

**THE BLOG**

Money = Message

By Marty Kaplan

05/19/2006 12:07 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

There's a dog not barking in the square-off about where Democrats should spend their campaign money.

In Washington, the sides are represented by Howard Dean (who's trying to build a 50-state party infrastructure), and Rahm Emanuel (whose DCCC argues for bankrolling key swing races). In HuffPo, the debate is mirrored by Zack Exley vs Paul Begala. Looks to me like Paul and Zack are heading toward common ground on the importance of a principled, winning message, and the need for long-term investment in a national field organization.

But why aren't people hot and bothered about what most campaign money goes to pay for?

Paul rightly points out that Democratic candidates "are risking their reputations, their careers, their financial security — and they're about to get hit with the most vicious negative ad campaign we've ever seen. If you think Karl Rove is going to surrender power without a fight, you're wrong. And if you think we can answer a last-minute mass media blitz with field organizers you're delusional. That's bringing a knife to a gunfight."

That campaign media arms race, which each year becomes more costly, is the real root cause of why politics in America is so sucky.

The reason why politicians spend most of their time fundraising, and why they become beholden to big givers, big PACs, big lobbies and big corporations, is to fund their ad buys. The golf trip kind of corruption, and the contract kickback kind of corruption, are indisputably repugnant, but they pale beside the everyday legal bribery that passes for politics as usual in Washington, and its cause is the cost of media buys.

And of course the reason why candidates have to spend so massively on ads is because local television stations, which largely cold-shoulder their campaigns in their news broadcasts, charge them up the wazoo for air time for their ads. It doesn't matter whether your message is positive or negative, inspired or insipid; if you don't have the cash to communicate it, if you can't pay the companies licensed to reach your constituents' eyeballs, you might as well not bother campaigning at all.

That's the iron triangle that rules American politics. As long as running for office means running ads on tv (rather than getting free air time from stations which pay zero for their licenses), and as long as candidates are beholden to big

money to buy airtime (rather than relying on publicly financed campaigns), the experience of elections by American voters — bathing in the sewer of all those negative ads — will be ever more alienating and corrosive of public trust.

Pollsters and campaign consultants (who of course get their cut as well) will tell you that Americans just don't put a high priority on campaign reform and media reform. They think it's a waste of time to run against the corruption of democracy by big money and big media.

A lot of lawyers and academics will also tell you it's a hopeless battle, because the courts say that you can't abridge the "speech" that money buys in a campaign, and because the history of campaign reform reveals a succession of loopholes, end-runs, back doors and unintended consequences that only make things worse.

If they're all correct, if Democrats can't educate the public about what's systemically wrong with democracy and rally Americans to take back their country, then we're on our way not just to more gunfights (to use Paul Begala's metaphor), but to tactical nukes and bio-warfare. It's ironic: the WMDs we were looking for turn out to be embedded in our own political process.

Follow Marty Kaplan on Twitter: www.twitter.com/martykaplan



Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director