

A Feasibility Study: Evaluating a California “Public Financing of Elections” Initiative Final Report – October 2002

Since the Steven and Michele Kirsch Foundation’s inception in 1999, we have been committed to federal and state efforts to reform and/or adopt campaign finance reform laws and initiatives. We believe our representational system of democracy is at significant risk if political decisions are made based on campaign contributions rather than the long-term interests of the country and its citizens.

Due to that belief, our ongoing commitment to fund or provide public policy resources to organizations working to reform the campaign finance system, and at the urging of our Founder and Chairman of the Board, Steve Kirsch, the Foundation launched a 16-week feasibility study in the summer of 2002. Its aim was to evaluate a potential California “public financing of elections” initiative.

After sending a Request For Proposals to a number of highly qualified, national political consulting firms and interviewing finalists, we hired Zimmerman and Markman (Bill Zimmerman and Pacy Markman, Principals) based in Santa Monica, California. With our concurrence, it hired Goodwin Simon Strategic Research (Paul Goodwin, Principal) as pollster for the feasibility study.

The study ensued with the gathering of confidential public opinion information, including prior polling, from reform groups across the country. Our consultant and pollster then conducted four focus groups (two in Northern California and two in Southern California) in order to learn more about how people perceived the issue of “public financing” as a mechanism to improve our campaign finance system.

There were two key messages from the focus groups: 1) participants found the concepts associated with **public financing of elections complex and confusing**, and 2) people are generally angry about politicians and campaigning, but **not necessarily the role of money in politics**.

The consultants then completed a statewide telephone survey (a “benchmark poll”) of 1,000 likely California voters that tested only one potential funding mechanism. In reviewing the poll results, we learned that voters believe that public financing of elections: 1) could level the playing field, 2) could allow more minorities, women and people with different views to get elected to office, 3) would reduce the power and influence of special interests, and 4) would allow elected officials to spend time governing, not just raising money. Further, voters support the notion of a narrowly-focused funding vehicle.

Several key messages tested in the survey resonated with voters: 1) elections should be about ideas, not the size of a candidate’s bank account, 2) politicians need to listen to the people rather than wealthy special interests, and 3) elected officials should spend time doing their jobs, rather than raising money to get re-elected. It is worth noting that voters responded favorably to the terms “equal campaign funding” and “fair elections” to describe the potential proposition, preferring these descriptors to “clean elections” and “clean money.”

Ultimately, the survey results provided mixed signals on the viability of such an initiative. While support grows for the measure as voters learn more about it, ultimately the poll numbers suggest the following: 1) the proposed ballot measure was complex and would need to be described simply and clearly with a significant educational campaign, and 2) a campaign in support of a such a measure would be enormously expensive, particularly given the high likelihood that a costly media campaign would be launched in opposition.

Given the survey data, a pre-determined minimum level of support in a benchmark poll needed for us to engage in an initiative, and taking into consideration our limited financial resources, the Kirsch Foundation’s Board of Directors decided in September 2002 that we not pursue involvement in a public financing of elections initiative in California for the foreseeable future. We remain committed, however, to campaign finance reform efforts at all levels of government and plan to stay apprised of activities in this arena.