# Political Campaigns: Crash Course Government and Politics #39

Crash Course: U.S. Government and Politics
https://youtube.com/watch?v=2A5QlpAyKSQ
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Hi I'm Craig and this is CrashCourse Government and Politics. And today we're going to try and untangle the mess that is the American political campaign. One of the things about the American political system that often confuses people who don't live in America is the way that our politicians run for office. There are two aspects in particular that stand out about American political campaigns: their length and their expense. We're going to look at both of these today and see that they're related but before we do we are going to answer a burning question: why do we need political campaigns anyway?

[intro plays]

If you ask one hundred people about the reason why we have political campaigns, you'll get well, not a hundred but at least more than one answer. And you might work for Family Feud. Probably the best answer to this question though, is that we have political campaigns to provide voters with information they need to choose a candidate to represent them. So how do political campaigns provide information? And what is a political campaign anyway? Let's go to the thought bubble.

A campaign is an organized drive on the part of a candidate to get elected to an office. It's also the way we refer to the organization itself. For example, in 2012 we had the Obama campaign and the Romney campaign. And each consisted of a campaign organization made up of thousands of staffers and volunteers and all of their activities. Most campaigns are temporary, geared towards an election although both parties do have permanent professional campaign organizations. At the top level are the national committees, the DNC and the RNC.  Can you guess what they stand for?

These organizations coordinate all national campaigns, especially those for President. Each house of congress has a Republican and Democratic campaign committee. The individual Senate and Congressional committees are headed up by sitting members of the Senate and the House, and because these committees give money to candidates, their leaders are very popular. I find that I'm popular when I make it rain at parties.

Campaigns provide information in a number of ways. The main thing they do is communicate with the public, usually through the media which we'll discuss in greater depth in future episodes. The main stage of political campaigns is the organized event where candidates can present information about themselves and their policies directly through voters and speeches. These are known as stump speeches, although only rarely these days do candidates actually speak on stumps, they have podiums and stages now.

In addition to these events, candidates present the information by appearing on the TV, in debates, at town meetings, and in "impromptu" photo opportunities. They like to appear with military hardware, too, although sometimes this can backfire, as in the case of Michael Dukakis in 1988.

Campaigns can spread their messages through direct mail, press releases, news coverage, and through advertisements, often on the TV, which is like the internet, only less interactive and has a lot of real housewives on it. Thanks, thought bubble.

Nowadays, there are many more ways that candidates can reach out to voters. One way is through email. If you've ever given money to a candidate or a campaign, you can expect emails in ever-increasing numbers as election day approaches, and we all love that. Candidates now take to Twitter to blast out information and individual candidates and their campaigns often have Facebook pages. There are even campaign ads made specifically for YouTube, although how their advertising algorithm works is beyond me. It's weird to get a campaign ad for the Michigan Senate if you don't live in Michigan.

One other way that campaigns communicate information is through raising money. Of course, they need money to pay for all the campaign ribbons and buttons and PA systems and folding chairs and tour buses and stump speeches and axes to chop down trees so they have stumps to speak on. These things ain't cheap.

Even more expensive are advertisements on the TV. A sitting president has an advantage here in that he can usually get on TV whenever he wants and he'll have a chance to clarify his positions in the State of the Union Address. But even he has to spend money on ads.

And raising money is another way to present voters with information because campaign solicitations usually come with some policy piece attached to them. Almost every solicitation you get will be somewhat targeted to one of your interests and tell you, or try to tell you, where the candidate asking for your money stands on that issue.

So you may have gotten a campaign solicitation and wondered, "hey, why you need my money?" The unhelpful answer is that they need your money because campaigns are expensive. But then you might ask, "why are they so expensive?" Good question.

Campaigns are expensive because they're huge, especially presidential campaigns; they need to reach 220 million people of voting age. Another reason they're expensive is because they're super long. Democrat and Republican candidates raise money, give speeches and create political action committees years before the election. It's ridiculous. I blame the eagle.

Campaigns are also expensive because Americans expect them to be personal and this takes time and money. We like to see our candidates in person and have them show up in small towns in Iowa and New Hampshire, even though those states don't matter all that much in the grand electoral picture.

Another reason campaigns are so expensive is that they rely increasingly on the TV and other visual media that cost a lot of money to produce. Gone are the days when William McKinley could sit on his porch in Ohio and have reporters come to him. Nowadays, even when candidates get free exposure by appearing on nightly comedy shows, like *The Daily Show*, it still costs the campaign in terms of time, travel and probably wardrobe and makeup so that they can look as good as I do. No makeup. Minimal wardrobe: no pants. Sorry, Stan.

How expensive are campaigns anyway? Eh...very! In the 2008 presidential campaign both candidates together spent three billion dollars. In 2012 the candidates spent about a billion dollars each, and outside groups spent a further four billion.

And congressional elections weren't much cheaper, except when you consider that there were a lot more of them. Combined, congressional races in 2008 cost about one billion dollars. All the money that gets spent on campaigns leads us inevitably to campaign finance rules, which were set up by Congress after 1970 and refined by the courts.

We have campaign finance legislation because all that money pouring into campaigns sure looks like it raises the potential for corruption. Whether or not an individual's campaign contributions can sway a congressman's vote is highly debatable but it certainly gives the appearance of impropriety when a congressman who receives millions of dollars from the oil industry then works hard to weaken regulations on oil companies so that they can make more

profit.

Campaign contributions are not bribes, but they sure look like them to lots of people. Recognizing that campaign contributions could potentially influence the political process, congress passes the Federal Election Campaign act of 1971. This was the first law that put limits on campaign spending and donations. It was further refined by the McCain-Feingold Campaign Law in 2002, and by court decisions that refined the rules for campaign spending and donations and provided a legal rationale for these limits.

Until recently, the most important case on campaign finance was Buckley V Valleo. This case established the idea that limits on campaign spending were problematic under the first amendment because limiting the amount someone could spend on politics was basically limiting what that person could say about politics. Freedom of speech, y'all!

According to the rules, individuals were allowed to donate up to $2500 per candidate and their was a total limit to the amount an individual could give. Donations to a party committee, which because they don't go to a specific candidate and thus seem less like bribes, were limited to $28500. Individual donors were also allowed to give up to $5000 to a political action committee, or PAC.

But it gets more complicated. Individuals and PACs are allowed to give unlimited funds to a 527 group, named after its designation in the tax code, that focuses on issue advocacy. Most famous 527 group in recent political memory is probably Swift Boat Veterans for Truth which spent more than 22 million dollars to raise awareness around the issue of whether 2004 presidential candidate, and later Secretary of State John Kerry was completely honest about his Vietnam War record. If this sounds like it was more of an organization against the candidate himself, well you can see how the line between "issue advocacy" and support for a political campaign can be kind of blurry.

Now here's something important: these limits are on contributions to candidates and campaigns, not on spending by candidates and campaigns. What this means is that a candidate and their campaign can spend however much they raise. So if a candidate running for office has one billion dollars, they can spend one billion trying to win, there's no concern about self-funded candidates bribing themselves, and you often see rich people spending a lot of their own money trying to win office.

So Buckley Vs. Valleo set up the basic distinction between campaign donations, which could be limited, and campaign spending, which couldn't. This distinction was undercut by the Supreme Court in the case of Citizens United Vs. the Federal Election Commission in 2009. This reaffirmed the idea that money is the equivalent of speech and struck down many of the limitations on campaign donations.

The Citizens United decision cleared the way for Super PACs. These organizations are allowed to raise and spend unlimited amounts of money to promote a candidate or publicize a cause, but they may not directly contribute to a candidate or coordinate with a campaign. In the 2012 election, there were over 500 registered super PACs and 41 of them spent over half a million dollars. The largest seven had spent over 256 million by the end of August, one of the reasons that the 2012 election was the most expensive ever, clocking in at around 6 billion.

Now this sounds like a lot of money, right? It is. Gimme it. But a little context: the total spent on house and senate races was around 3.6 billion dollars, which was less than half of what Americans spend annually on potato chips. So when you look at it this way, the amount we spend on elections doesn't seem like so much, which may make us rethink the idea that money is corrupting American politics. Or maybe not. Maybe potato chips are corrupting American politics. Certainly corrupting my belly.

American political campaigns are big and high stakes and raise questions about the influence of money in politics that are tough to answer. On the one hand, it does seem like there's the potential for very rich people to have a lot of influence on the elections. On the other hand, limiting a person's ability to register his or her preference of a candidate through spending on that candidate does seem like a limitation on their political speech.

One of the arguments for limits on campaign contributions is that forcing candidates to raise money in small amounts from a large number of donors will make them reach out to larger numbers of constituents, and appealing to large numbers is the essence of Democracy. But it's also time consuming for a politician to reach out to all those potential donors and congressmen already spend a considerable amount of time raising money when they should be legislating. And watching Real Housewives. And eating Little Caesar's. There's a lot to do.

But this is the system we have, and unless congress passes a law limiting campaign expenditures, or shortening the campaign season, we can expect campaigns to remain long and get more and more expensive. Thanks for watching, I'll see you next time.

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