a public that seems overwhelmingly leery about moneyed interests in Washington?

Perhaps people think \$10,000 is a more “corruptible” limit, because the standard of \$2,500 actually seems to have no quantitative or psychological basis. Or put more simply, there does not appear to be any reason why the standard is set to \$2,500.

**Perhaps people think \$10,000 is a more “corruptible” limit, because the standard of \$2,500 actually seems to have no quantitative or psychological basis.**

It is also worth mentioning that only 133 respondents (29.14% of those who chose a specific dollar amount) fell at or below \$2,500; 300 reported larger dollar amounts as corrupting. We can extrapolate here that if this is a fair

cross-section of American opinion, a reasonable person might conclude that the individual limit is too low and that a \$2,500 individual contribution may not be of great concern with respect to the appearance of corruption.

Since it is not until you get to five figures that people start to sweat about corruption, one might argue that a rich person who can afford to donate \$10,000 will have more influence than a middle

3 <http://www.polisci.ccsu.edu/trieb/70.HTM>



class person who can only afford \$2,500, and thus the rich are getting an unfair amount of leverage in the electoral process. However, it stands to reason that the number of people granting smaller donations will be significantly larger than those donating larger amounts, which could offset much of the “undue influence” by those with deeper pockets if the limit was a mere \$10,000 and should prevent them from being able to exert greater pressure on the political process as a class. This could be an area for future research.

## **Disclosure**

In general, respondents were tolerant or approving of disclosure laws in roughly the same proportion whether they donated to political campaigns or did not.

The survey asked if the respondents:

1. Had used disclosure information to learn about the support of others for candidates;
2. Believed disclosure violated privacy;
3. Believed disclosure was necessary to deter corruption;
4. Believed others would use disclosure information;
5. Used disclosure information to decide which candidate to support;
6. Believed disclosure may deter contributions.

31.19% of respondents said they believed disclosure violated privacy, with 45.87% believing it did not. A clear majority of 60% said it was necessary to deter corruption. When cross-referenced with those who claimed to have donated, the approval proportions were roughly the same; of the 248 who reported they had donated, 79 (about 31%) reported they did agree with the statement that disclosure violated privacy rights, while 111 (about 44%) disagreed. Of the 623 who reported they had not donated 187 (about 39%) agreed with the statement and 272 (about 43%) did not. While a larger number of respondents did not donate, their overall opinion on disclosure did not seem to change proportionally whether they donated or not. Apparently people are okay with disclosure whether they donated or not.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, when asked if they used disclosure information to 1) learn about the support of others or 2) decide who to support, they chose no 49.51% and 60.04% respectively.

So it seems that while the general public appreciates the idea of disclosure as a sort of deterrent to

corrupt activity, they tend not to use it themselves when making political choices.

**So it seems that while the general public appreciates the idea of disclosure as a sort of deterrent to corrupt activity, they tend not to use it themselves when making political choices.**

Some respondents appear to have mixed feelings on disclosure as well. Of the 313 respondents who reported that they believed disclosure violated privacy, 135 (about 43%) also believed it was necessary to deter corruption. So a little less than one half of respondents who believed disclosure posed a privacy issue seem to grudgingly accept disclosure as a corruption deterrent, even if they are uncomfortable with the privacy intrusion it necessitates.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Data approximated here is unweighted for ease of exposition.

<sup>5</sup> See footnote 4.

Those who use disclosure data are also no more likely to donate than the average person. Of the 164 (about 17% of respondents) who reported affirmatively that they did use disclosure info to decide whom to support, 52 had donated (slightly less than one third). In the general survey, of the entire 1,000 respondents, 248 had donated (about 25% of total respondents). Since they are around the same proportion, it does not seem to make the use of disclosure data a good indicator of predicting who donates.<sup>6</sup>

This might call into question the usefulness of disclosure information for the average voter/donor in general. Most people do not seem to use it, and those who do don't seem to donate in larger or smaller numbers than the average individual according to this poll. One might think using disclosure information gives a person an inside scoop on where politicians are getting their money and can thus make more educated guesses about who to donate to, presumably targeting their donations toward less financially established candidates that aren't in too tight with big donors. Wouldn't educated "disclosure" people be more likely to donate if they have the tools at hand to assess whether a candidate is getting more or less money from "the rich?" If not, is disclosure fulfilling its purpose?

### **Clean Elections and the Importance of Wording in Polls**

According to this poll, Americans are generally opposed to taxpayer-funded "clean elections" programs that exist in several states, though the specific wording of the question matters.

Respondents were randomly assigned one of two questions that asked the same thing differently:

*A: Do you agree that government should give taxpayer dollars to candidates to pay for their campaigns? 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.*

*B: Do you agree that candidates should be allowed to use public funds to pay for their campaigns? 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.*

A significant 71.34% of respondents chose either 1 or 2 and disagreed that "taxpayer dollars" should go to candidates to pay for their campaigns; respondents for question B also opposed the policy, with a slightly narrower, but still significant margin of 53.22%.

These findings seem to contradict statewide polls commissioned by some pro-regulation advocacy groups, who have long claimed widespread public support for the programs.

For example, in January 2010 a telephone poll was conducted by Zogby International that had been commissioned by Common Cause in Connecticut of 503 Connecticut residents who were randomly selected to answer 15 questions. Respondents seemed to underwhelmingly favor the Connecticut clean elections policy: 50% indicated they did not "know enough about it." 45% strongly approved of the program on initial impression. After a brief and pleasant description that mentions nothing about taxes, abuses or any downside of the program, a whopping 79% approved, with apparently over 30% who had claimed ignorance of the program suddenly becoming confidently knowledgeable after a two-sentence description.<sup>7</sup> The study was cited as evidence of voter support.

Such data indicates clearly the folly of polling voters on a complex issue and citing their off-the-cuff opinion as evidence of overwhelming public support.

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 4.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.commoncause.org/atf/cf/%7Bfb3c17e2-cdd1-4df6-92be-bd4429893665%7D/ZOGBY011410.PDF>



## Conclusion

While we are as concerned as the Supreme Court with the “appearance of corruption” with regard to campaign finance, it seems unlikely that the individual contribution limit being held so low has had an impact on public opinion, or that the appearance of corruption would change at all if it were to be raised beyond \$2,500. A number of other factors are likely at play. Nathaniel Persily and Kelli Lamie’s study “Perceptions of Corruption and Campaign Finance: When Public Opinion Determines Constitutional Law” found that the state of the campaign finance system in America has little to do with public perception of corruption; “The share of the population describing government as corrupt went down even as soft money contributions skyrocketed” they argued in their 2004 report that took into account forty years’ worth of public opinion polls.<sup>8</sup> They further concluded:

Moreover, the survey data suggest that an individual’s perception of corruption derives to some extent from that person’s (1) position in society (race, income, education level); (2) opinion of the incumbent President and performance of the economy over the previous year; (3) attitudes concerning taxation and “big government”; and (4) propensity to trust other people, in general. Although we conclude that, indeed, a large majority of Americans believe that the campaign finance system contributes to corruption in government, the data do not suggest that campaign finance reform will have an effect on these attitudes.<sup>9</sup>

Public cynicism certainly plays a role in the “appearance of corruption” issue, regardless of how rampant actual corruption in the political system is, as they suggest, due to pre-existing biases that attempts at reform often affect little. This cynicism probably plays a significant role in people’s voting and donation habits. We can conclude from this survey that people who don’t donate to political campaigns are more likely to think they are corrupt: of our surveyed respondents, the majority who self-reported that they 1) did or did not donate and 2) gave a specific dollar amount as a corruption threshold *did not* donate by approximately a two-to-one margin.

We believe this creates an insight into how the average American thinks about some of these issues. We know they dislike the idea of tax-funded election campaigns. We know they are generally supportive, or at least tolerant, of disclosure requirements, even if they view them as a privacy infringement. We know they can be influenced by the specific wording of a question to respond differently on a subject they may have only limited knowledge of. We can also say strongly that a \$2,500 individual contribution limit is likely unnecessary to deter the appearance of corruption in the eyes of the average American. We would like advocacy groups on both sides to keep these findings in mind moving forward in this debate as we consider public funding, disclosure laws, and contribution limits and their impact on public opinion.

---

8 [http://lsr.nellco.org/upenn\\_wps/30/](http://lsr.nellco.org/upenn_wps/30/)

9 *Ibid.*

## Appendix

### CCES poll questions MIZ333 – MIZ340 used as well as Cc417a\_4

Part I: Unweighted data

#### QUESTION MIZ333: Contribution Limits

*Candidates for Congress raise their own campaign funds from private sources. In 2008, the average campaign expenditure for a winning candidate in a U.S. House race was about \$1.1 million, and the average campaign expenditure for a winning Senate seat was about \$6.5 million.*

At what level do you think a contribution to a candidate for Congress becomes large enough to exert a corrupting influence on that candidate?

Responses:

- (1) \$ [ ] Number of dollars
- (2) Any amount
- (3) No amount

The results:

#### Contribution Limit

Response	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
\$amount	438	44.97	44.97
any amount	394	40.45	85.42
no amount	142	14.58	100.00
Total	974	100.00	



Among those respondents that listed a dollar amount, here is the distribution:

contribution limit -

\$amount	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	5	1.16	1.16
20	2	0.47	1.63
25	1	0.23	1.86
50	1	0.23	2.09
100	14	3.26	5.35
150	2	0.47	5.81
200	4	0.93	6.74
250	5	1.16	7.91
500	13	3.02	10.93
1000	65	15.12	26.05
1500	2	0.47	26.51
2000	10	2.33	28.84
2400	1	0.23	29.07
2500	8	1.86	30.93
5000	50	11.63	42.56
8000	2	0.47	43.02
10000	96	22.33	65.35
15000	1	0.23	65.58
20000	12	2.79	68.37
25000	18	4.19	72.56
30000	1	0.23	72.79
50000	33	7.67	80.47
75000	1	0.23	80.70
100000	44	10.23	90.93
200000	2	0.47	91.40



250000	9	2.09	93.49
500000	11	2.56	96.05
750000	1	0.23	96.28
1000000	9	2.09	98.37
2000000	1	0.23	98.60
2500000	1	0.23	98.84
5000000	2	0.47	99.30
1.00e+07	2	0.47	99.77
1.00e+08	1	0.23	100.00

Total 430 100.00

#### QUESTION MIZ334: Publicly-funded elections

“Version A” asks respondents if they agree that “Government should give taxpayer dollars to candidates to pay for their campaigns.” Responses are on a 5-point scale: 1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree

#### Public Funding –Version A

Response	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	280	60.48	60.48
2	41	8.86	69.33
3	76	16.41	85.75
4	35	7.56	93.30
5	31	6.70	100.00
Total	463	100.00	

“Version B” asks respondents if they agree that “Candidates should be allowed to use public funds to pay for their campaigns.” Responses are on a 5-point scale: 1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree



Public Funding- Version B

Response	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	243	45.76	45.76
2	52	9.79	55.56
3	104	19.59	75.14
4	48	9.04	84.18
5	84	15.82	100.00
Total	531	100.00	

QUESTIONS MIZ335-340 : Disclosure in Federal Elections

These responses are also on a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree)

tab miz335 disclosure: - used info to learn about support of others

Response	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	396	40.00	40.00
2	109	11.01	51.01
3	250	25.25	76.26
4	122	12.32	88.59
5	113	11.41	100.00
Total	990	100.00	

tab miz336 disclosure – violates privacy

Response	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	331	33.37	33.37
2	126	12.70	46.07
3	222	22.38	68.45
4	138	13.91	82.36

5	175	17.64	100.00
Total	992	100.00	

tab miz337 disclosure – others would use info

Response	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	247	24.87	24.87
2	145	14.60	39.48
3	248	24.97	64.45
4	166	16.72	81.17
5	187	18.83	100.00
Total	993	100.00	

tab miz338 disclosure - used info to decide who to support

Response	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	466	46.88	46.88
2	120	12.07	58.95
3	244	24.55	83.50
4	87	8.75	92.25
5	77	7.75	100.00
Total	994	100.00	

tab miz339 disclosure – necessary to deter corruption

Response	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	85	8.53	8.53
2	69	6.93	15.46
3	231	23.19	38.65
4	221	22.19	60.84
5	390	39.16	100.00
Total	996	100.00	

tab miz340 disclosure - may deter contributions



Response	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	138	13.84	13.84
2	114	11.43	25.28
3	320	32.10	57.37
4	226	22.67	80.04
5	199	19.96	100.00
Total	997	100.00	

Question CC417a\_4

Asked whether the respondent donated money

Count Code Label

-----

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 8 Skipped
- 9 Not Asked

\*\*\*

**Part II: Weighted data**

Weighted tabulations for all CCES variables

. tab miz333 [aw= v100]

contribution limit	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
\$ 432.667593	44.42	44.42	
any amount	391.461778	40.19	84.61
no amount	149.870629	15.39	100.00
Total	974	100.00	

```
. tab miz333_t [aw= v100]
```

miz333_t	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
__NA__	1,000	100.00	100.00
Total	1,000	100.00	

```
. tab miz333_ti [aw= v100]
```

contribution limit -

other	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	5.4877782	1.28	1.28
20	2.45806954	0.57	1.85
25	.66760636	0.16	2.00
50	2.1517218	0.50	2.50
100	11.69583129	2.72	5.22
150	1.39239265	0.32	5.55
200	5.53072988	1.29	6.83
250	4.45656409	1.04	7.87
500	13.6963279	3.19	11.06
1000	56.458532	13.13	24.19
1500	2.91348017	0.68	24.86
2000	9.88233063	2.30	27.16
2400	.897927751	0.21	27.37
2500	7.59825678	1.77	29.14
5000	48.7568068	11.34	40.48
8000	1.77268455	0.41	40.89



10000	95.4999565	22.21	63.10
15000	1.42210379	0.33	63.43
20000	12.2570862	2.85	66.28
25000	18.5996269	4.33	70.60
30000	.7831407801	0.18	70.79
50000	32.5438413	7.57	78.35
75000	1.56574767	0.36	78.72
100000	49.5814578	11.53	90.25
200000	2.05647531	0.48	90.73
250000	8.33198577	1.94	92.66
500000	12.2664026	2.85	95.52
750000	.918349154	0.21	95.73
1000000	11.4442877	2.66	98.39
2000000	2.18447613	0.51	98.90
2500000	.45327506	0.11	99.01
5000000	.635519397	0.15	99.15
1.00e+07	3.03683613	0.71	99.86
1.00e+08	.602391343	0.14	100.00

Total 430 100.00

. tab miz334 [aw= v100]

miz334 ambiguous abbreviation

r(111);

. tab miz334a [aw= v100]

public

funding -

ver a	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	290.838602	62.82	62.82
2	39.4670266	8.5271.34	
3	74.6750341	16.13	87.47
4	30.8063148	6.6594.12	
5	27.2130229	5.88100.00	
Total	463	100.00	

. tab miz334b [aw= v100]

public

funding	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	239.070975	45.02	45.02
2	43.5145599	8.1953.22	
3	118.373089	22.29	75.51
4	45.7818592	8.6284.13	
5	84.2595169	15.87	100.00
Total	531	100.00	

. tab miz335 [aw= v100]

disclosure - used info to learn about support of others

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	391.543452	39.55	39.55



2	98.5746158	9.9649.51	
3	254.167594	25.67	75.18
4	125.689446	12.70	87.88
5	120.024892	12.12	100.00

Total 990 100.00

. tab miz336 [aw= v100]

disclosure - violates privacy

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	339.125261	34.19	34.19
2	115.8965532	11.68	45.87
3	227.9910132	22.98	68.85
4	143.885595	14.50	83.36
5	165.101578	16.64	100.00

Total 992 100.00

. tab miz337 [aw= v100]

disclosure – others would use info

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	256.846437	25.87	25.87
2	143.040114	14.40	40.27
3	256.64102	25.8566.12	
4	158.231795	15.93	82.05



5	178.240634	17.95	100.00
---	------------	-------	--------

Total	993	100.00	
-------	-----	--------	--

```
. tab miz338 [aw= v100]
```

disclosure - used info to decide who to support

Freq.	Percent	Cum.
-------	---------	------

1	485.5916381	48.85	48.85
---	-------------	-------	-------

2	111.174012	11.18	60.04
---	------------	-------	-------

3	241.956393	24.34	84.38
---	------------	-------	-------

4	88.3467218	8.89	93.27
---	------------	------	-------

5	66.9312345	6.73	100.00
---	------------	------	--------

Total	994	100.00	
-------	-----	--------	--

```
. tab miz339 [aw= v100]
```

disclosure - necessary to deter corruption

Freq.	Percent	Cum.
-------	---------	------

1	79.5283559	7.98	7.98
---	------------	------	------

2	67.83137108	6.81	14.80
---	-------------	------	-------

3	250.552308	25.16	39.95
---	------------	-------	-------

4	212.859058	21.37	61.32
---	------------	-------	-------

5	385.228907	38.68	100.00
---	------------	-------	--------

Total	996	100.00	
-------	-----	--------	--



. tab miz340 [aw= v100]

disclosure - may deter contributions

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
1	140.276019	14.07	14.07
2	106.896904	10.72	24.79
3	335.63841	33.6658.46	
4	223.55182	22.4280.88	
5	190.636846	19.12	100.00

Total 997 100.00

. tab cc417a\_4 [aw= v100]

pol activity - donate money

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
yes	247.064867	28.37	28.37
no	623.935133	71.63	100.00

Total 871 100.00





## GUARANTEE *of* QUALITY SCHOLARSHIP

The Center for Competitive Politics is committed to delivering the highest quality and most reliable research on issues related to campaign finance, political speech, First Amendment rights, and related topics.

The Center guarantees that all original factual data are true and correct and that information attributed to other sources is accurately represented.

The Center encourages rigorous critique of its research. If the accuracy of any material fact or reference to an independent source is questioned and brought to the Center's attention with supporting evidence, the Center will respond in writing. If an error exists, it will be corrected in subsequent printings and distributions. This will constitute the complete and final remedy under this guarantee.



Published by the Center for Competitive Politics. All information is from sources considered reliable, but may be subject to inaccuracies, omissions, and modifications.

The Center for Competitive Politics (CCP) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC. CCP's mission, through legal briefs, studies, historical and constitutional analyses, and media communication is to promote and defend citizens' first amendment political rights of speech, assembly, and petition, and to educate the public on the actual effects of money in politics and the benefits of a more free and competitive election and political process. Contributions to CCP are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law.

2011 Center for Competitive Politics

Material from this document may be copied and distributed with proper citation.

124 S. West Street Suite 201

Alexandria, Va 22314

(703) 894-6800

<http://www.CampaignFreedom.org>