

Pocketbook Politics: Whose Voice Speaks Loudest?

Wendy Quinones

"No right is more precious in a free country than having a voice in the election of those who make the laws under which, as good citizens, we must live."

– U.S. Supreme Court, *Wesberry v. Sanders*, 1964

Campaigns for election to office in the U.S. are expensive – very expensive! In 2004, for example, it cost \$28 million to win a Senate seat in Illinois; by 2006 the price had risen to \$46.5 million in New York. In 2004, House Speaker Dennis Hastert spent over \$5 million for his Illinois House seat; by 2006 the highest-priced House seat, in Florida, had risen to over \$11 million. Even the least costly Senate seat took \$1.5 million to win in 2006, while the least expensive House seat cost more than \$182,000.

With these kinds of costs, candidates need money, and lots of it. Where does it come from? Who helps winners get elected? Who do the winners owe? Very, very few people, as it turns out.

Furthermore, studies show that those few are 95% White, and 81% of them have incomes of \$100,000 or more. The chart below shows the number of campaign donors who gave money to political candidates in the 2004 election. Use these figures to answer the questions below.

The total U.S. voting age population was 220,126,266 in 2004. U.S. Census figures for 2006 show the population is 66% White, 14.8% Hispanic or Latino, 13.4% Black, and 5.8% other.

Contributions to Political Candidates in 2004

| | Number of donors | Amount donated (in millions of \$) |
|---------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|
| All Donors giving \$200+ | 1,140,535 | 1,913.3 |
| Donors giving \$200-\$999 | 673,602 | 264.6 |
| Donors giving \$1000-\$1,999 | 834,321 | 513.2 |
| Donors giving \$2,000 - \$9,999 | 230,798 | 755.6 |
| Donors giving \$10,000+ | 25,833 | 644.8 |
| Donors giving \$95,000+ | 372 | 41.2 |

Source: figures from the Center for Responsive Politics, <www.opensecrets.org>.

Math Questions

1. What do you think is interesting about this information?
2. Use the information to calculate averages. For example, what is the average contribution of donors who gave \$95,000 or more? Round to the nearest \$10,000.
3. Use the information in the chart and the text to create a pie chart or a bar graph.
4. What statements could you make about race and political giving?
5. Based on the data presented, what statements can you make about the political system? For example, more than three-quarters of the donors to political campaigns have incomes of \$100,000 or more.
6. What effect do you think these numbers have on political campaigns?

Wendy Quinones is an ABE teacher at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge, MA.