

OPINION

If Canada's political parties are too hungry for money, let them have less



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Canadian flag flies in front of the Peace Tower on Parliament Hill in Ottawa on March 22, 2017.

CHRIS WATTIE/REUTERS

Lately there's been a surge in concern about money in politics. No, not the familiar scourge of Big Money: a handful of well-heeled donors buying influence with hefty political contributions. At the federal level,

at least, contributions are strictly limited, while corporate and union donations have been banned since 2004. (The provinces are another story.)

The new wave of concern, rather, is over the influence of Small Money: the thousands and thousands of small individual donors on which the parties, thanks to campaign finance reform, now rely.

Why have our politics become so polarized, runs the argument? Because, obliged as they now are to raise funds from these legions of small donors – a never-ending quest, far removed from the genteel tour of the boardrooms that once sufficed – parties are driven to court the most extreme members of their base.

Accordingly, some commentators have called for the return of public funding: introduced along with the 2004 reforms to compensate the parties for the loss of corporate and union funds, but abolished as of 2015.

That's not quite accurate. The parties are still funded publicly, to the tune of tens of millions of dollars annually: directly, through the partial reimbursement of campaign expenses (50 per cent, for the parties; 60 per cent, for candidates), and indirectly, through the 75 per cent (!) political-contribution tax credit.

All that was lost to them in 2015 was the *additional layer* of public funding known as the per-vote subsidy: originally set at \$1.75 per vote received in the previous election, and indexed to inflation. But never mind. Is this a good idea?

Is it the case, first, that small donors are to blame for the polarization of our politics? I'd question whether "polarization" is even the right word, at least in Canada. Our problem is less a vast ideological gulf between the parties than it is the vein of extremism that runs – let's be frank – through one of the parties in particular. The Liberals may have veered too far left under their current leader, but there is no equivalent to the wacko beliefs that have taken hold among a section of the Conservative base.

That the party leadership feels compelled to indulge these beliefs may indeed be partly attributable to the need to appeal to small donors. But it may also have other sources: for example, the crazy system by which party leaders are elected, with its emphasis on mass recruitment of "instant" members.

In any case, the more germane question, surely, is not why the party is so beholden, financially or otherwise, to its members – a not-undesirable state of affairs – but why so many members have taken leave of their senses.

To the extent that there is a problem, it's far from clear that (more) public funding is the solution. It's objectionable, for starters, to force people to pay to support causes to which they may vehemently object. Indeed, if it's extremism you're worried about, some of the biggest beneficiaries of the per-vote subsidy were parties whose agendas could objectively be described as extreme, notably the Bloc Québécois.

And there are other solutions. If the need to raise and spend so much money on election campaigns drives parties to extremes, let me suggest the answer is to *spend less money on election campaigns*. The

argument that we should replace private donations with public funds presupposes that there is some fixed quantum of funds that must be raised, which by some miracle we are exactly at. Current levels of party spending, that is, are taken as a given.

Nonsense. It's never been easier or cheaper for parties to "get their message out" (apparently there's this thing called the internet). They don't need to spend anything like as much as they do. The only reason any of them do is for fear of being outspent by the others.

Moreover, most of the money they spend goes to things that hurt democracy: attack ads, robocalls, and the like. You could cut party spending to a fraction of its current level, and I promise you no one would miss it – no one, aside from the hordes of consultants and party flaks who make their living off of it.

How to cut campaign spending? Cut the flow of funds that finances it. That means no public subsidy, but also tighter limits on private contributions – radically tighter. I'm thinking an annual limit of \$500 per person – not for each donation, but as the total amount contributable to political causes of all kinds.

The way to make parties less desperate for money is not to relieve them of the trouble of raising it. It's to make politics less dependent on money, period – big or small.

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