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Money & Politics

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Distinctly Catholic

Money and politics function like pasta and olive oil: They cling to each other. The making of money today is accompanied by elaborate lobbying efforts to get special provisions into the tax code, or special regulatory standing, or some governmental special treatment. And campaigns can't run if you can't pay the staff, can't run the ads, can't send out the mailings.

Candidates for political office spend hours upon hours dialing for dollars. The candidate sits in a room, calling people on the phone and asking for donations. Sitting opposite the candidate is a staffer who feeds them the name, number and personal information about the person they are calling. As they wind down one call, the staffer begins dialing the next number. This is all opaque to the public: You never, ever let the press see the candidate dialing for dollars. It would appear so humiliating. This has given rise to a number of self-funding candidates, super-rich people who wish to share their capacity for success with the public.

In Florida, according to an article in Politico.com, two self-financing candidates are lagging in the polls in a state that puts a premium on fundraising. GOP gubernatorial candidate Rick Scott and Democratic Senate hopeful Jeff Greene have spent a combined \$60 million on their campaigns, yet both appear headed for defeat. The Politico article notes that in Florida, with its 10 media markets, it takes a ton of money to run television ads statewide.

Looking forward to the November midterms, it is important to remember what money can and can't achieve in the political arena. Money can be used to run ads that increase name recognition. Money can't be used to motivate primary voters. Money can be used to run negative ads and mailings that paint your opponent in an unfavorable light. Money can't build a grass roots Get-Out-the-Vote effort. Money can get you the edgiest, niftiest consultants pollsters, but money can't impart an understanding of a given district

to those consultants. Given the choice of having money or not having money, every campaign in America would rather have it. And, it is undoubtedly the case that without a certain amount of money, an effective campaign cannot be run. But, money can't turn a sow's ear into a silk purse.

This year, money is an especially awkward burden. Not everyone faces the acute difficulty faced by Mr. Greene in Florida. He had the good fortune to make tons of money by betting that the housing market would collapse. But in a state with huge numbers of foreclosures, plummeting home values, tens of thousands of "under water" mortgages, his good fortune is bad political fortune. But, Gov. John Corzine of New Jersey is now ex-Governor Corzine. Mayor Bloomberg faced a surprisingly close race last election. People are suspicious of those who are wealthy when times are tough. When times are good, the suspicions lessen as people again dream of becoming rich like Corzine and Bloomberg.

A well-financed newcomer is also, still, a newcomer, likely to make the kinds of rookie mistakes that can be forgiven in the real world but in the political world, with YouTube ready to trumpet any mistakes, can be punishing. Furthermore, I suspect that there is a psychological dynamic, an "I am the King of the World" disposition that one finds commonly among the rich. Whether they be smart or hard-working, they think they are destiny's child. "I made it in business," you can hear them say, "politics should be a breeze." This often creates a sense of entitlement, an "I know best" attitude, that is not conducive to winning an election because people want to be asked for their vote, and they want to feel that a candidate can relate to their problems, and most importantly, voters value competence, they really do want someone who knows what they are talking about, someone who knows the issues, especially when they are electing their representatives to Congress.

The only thing about the Politico story that I found naïve was the inability to recognize the diminishing value of TV advertising. Find me a man who owns a television and I shall show you a man who owns a clicker. Do you watch TV ads anymore? What percentage of people in Florida have Tivo, another means of avoiding ads. The campaign media consultants do not want to tell the candidates this, but their art is a dying one or, better to say, a transforming art, searching out new ways of using new media to affect election results.

It remains to be seen if money will be the best way to exploit the new technologies. Turns out that Facebook is free and it costs nothing, or next to nothing, to send a text message reminding someone to vote, but only if you have their cell phone number. That takes old-style neighborhood politics, real grass roots politics, building a campaign organization from the ground up, one friend or acquaintance at a time. I suspect that a number of states went for Obama in 2008 simply on the strength of the youth vote and the text messages that reminded them to go to the polls. Robocalls "those obnoxious phone calls to your home phone" reminding you to vote and for whom, always came too late on election day. Once you are home from the office, you aren't heading out again. You need to be reminded on the way home. That is the beauty of text messaging. I suspect there will be a few surprise victories for candidates of both parties attributable solely to their ability to use these new technologies effectively. The consultants don't want to tell the candidates, because they have not figured out how to take their cut off of a free network. And, building a real grass roots organization takes time, even years, and America's super-rich candidates do not strike one as paragons of patience.

I am glad that money may become less important to campaigns, that social media, and blogs and text messaging and other free forms of communication are replacing the television ad. Anything that checks the power of the moneyed interests in a democracy is a good thing.

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