

*Straight Talk on Campaign Finance:
Separating Fact from Fiction*

Paper No. 3



POLITICAL PARTIES

- The McCain-Feingold and Shays-Meehan bills eliminate soft money contributions to political parties and increase hard money contribution limits. **These measures will strengthen the political parties. Parties will refocus on average voters, rather than special interests able to make five and six figure contributions. Party participation will expand.**
- Senator Mitch McConnell, predicting that McCain-Feingold will destroy parties, closed the Senate debate by offering the specter of an uncertain and unworkable campaign finance system: "Welcome to the hard money world."
- Yet a world where political parties rely overwhelmingly on hard money should pose no mystery to Senator McConnell or other members of Congress. It existed just twelve years ago, during the Senator's first term.
- The Republican and Democratic parties' addiction to soft money is a recent phenomenon. In 1988, the parties raised \$45 million in soft money. In 2000, that figure had exploded to \$495 million – an eleven-fold increase in three election cycles. **The notion that parties are stronger today than they were a decade or two ago, before the advent of soft money, is simply false.**
- Welcome to the *soft money* world: Corporations and unions, which are banned by law from making political contributions, give the parties hundreds of millions of dollars of soft money, which the parties spend on campaign ads supporting and opposing candidates.
- **Is a political party consumed with purchasing television commercials stronger than a political party focused on candidate recruitment, message development, grassroots organizing, and voter mobilization? Clearly not.**
- Of the \$456 million of soft money spent by the parties in the 2000 election, by far the largest share – 38 percent, or \$173 million – was spent on sham issue ads aired on television and radio to elect or defeat candidates.
- **Just 8 cents of every soft money dollar was spent on party building, grassroots organizing, and get-out-the-vote operations. In the 2000 election, we saw nearly a 5:1 ratio of party soft money spending on sham issue ads to spending on voter mobilization activities.**



- The 2000 elections were the first in history in which a majority of the money spent by parties on television ads – 56 percent – was unregulated soft money.
- In 2000, party soft money ads mentioned a candidate running for office 99.8 percent of the time.
- In 2000, party soft money ads, which are supposed to be party-building, failed to even mention a political party 92 percent of the time.
- Party soft money television ads that were broadcast within 60 days of the election attacked the opposing party's candidate 54 percent of the time.
- For the first time in history, the parties replaced candidates as the top spenders on television ads in the 2000 presidential election. Together, the Republican and Democratic parties spent \$81 million on televised campaign appeals, substantially more than the \$71 million spent by candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore.

The Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law has conducted groundbreaking research studies of political television advertising in the 1998 and 2000 elections. Brennan Center attorneys testify frequently before Congress on the constitutionality of campaign finance bills, appearing this month before the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution and the Committee on House Administration.