

# In US presidential campaign: big money backs Bush, Gore and Bradley

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The results of the first major contest in the US presidential election campaign were reported last week, eight months before anyone casts a ballot in a primary election and sixteen months before the November 2000 vote. The candidates seeking the presidential nominations of the Democratic and Republican parties filed quarterly fundraising reports with the Federal Election Commission.

The hands-down winner among the Republicans was George W. Bush, the Republican governor of Texas and eldest son of the former president, who raised a staggering \$36.2 million in the first half of 1999, more than any presidential candidate has raised for an entire nomination campaign, let alone in a six-month period in the year before the vote. So huge is Bush's lead in fundraising that he collected more than double the amount of money of all his opponents for the Republican nomination combined.

Under the big business-dominated two-party system in the United States, the federal government finances candidates seeking the nomination of the Democratic and Republican parties, matching dollar-for-dollar the amount they raise from private contributors, up to \$16.7 million. The candidates are then required to limit their spending in the primaries to the combined total of \$33.5 million, which is further subdivided into specific limits for the primary campaigns in each state. In the general election the Democratic and Republican nominees each receive an additional \$67.3 million in federal funding.

By raising far more than the campaign spending ceiling, more than half a year before the first primary in New Hampshire next February, Bush is in a position to decline federal matching funds and spend essentially unlimited amounts to win the Republican nomination.

The results of the fundraising contest on the Democratic side were more ambiguous. Vice President Al Gore, backed by the Clinton administration, collected \$18.5 million, while his only declared rival, former Senator Bill

Bradley, raised \$11.4 million. The sizeable contributions for Bradley produced a wave a favorable media publicity portraying him as a viable alternative to Gore, just as the disparity between Bush and the other Republicans produced statements that the Republican contest was effectively over.

What is most striking about the media reaction is that there was virtually no criticism of the vast sums required to gain entrance into the arena of the presidential election, or any consideration of the implications of this for what passes for democracy in the United States.

In a country so vast and diverse in its population, the presidential campaign in the year 2000 is already boiling down to a contest between two individuals, Gore and Bush, who are virtually indistinguishable. Both are millionaires, scions of the most privileged layer in American society—one the son of a senator, the other the son of an ex-president. Politically they are so similar that their campaign speeches could be switched without the slightest discomfort.

Money has long called the shots in American politics, but the 2000 campaign marks another qualitative stage in the process by which the vast majority of the American people are effectively disenfranchised. Not one vote has been cast, and Bush has not even appeared on a platform to debate any of his rivals, and yet he is already being declared the Republican nominee, because the vote which really counts, the money vote, is overwhelmingly in his favor. Similarly, Bradley has been elevated to the front ranks of candidates, not by any public response to his campaign, but by his success in collecting campaign contributions.

The enormous influx of money into the political system extends into every legislative contest. Senate campaigns routinely cost \$10 million or more in larger states, and most contested seats in the House of Representatives cost at least \$1 million.

House Democrats boasted recently that they had raised record amounts this year for the 2000 campaign, more than double the amount raised during a similar period two years ago. According to the *Washington Post*, "Party officials attributed much of their success to large Washington contributors who believe Democrats can recapture the majority next year." The chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, Patrick Kennedy (D-R.I.), said, "Clearly the lobbyist community is hedging their bets, and for good reason. We're poised to take the House back."

Senator McCain of Arizona, reacting to Bush's fundraising machine, was even blunter. The present campaign financing system, he said, "is nothing less than an influence-peddling scheme in which both parties compete to stay in office by selling the country to the highest bidder." McCain should know, since more than half the contributors to his presidential campaign have pending business before the Senate Energy and Commerce Committee, which McCain chairs.

In the estimation of the media pundits, Bush has locked up the Republican nomination a year before the convention. More than half the party's senators, governors and congressmen have endorsed him. Some 200 corporate and business backers, in a group called the Pioneers, have agreed to raise \$100,000 apiece from friends and associates, and half have already done so. Last month Bush raised more than \$4 million at a single fundraiser in Washington, DC, attended by nearly every lobbyist in town.

Bush's enormous lead is not a byproduct of broad personal or political support—he is little known to the public and played no significant role in Republican Party politics before his election as governor of Texas in 1994. As the *New York Times* observed, "the financial frenzy ... is all the more striking because Mr. Bush is not particularly well-known nationally and his positions on issues are largely a mystery."

A major factor is the intensifying struggle for control of the Republican Party, between the traditional corporate elite and the extreme-right forces who have become the principal social base of the party in the last two decades. To a certain extent, the Bush boom is an effort by the most powerful sections of big business to preempt the intervention of the Christian fundamentalist and neo-fascist elements in the nominating campaign.

Bush is seen by many in the extreme right as too willing to drop their agenda in pursuit of the political main chance. Thus campaigning in South Carolina in front of

Christian fundamentalist audiences, Bush declared his support for sex education programs in public schools which would be limited to lecturing teenage youth about abstinence. But on his first campaign swing through California, Bush met with Hollywood executives, who largely supported Clinton in 1992 and 1996, and defended them against attacks by right-wing moralizers.

Bush also declared his opposition to the anti-immigrant California Proposition 187, which barred the children of undocumented workers from the public schools, and he staged several well-publicized events in Mexican-American neighborhoods, addressing audiences in Spanish.

At least a half dozen declared or all-but-declared candidates are seeking support among the extreme right and Christian fundamentalist groups. These include multimillionaire publisher Steve Forbes, who can compete with Bush financially, using his own funds; chauvinist demagogue and media pundit Patrick Buchanan, a two-time candidate for the Republican nomination; former Vice President Dan Quayle; Senators John McCain, Robert Smith, and Orrin Hatch; fundamentalist activist Gary Bauer; and former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander.

The multiplicity of candidates is itself a symptom of the political crisis and fragmentation within the Republican Party in the wake of the failure of the impeachment campaign against the Clinton administration. Party officials have expressed the concern that one or more of the ultra-right candidates may bolt the Republicans and launch a third-party campaign. Smith, of New Hampshire, is expected to announce this week that he will accept the nomination of the far right U.S. Taxpayers Party, while Buchanan aides have suggested that he is exploring a campaign for the nomination of the Reform Party founded by billionaire H. Ross Perot.



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