Executive Summary

The Topos Partnership was tasked by the Ford Foundation with assessing the frames that advocates currently rely upon to influence the public conversation on the issue of Money in Politics. We interviewed 18 experts with a variety of perspectives and analyzed a number of organization materials, websites, and media coverage related to the topic. Through this process, we identified several frames that dominate advocate discourse. Some of these frames are unlikely to overcome deep-seated cultural attitudes on this issue, but others, while not currently deployed widely by most advocates, show potential for taking the conversation in a more productive direction.

Public opinion polls consistently demonstrate wide and deep frustration with government, with the current state of campaigns, and with corporate and special interest influence over policies and regulations. And yet, most experts we interviewed continue to be frustrated by the state of public debate on the issue of Money in Politics. For example, they suggest that proposals that should be easy to sell come under vigorous attack in political debate; they worry about how difficult it is to engage the public on this issue more generally; and they are uncertain about the most effective communications strategy for the movement as a whole (though many are very confident about their own organization’s communications).

A key strategic consideration that emerged in this research is the difference between public indifference and public cynicism. If the main problem is indifference or a sense that this issue is not very important to the public, then it makes sense to forge ahead with communications strategies designed to increase the salience of the issue, perhaps by linking Money in Politics to serious consequences that matter to average people. However, if cynicism about the effectiveness or likelihood of reform is a fundamental obstacle to public engagement, then communications has to convince people that change is possible. This is a fundamental strategic consideration, yet the experts we interviewed often move back and forth between both views.

A second key consideration is a visible contradiction about whether to highlight the problem or the solution(s). There is near universal agreement that solutions need far more prominence in public discourse, and yet, most of the media and advocate coverage is
dominated by a discussion of the problem. Interviewees genuinely want to promote solutions, and yet many feel uncertain about how to have that conversation, particularly one designed to lift a number of reforms. As a result, they often default to the more familiar conversation about the problem.

Importantly, we identified an overriding obstacle in advocates’ thinking about the issue. By and large, the “problem” is narrowly defined, which constrains imagination. It constrains our ability to imagine different ways of understanding the problem and creating solutions. The frames that dominate public debate are driven by a fundamental, narrowly defined, idea:

*Politicians are being bought.*

Some may read this and think, “Of course. That’s the issue.” However, consider how this fundamental framing choice directs discourse, the definition of the problem, and potential solutions.

- It blurs the line between illegal corruption and legal influence peddling.
- It focuses on politicians and obscures who or what is doing the “buying.”
- It constrains thinking to “money” which oversimplifies the impact — a particular vote, politician or party, rather than the system of representation more generally. The entire system advantages corporate needs, for example, but the “bought” idea obscures the broader, systemic effects.
- It highlights a problem (money) that seems particularly difficult to control.
- It positions politicians as “the problem” therefore they cannot be “the solution,” continuing to feed anger, resentment and cynicism toward government.

The most common frames for this issue flow from the “Politicians are being bought” premise. Consider the framing options this choice leaves out of consideration:

**Corporate Influence** — instead of starting with the politicians who are “being bought” this approach would focus on those who are trying to shape public policy, and ALL of the ways they try to influence it at the local, state and federal level, through campaigns, lobbying, participation in groups like ALEC, etc.

**Corporate Responsibility** — this frame highlights corporate actions and speaks to people as shareholders and customers, in addition to citizens. It affords an opportunity to open up a dialogue about a range of corporate-centered solutions.

**People In/Power** — Several of the experts interviewed expressed a desire to create strategies grounded in the concept of getting people more engaged in the process.
Beyond “Bought”

Narrowly, this approach is often communicated as public matching of small contributions. However, there may be an opportunity to make this approach much broader – about demonstrating power and linking to a range of issues of representation (campaign finance, voting rights, gerrymandering, etc.). Would a broader “movement” with a range of goals be more engaging and persuasive than a narrowly defined issue?

**Checks and Balances** – When existing frames touch on democratic values, the primary value tends to be “speech” (where money = speech) and having an equal voice in governance. While that approach is likely effective in certain ways, it may also lead to a stalemate when positioned against other deeply held values like corporations’ freedom of “speech.” Adding other democratic values to the conversation may advantage our side. “Checks and Balances” or “We the People are the Government” may reinvigorate a sense of citizen responsibility and empowerment across a range of issues.

In the white paper that follows, we highlight challenges in the current dominant discourse on this issue, and suggest potential opportunities for new ways of framing the issue with possible consequences for how people will understand the problem, solutions and their role in advancing change. These potential reframes include:

- Start the conversation by talking about solutions, or talking about victories to make change more concrete and imaginable.
- Instead of focusing on ”keeping money out,” frame the issue as ”bringing people in.”
- Frame the issue as whose voice is loudest and ensuring the public voice counts.
- Shift the focus from corrupt politicians to corrupting corporations, and, related, have a conversation about corporate responsibility.
- Have a conversation about secrecy, rather than jumping directly to the ”transparency” frame, which most people don’t immediately grasp.
- Highlight the central role of checks and balances in our system of government.
- Shift the conversation from ”corruption” to the ”appearance of corruption.”
- Help people understand the ”big picture” rather than/as well as the specific effects of money in politics.

While many of these potential reframes are similar to, or even overlap with, the currently dominant frames, they often have vastly different implications for how ordinary people think about the issue. These frames and others need to be further explored and tested to confirm which approaches will be most effective in engaging the public.

A note on format: Throughout, examples of frames, drawn from public, cited sources, are shown in bronze boxes. Quotes from expert interviews are shown either in red quote bubbles or italicized text.

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Strategic Backdrop

While the intent of this analysis is to outline the potential advantages and disadvantages of the framing choices communicators make when it comes to Money in Politics, there are a number of dynamics separate from conscious framing choices that influence communications decisions. We start with observations of these dynamics and assumptions.

Public Indifference or Cynicism?

Every communicator interviewed talked about the difficulty of engaging public action on this issue. For some, the primary challenge is combatting public indifference:

For others, the primary challenge is public cynicism that change can happen.

And in many, if not most instances, communicators reflected on both challenges.

This distinction is essential, as it influences communicators’ assumptions about what the public needs to hear. For example, if “indifference” is the central problem, then the primary goal for communications becomes increasing the salience of the issue, riling people up, showing them this issue matters to their lives, or, by borrowing the salience of the issues they care about and associating it with Money in Politics. But if “cynicism” is the challenge, then it becomes important to demonstrate that change can happen, that things can be different, that the public voice matters, etc.

On defense, not offense

Many interviewees find themselves having to defend the line on policies. They are frustrated that they expend a great deal of energy defending against attacks on policies like transparency that didn’t use to be controversial or partisan. Many feel unable to make inroads on significant policy change because they are in a battle for even the most obvious and limited measures.
Beyond “Bought”

We limit ourselves only, exclusively, to advocating transparency. It’s frustrating, because it’s not really the goal, it’s just the beginning point to achieve our goals, but even transparency is under threat and deserves a champion. More and more every day it’s under threat.

The reality is that the public so strongly agrees with the view of reformers that communicators should be able to take a strong, proactive stance on the issues they want to advance. Clearly, reformers need communications strategies to avoid the traps and distractions set by the opposition and a frame that allows them to go beyond what should be easy wins.

Lack of Solutions

Interviewees are frustrated by an inability to shift the conversation toward solutions, particularly in a way that lifts all reforms. However, beyond that framing challenge (addressed in the next section), several cite a more fundamental challenge – a lack of, or little clarity on, what real solutions might look like – within the advocacy community itself.

Several cited the need for specific calls to action. Mobilizing the public requires action steps, they assert, and the movement has few actions to offer.

Some worry that Supreme Court decisions have constrained the solutions that are possible, making concrete actions and specific solutions even harder to create.

I feel like maybe it’s the space for solutions has been so circumscribed by the Supreme Court decisions, and that there’s almost no room to play in, and I feel like we have to get outside the boxes that are there, and I don’t know if that’s really possible or if that’s just wishful thinking.

Beyond the challenge of developing real actions and solutions, several also note that the nature of the movement is to advance different approaches to addressing the problem. This makes it difficult to highlight just one or two solutions. Few feel advocates believe the field will come to agreement on common solutions (and many do not feel the need to).

I think the biggest obstacle is around solutions. I don’t think there is like one easy idea for people to get behind. There are multiple ideas for people to get behind, …there are really different opinions about what a comprehensive solution looks like, and there’s also different opinions about what a good strategy about comprehensive solutions looks like.
Beyond “Bought”

I don’t think there’s one organization that can and should do it all, and I don’t think that there’s one perspective that’s valid. We have to / if we come to this debate and this discourse in good faith, we have to honor the views and the expertise coming from differing perspectives.

Fundamentally, it seems that different advocates conceptualize the scope of the problem very, very differently. Some are interested in small-bore solutions, and some are interested in big, more radical approaches like a Constitutional amendment. This is such a fundamental difference in how to address the problem that it’s almost hard to see them as part of the same issue area. Global warming is a useful parallel situation - some want to work on sea walls and others want to go after polluters. That kind of range makes it tough (but not impossible) to create a unified communications strategy.

Even with all these concerns and fundamental challenges, nearly every person interviewed expressed a desire to shift the conversation much more strongly toward solutions. This leads us to conclude that effective frames designed to “lift all reform boats,” while challenging to develop, would be very welcome.

An Action Strategy

An effective communications strategy requires an action strategy. While the individual organizations we interviewed often have a clear sense of what they want to accomplish and how they want to accomplish it, the field does not yet seem to be at that stage. There are wide-ranging differences of opinion on the solutions that matter and theory of change (focus on policymakers, activists, the public, the courts), etc. In addition, most organizations’ efforts struggle with scale – with having the necessary resources to really advance this issue.

That said, we’ve outlined thoughts – from a communications perspective – on what different frames are likely to accomplish and potential frames that could create a common platform for various solutions and organizational strategies.

Uncertainty about Communications

Finally, many interviewees expressed uncertainty about framing and communications strategy more broadly and nearly all expressed enthusiasm for this effort and hope that it will provide some clarity for advocates.
Beyond “Bought”

Dominant Frames

The frames that currently dominate public discourse are driven by a framing choice so fundamental that advocates may not even realize they’ve made a choice that shapes public understanding and policy support:

**Politicians are being bought.**

This may seem pretty obvious. “Of course” we are talking about how politicians are being bought. However, consider how this fundamental framing choice directs discourse:

- It blurs the line between illegal corruption and legal influence peddling.
- It reinforces the court’s quid pro quo definition of the issue, as opposed to human nature, for example.
- It focuses on politicians rather than those attempting to buy influence.
- It constrains thinking to the money (particularly money spent on campaigns), rather than a broader set of influences on both elections and policy.
- It oversimplifies the impact – a particular vote, politician or party, rather than the system of representation more generally – the entire system advantages corporate needs, for example.
- It highlights a problem (money) that seems particularly difficult to control; the most common metaphor (flow of money) reinforces the difficulty of “stopping” money.
- It makes all big money the same; there is no immediately perceived difference between a contribution by one billionaire and by one labor union, for example.
- It can sound like “class warfare” in the sense of simple resentment of the unfair power and influence rich entities have.
- It continues to feed anger, resentment and cynicism toward government.
- It positions politicians as “the problem” therefore they cannot be “the solution”.
- Politicians as “bought” becomes the new norm.

If the metaphor of "buying" politicians sounds like an exaggeration, it might have the effect of delegitimizing the progressive position.

Example

America’s government is bought. Those who can throw campaign fundraisers and hire lobbyists get better treatment from our elected leaders than those who can’t. That is not how our country should work.
Beyond “Bought”

A few interviewees have been thinking about “money in politics” and even a focus on “money” as fundamental starting points for the conversation, and worry about inadvertent consequences:

The way that people tend to shorthand it is “we want to get money out of politics,” and what I hear pushback from a fair amount is, “but money’s always been in politics, right, you’re never going to get money out of politics. You’re a fool, you sound like an idiot if you think that you somehow can solve the problem.” And the way I’ve started thinking about it in my head is, change the word “money” for “murder,” right? We want to end murder. It’s like, well, as long as there has been more than one human being on earth, there’s been murder. So to say we want to end murder seems like a fool’s errand, right?

We’re opening floodgates, we’re opening floodgates, we’re opening floodgates. Then, what are they doing? It’s going to drown us. We are drowning in big money, the big money is drowning the rest of us, etc… I think that the water metaphor just completely leads people into that, because there’s nothing you can actually do to stop water, right? The whole, like, water will get into your basement, water finds its own level… You know, so it just ends up us being like we’re going to put our finger in the dike, you know, like that’s just going to be / that’s just not going to effectively ever change anything.

The most widespread, dominant frames on this issue, explored in the rest of this section, mostly stem from a focus on the money and the fundamental idea that “politicians are being bought”. While there may be situations where this is the most sensible, effective framing, the overreliance on this one approach obscures a number of other, distinctive framing options from consideration.

**Competition for Money**

The news media gives lots of attention to the “horserace” of campaign money – how big the sums are, who’s giving it to whom, who knows about the money, etc.

Hedge funds, which barely existed two decades ago, are placing their chips mostly on Republican congressional candidates in the 2014 election.

The numbers, collected by Washington’s Center for Responsive Politics, reflect the industry’s long march away from Democrats in 2008 - when hedge funds gave 67 percent of donations to Democrats and 33 percent to Republicans.

So far in the 2014 election cycle, the proportions have flip-flopped. (Freedman, San Francisco Chronicle, 6/21/14)
Beyond “Bought”

This particular example includes a subtle reference, really a presumption that the money will lead to influence. However, often the Competition for Money frame includes no reference to the actions and outcomes this money flow leads to.

In addition to all the negative consequences outlined for the “politicians are being bought” concept, this particular angle on the conversation is also likely to feed resentment about campaigns being too expensive (wasted money that could be better spent) and trigger thoughts about the negative ads the money will buy.

It may also reinforce the idea that even “good” candidates need to stay in the game by accepting the money (e.g., Obama in 2008), so that money-grubbing becomes the norm.

One angle that is worth investigating is whether this approach could be directed in a more beneficial direction: The time spent competing for money takes away from the important work of representing the people. This may or may not be a compelling argument for engagement.

Quid Pro Quo/Special Favors

The Quid Pro Quo/Special Favors Frame is one that refers to a specific way that money buys a result, for example:

An NBC News report that Organizing for Action (OFA) promised a brief meeting with the President to a six-figure donor and then tried to re-direct the money to an allied group that would not have to disclose the contribution “is a disquieting illustration of the power of big money to open doors in Washington,” said Arn Pearson, Common Cause’s vice president for policy and litigation…. The donor involved, Dr. Joseph Piacentile, is a New Jersey doctor who was hoping to secure a presidential pardon for his 1991 conviction on Medicare fraud and tax evasion charges, NBC said. OFA returned his $100,000 check after the network raised questions about it and Piacentile apparently was not permitted to join “a small clutch” of Obama supporters who met privately with the President after an OFA-sponsored event last week. (Common Cause, 3/5/14)

“This bill takes a cynical approach to two serious problems,” said Common Cause President Miles Rapoport. “First, it strengthens the hold of millionaire donors, corporations, trade groups and other special interests on our political parties and their candidates. Those big donors will swoop in to cover convention expenses now absorbed by public funds, and they’ll extract all manner of special favors in return.” (Common Cause, 3/11/14)

On one hand, this frame is newsworthy and attention getting. The media will certainly cover these allegations and the public is likely to conclude that money buys favors. Strategically, it may make sense for communicators to be opportunistic in these instances.
Beyond “Bought”

and use illegal acts to push for more systemic reforms. At the same time, there are a
number of potential downsides to an over-reliance on this frame.

First, it reinforces the court’s quid pro quo definition that is constraining policy solutions:

…if that’s [what] we discuss as being the problem of money in politics, then the Supreme
Court’s current jurisprudence, which is completely at the heart of why we can’t protect our
democratic government right now, of their jurisprudence in the last 40 years. We’re playing
into their vision of the only thing wrong is when it’s quid pro quo bribery, and so the fix is anti-
bribery statutes… But that has nothing to do with the larger democratic, the larger corruption
of democracy that happens with all of this improper influence and access that is engendered
by financial contributions…

In other words, it reinforces the narrow, little-picture view of the problem: the only thing
that counts as a problem is quid pro quo. This clear and vivid picture makes it much harder
to see the bigger problem -- which is more abstract, bigger, and less familiar, and therefore
harder for laypeople to wrap their arms around.

It is also likely that, for the public, this framing blurs the line between illegal bribery and legal
influence, which may muddy support for new laws. It would be logical for the public to
question, “Why pass new laws if they aren’t paying attention to existing laws?”

Corruption

Though many of those interviewed have a broader interpretation of the term “Corruption
Frame,” we use it to refer to a lens on the issue that is particularly moral in tone. For
example:

"The Court has reversed nearly 40 years of its own precedents, laid out a welcome mat for corruption,
and turned its back on the lessons learned from the Watergate scandal," said Rapoport. "This decision
once again demonstrates the Court majority’s ignorance of the real world of American politics, the one in
which big money buys big returns." (Common Cause, 4/2/14)

While much advocate communications
include variations of the Corruption Frame,
many of the people interviewed worry about
the negative consequences of this frame.
The Corruption Frame can get attention and
widespread public agreement, but it is not clear
that it engages people in solutions. In fact, several
Beyond “Bought”

interviewees assert that it simply convinces people government can’t be relied upon.

Furthermore, framing government and politicians as the problem makes it very difficult to pivot to positioning them as the solution.

It’s very easy to talk about corruption and the negative influence of money, and you’ll get a lot of nodding heads, but that also / it’s double-edged, because I think it can lead to disengagement and the idea that they’re never going to do anything about it. They’re benefiting from this system, they’re corrupt, and you know, they’re all corrupt so it’s never going to change.

Obviously, elected officials need to be held accountable for their actions. But there is a difference between frames that show how a particular official or candidate is corrupt, hypocritical or out of the mainstream, and frames that use a broad brush to paint virtually all politicians as suspect.

The Price we Pay

This frame is designed to increase the salience of the issue by emphasizing very specific outcomes that affect people’s lives. For example:

Over the past 20 years, the internet has evolved: from emails, then to webpages to audio, to games and now television and tons of other amazing stuff. It is the primary source for most communications. And during those 20 years, the largest phone and cable company lobbyists have become one of the biggest spenders in Washington to buy politicians and control the internet to maximize profits. They have passed laws that literally prevent competition. That’s why you have hardly any choices for your internet provider, and extremely slow and expensive in comparison to most other countries. (Represent.us, webpage)

Most communicators we interviewed stressed the need to tie Money in Politics to issues people care about.

We have some of the slowest broadband speeds, some of the slowest average broadband speeds in the world, in the developed world, and yet our bills are higher than most places on earth, most places that have access to high speed broadband on the earth. And that is largely because the largest spenders in the policy and political-making space are people like Verizon and AT&T and Comcast, which spend extraordinary amounts of money to gain preferential treatment, to write the rules to benefit their industry, not the consumers, who are blocking

I have dirty water here in West Virginia because that coal miner gave money to my politicians, and if that very specific problem that people are facing, that’s affecting their day-to-day life, is linked to money in politics, they’re more likely to mobilize around it.
Beyond “Bought”

the development of municipal broadband systems … And in place after place, governments have shown that they want to work, they want to do what the people want. And this is no more true than at the municipal level where cities like Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Lafayette, Louisiana, have created municipal broadband networks, but then cities in North Carolina that have wanted to do similar things, where people have come together through their government to try to improve a basic utility, right, a basic public service, have been blocked by the fact that legislators/state legislators and federal regulators have been captured by corporate interests.

There are several reasons to believe this approach will be an important part of the conversation. As noted earlier, if “indifference” is the central obstacle that prevents public engagement, then demonstrating that this issue matters to people’s lives is a key starting point. This is a compelling way to increase the salience of the issue. (However, if “cynicism” is the challenge, then it becomes critical to demonstrate that change can happen. Further describing the problem will be insufficient.)

Even if The Price we Pay is an important part of the conversation, there are some cautions and questions to keep in mind:

- Which consequences should be highlighted? Without careful consideration, the examples could inadvertently reinforce a partisan policy debate with examples that speak to either Democrats or Republicans, but not both.
- What does the “price” link to? Is this “about” corrupt politicians, undue corporate influence, lack of citizen engagement, etc.?
- How do these smaller (but important) victories in public perception add up to a larger cultural shift? We don’t want to have to fight an endless stream of these (winnable) battles -- we want to win the war.

Campaigns vs. Policy

Sometimes the focus of communications is the influence of money on the outcome of elections, for example:

The conservative super PAC American Crossroads and its nonprofit affiliate Crossroads GPS plan to reserve about $15 million worth of fall air time in five key Senate races, bringing its total investment for the post-Labor Day campaign to more than $20 million in six battleground contests.

The Crossroads organizations will reserve about $14.6 million in five states Democrats are defending: North Carolina, Louisiana, Arkansas, Montana and Iowa, the group told Post Politics Monday. The new reserves will come on top of about $5.6 million in fall broadcast and cable advertising time in Alaska American Crossroads reserved last month.

The spending blitz offers a glimpse at GOP thinking about the battle for the Senate four months from the Nov. 4 election. Republicans need to pick up six seats to win back the majority. (Sullivan, Washington Post, June 30, 2014)
Beyond “Bought”

And sometimes the focus is on the special access and influence that is bought through campaign contributions:

“In lobbying, the name of the game is fundraising, that’s all they care about with us.” said another Republican lobbyist and fundraiser. “Sure, we can give them advice, but if we aren’t contributing, what are we doing? If we’re not contributing, we don’t deserve a seat at the table.” (Wilson, The Hill, 6/22/14)

During the 2014 election cycle, telecom firms and their supporters have contributed $2.1 million to members of the House and Senate committees overseeing matters related to net neutrality, according to an analysis done for The Chronicle by the nonpartisan Sunlight Foundation.

That’s roughly three times the amount contributed by Google and other tech companies that support maintaining net neutrality. A similar disparity was found during the 2012 election cycle.

The reason for the disparity is ingrained in how business gets done in Washington.

Telecommunications and cable interests have spent generations cultivating contacts on Capitol Hill and at the FCC…many tech firms have only recently begun turning their attention to the business of political schmoozing. (Garofoli, San Francisco Chronicle, 6/21/14)

And finally, sometimes the focus is on the way in which the wealthy and corporations are able to shape the policy and regulatory process through a variety of channels, including political organizations and lobbyists:

Google is a Washington powerhouse that shapes federal law, rewards congressional allies and boasts a new 54,000-square-foot office, just down the road from the U.S. Capitol. But the Internet giant quietly has planted its political roots in places far beyond the Beltway — in state legislatures and city councils that have become hotbeds for tech policy fights.

The company has hired an army of lobbyists from coast to coast as it seeks to protect its self-driving cars, computer-mounted glasses and other emerging technologies from new rules and restrictions, according to an analysis of state records. It’s an aggressive offensive meant to counter local regulators, who increasingly cast a skeptical eye on Silicon Valley and its ambitious visions for the future. (Romm, Politico, 6/22/14)

Of course advocates want to talk about all these things: the influence of money on election outcomes, on policy, e.g. via access to elected officials as well as organizations like ALEC. However, these distinctions undoubtedly create some problems in terms of clarity in communication and solution.
Beyond “Bought”

While each area of focus is likely to rile citizens, each has dynamics that could potentially interfere with engaging the public in effective solutions.

Campaign Finance

- A focus on election outcomes is likely to cue partisanship, as one side cries “foul” and the other sees “fair”.
- There are enough upsets in any given election year for people to point to the exceptions and say, “money doesn’t matter”.

Special Access for Contributors

- This could reinforce the idea that all politicians are bought, and therefore it is futile to look to elected officials for solutions.

Shape the Process

- This is a direction that seems to not get much visibility, yet may provide a new way for people to think about the enormity of influence, as well as bring a range of solutions to light. This angle deserves more investigation to understand its consequences.

Democracy/Representation

Ultimately, protecting Democracy is the objective that drives most advocates.

So the current Court has struck down decades of precedent in the field of campaign finance, and it also has arranged things that the only real remedy is one that is impossible to achieve. The consequences of 40 years of trying to clean up the rot with which big money infects the structure of democracy has been a series of legal decisions that sanctified the rot with the most profound blessing the Constitution can provide. (Pierce, Esquire, 6/6/14)

The communicators we interviewed have differing views on the effectiveness of the Democracy Frame. Some believe it resonates:

But in my experience, what resonates when I do talk to audiences is that this is not a partisan problem, this is a democracy problem. If we care about our democracy and strengthening and preserving our democracy for the long haul, we need to do a better job of making sure it’s truly a representative government, and money has the ability to make it less representative.

While others believe it is ineffective.

We have to stop talking about democracy, stop talking about campaign finance, stop talking about money in politics, and we have to start talking about corruption. Because the former frames really only resonate among self-identified liberals and progressives.
Beyond “Bought”

One challenge of the Democracy Frame is that there are many possible variations of this theme, and some may be more effective than others. On one hand, “Democracy” is a "level one value" that Americans hold dear, providing the potential for a motivating meta-frame for a range of related issues. At the same time, “Freedom” especially including, free speech, and perhaps competition (as in for campaign dollars [see above]), are also level one values. Simply referring to “Democracy” doesn't inoculate against these other values. We might end up in a classic stalemate situation: Choice vs. Life, two equal and opposing values.

It may be that a very abstract version of this frame may be “too big” to motivate action and it needs to be more concrete. Or, it may need to be tied to other level one values to break a potential stalemate (for example, democracy is not democracy in the absence of self-government, e.g., the freedom to create and direct government). Finally, some variations of the Democracy frame may be more effective as one component of a broader narrative, a sub-theme.

Crisis

The Crisis Frame is often a component of communicators' messages.

"Today's decision in McCutcheon v. FEC is Citizens United round two, further opening the floodgates for the nation’s wealthiest few to drown out the voices of the rest of us," said Miles Rapoport, president of Common Cause. (Common Cause, 4/2/14)

Few interviewees mentioned this frame explicitly, but there is some concern that stressing the potential crisis undermines the issue when an actual crisis does not seem to appear.

Across issues, Topos research finds that the Crisis Frame typically does more harm than good. People become overwhelmed instead of empowered, and the focus on “crisis” obscures the solutions that are available to address the problem. People quickly conclude there is nothing they can do.

There's not a whole lot of truth telling about the problem, there's a lot of Henny Penny discussion in order to attract money, in order to attract press attention, in order to get the sound bite in...
Beyond “Bought”

Court Frame

Court decisions are often the focus of communications. There are times, of course, when this is unavoidable, such as when a relevant court decision is made. However, there are other times when focusing on the courts is a framing choice, a decision about how to talk about the problem and why it exists.

There are a number of potential downsides to this frame. It is likely that most Americans see “the courts” as outside political or partisan influence – the arbiters of “truth” – which then suggests that nothing can be done.

Furthermore, it has the potential to constrain public discourse on solutions if people believe the only thing that can be done is a constitutional amendment. And in general, the Court Frame can easily be too technical, too small-bore to contribute much to larger cultural shifts, especially this Court, which has been very good at crafting small decisions and denying larger implications.

Good Government

Communicators want people to see government as a problem solver, as able to accomplish important things.

I feel like we have finally convinced Americans that the government is utterly corrupt. And now I realize, shit, if we’re ever going to get the government to do anything, we need to convince the public that the government can do something that’s good.

A direct and singular “good” government frame may not be credible or motivating when associated with this issue. Our framing choices should lead people to believe in the possibility of good government, not suggest it either already exists or does not exist.

This has been the impact over the past four years of the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision. The narrow court majority, overturning decades of precedent, opened the floodgates to millions of dollars in secret, special-interest spending on elections. Indeed, Citizens United shook the foundation of our democracy; the principle that, in the United States of America, it is the voices of the people, not the bank accounts of the privileged few, that determine the outcome of our elections and the policies of our government. (Sarbanes and Pelosi, Washington Post, 2/4/14)
Beyond “Bought”

I always think about it in terms of the good government language. I think that’s a really bad way to sell our stuff. I think… I mean I guess this kind of gets at the core of what you’re looking at, and this is one reason that we’ve been excited about working on constitutional amendment activity—I think what does get people excited is talking about corporate power, because it feels real, it feels like it’s got an edge to it, it actually describes, it explains in a pretty useful way the world as they understand and as I think the world is, actually is.

Partisanship

While much of the discourse on this issue avoids targeting one political party or another, there are times when partisan motivations come into the conversation.

In fact, this decision should be seen as part of a larger initiative by moneyed conservatives to rig the electoral system against their opponents. How else to explain conservative legislation in state after state to obstruct access to the ballot by lower-income voters — particularly members of minority groups — through voter identification laws, shortened voting periods and restrictions on voter registration campaigns? Conservatives are strengthening the hand of the rich at one end of the system and weakening the voting power of the poor at the other. (E.J. Dionne, Washington Post, 2/5/2012)

A liberal campaign finance reformer with ties to one of the left’s leading dark money outfits succeeded last week in raising $5 million to elect politicians who will pledge to reduce the influence of money in the American political process… Lessig pitched wealthy donors in the tech community last week on the utility of restricting corporate political speech, saying their political agenda would be much easier to advance if opposing forces were restricted from influencing the political process. (Markay, Washington Free Beacon, 7/7/14)

Some interviewees worry about how politicians are forcing the partisanship of the issue.

It very quickly just devolves into this very partisan debate. And I think members of Congress are also making it, you know, a very partisan debate. But I don’t know what everyone else thinks about that, but I think it’s more so than I think we saw 10, 15 years ago. It’s always been a somewhat partisan issue, but it’s becoming a very core partisan issue.

Our work on related issues suggests that while partisanship may fire up the base, it is disempowering beyond the base. Partisan arguments often result in a dismissal of both parties and further erosion of people’s attitudes toward government. Potentially, partisanship can lead to a stalemate on the issue, which means lack of progress and a victory for the status quo – we can’t afford a stalemate here.
Frames with Potential to Set the Right Direction

We see several options for frames that may effectively move the dialogue in the right direction. Some of these are “new” frames while others are frames that exist, but get very little attention. Without research it is difficult to know exactly how these would play out, and more investigation is needed to fully develop these. At this point, we offer them as starting points for consideration, and have suggested what we believe are potential consequences of each of the frames.

Problem Orientation vs. Solutions Orientation

Discourse on this issue is dominated by discussions of “the problem” (typically defined as “politicians are being bought”) and very little attention is given to solutions. When solutions are included in communications, it is often after a lengthy discussion of the problem. Many of the experts we interviewed want to lift up solutions, but are not sure the best way to do that, or how to get the media focused on that angle.

The more consequential one is framing / both promoting solutions, framing solutions, and in ways that get people impassioned, energized and believing that change is possible.

It’s political malpractice that we haven’t had people talking about solutions in the wake of McCutcheon. We’re talking about how bad the Court is. We’re talking about how large checks can be written. We’re not breaking through on solutions. We’re not giving anyone any hope. So it’s malpractice. It’s just simply malpractice.

Communications oriented toward solutions START with solutions as the focus (and almost presume broad knowledge and acceptance of the problem, or briefly refer to the problem as an aside). This frame could have a number of variations:

- “Packaged” solutions – a Solutions Narrative
- Success stories – reforms that work
- Victories

While all the people we interviewed believe it is important to engage and mobilize citizens around solutions, most have little confidence about the best way to communicate solutions. This emphasis is perhaps complicated by a dynamic noted earlier – that if politicians are the “problem” then it is difficult to promote solutions that rely on the legislative process. In next steps, it will be important to investigate this challenge, to see if it differs based on level of
Beyond “Bought”

government (federal, state, local), and to determine if different or additional actors are required.

A Broader Solutions Narrative

Part of the challenge is that several organizations are focused on their own particular goals. They may feel confident in talking about their own agenda or particular solutions, but do not see an approach that lifts ALL solutions. Few are trying to package several solutions into a broader narrative.

I think you’ve got to lead with the solutions... there’s a couple of problems—one is we haven’t, as a community working on this money in politics issue, yet figured out how to talk about all the remedies together. We’re still in competition with one another, “my solution is best,” and we’re trying really, really hard to get past that, but it’s hard... the most important thing is you’ve got to go vote. You’ve got to go vote because right now, that’s what you have, right? And right now, no matter how much money they throw at this, you still have a vote, and so kind of shame on you if you don’t exercise that, because that’s fundamentally what this is about. So what I’ve been saying is I’ve been including voting as a remedy, and it seems to / people get it a little bit.

But those who are packaging solutions believe it is the most effective way to build public support.

Not just going after isolated public funding victories, but instead, more comprehensive lobbying ethics, transparency, and campaign finance laws in one chunk that are more appealing to voters.

A solutions narrative also opens up an opportunity to define the problem differently, perhaps a broader, values-based narrative that encompasses a range of democratic reforms.

Success Stories – Reforms that Work

A Success Story frame demonstrates that reforms make a difference.

Experiments have already shown that it works and how it works best. Maine, Connecticut, Arizona, Massachusetts, North Carolina, New Mexico, New Jersey, Hawaii and West Virginia have all experimented with publicly funded elections. They have learned that they are most effective when every office’s election is publicly funded, so that candidates learn how to raise money by going to the people, and that it is better to give a public match only to in-state individuals and not to PACs or out-of-state donors. Big lobbyists don’t like this because they are used to getting meetings with candidates to whom their clients give money. We’ve also learned that more women and minorities run for office with a public-funding system. It is time to take the experiment into big states and to Congress. (Zephyr Teachout, Washington Post, 4/3/14)
Several interviewees noted that Americans are cynical that change can happen or that reforms will make a difference. So lifting up successes – showing that solutions can make a difference – seems critically important. However, many of the people interviewed struggled to come up with any examples of success, or framed the examples in ways that are likely to reinforce problematic mindsets:

*New York City public financing system and Connecticut’s public financing system and how they’ve changed politics in those places, and how they’ve changed the way candidates relate to their constituents, and we have testimonials from candidates who have run in those places both on the kind of normal, unregulated system and then the public financing system, and they’ve talked about how different it is and how they get to think more about their constituents than about their big donors, and what a good thing that is.*

This description of “success” may simply reinforce the public’s conclusion that politicians care about wallets, not people. (They pay attention to constituents when constituents are footing the bill, not because they should care about constituents.)

Instead of focusing on public fundraising as the definition of success, can we develop “success” stories that show different kinds of people get elected, the public has more voice, policies are more focused the public interest, the policy process works differently, or that politicians are freed up to do the actual work of the people, etc.?

**Victories**

A Victories Frame highlights the wins that citizens achieve on this issue, as well as HOW a particular win will actually improve the system.

In March, residents made it crystal clear that they want to free elections from corporate influence and mega-donors when they overwhelmingly passed warrants at 48 town meetings calling for the state Legislature to support a constitutional amendment to overturn the 2010 *Citizens United* ruling. (Public Citizen, 5/15/14)

Highlighting victories – building a sense of momentum that change can and is happening – may be important in establishing the feel of a “movement”. Stories about victories may be particularly effective if they model the “people-in” actions we’re advocating, e.g., this victory happened because hundreds/thousands of people got engaged.

In addition to motivating the public, this type of approach might energize politicians, due to fear.
Beyond “Bought”

So to a certain extent I think the public is involved, engaged, I mean we’ve been just around the constitutional amendment there’s been incredible, literally grassroots activists organizing to get municipal resolutions passed in support of a constitutional amendment ... when we call on our activists to get engaged, they’re engaged.

I think we must emulate from Medical Marijuana and from LGBT rights and from the Minimum Wage advocates. Those three causes are marching across the country, passing city and state laws and changing political culture while they do it.

What People Want

Public opinion polls are often used to get media attention for the issue, and in these instances the frame is typically about the overwhelming public support for reform. When narrowly framed, this approach may reinforce a desirable view (that reform is needed), but it probably does not overcome some of the other major obstacles to action such as believing that change won’t happen.

However, a version of this approach tied to the Victory Frame and couched in “power” terms, is potentially persuasive for elected officials. When they see and believe that people are angry enough to vote on this issue, they may finally take action.

...people will vote on that basis, like they’ll vote out the crook, you know, or they’ll vote out the person who’s supporting the crooks...their constituents are reading this and might hold them accountable at the ballot box for what they do on this.

You do this by creating genuine political power...you don’t rely on the good intentions of politicians who say the right things... you actually have to create political consequence.

People In

Several interviewees noted the difference between strategies grounded in “money out” as opposed to “people in”. A People In Frame is fundamentally different than the current dominant frame for this issue. It is about engaging people in the political process:
Beyond “Bought”

Potentially, “People In” has a number of benefits. It might make it possible to mobilize citizens and avoid cynicism. It offers an opportunity to focus the conversation on solutions, and allows for many different kinds of solutions. It can serve as a bridge to other issues of representation (voting rights, gerrymandering, etc.). The implicit message to get involved is likely to be more mobilizing than an abstract democracy message. The idea of “inclusion” vs. “exclusion” in the process may be a particularly compelling aspect of this approach that opponents would find difficult to refute. Finally, it still allows for a connection to “the issues people care about” and more importantly, to a conversation about the benefits people gain from a well-functioning government.

*It’s not about taking money out or getting money out, it’s about bringing people back in. So that type of approach is I think strategically sound for engaging membership organizations on these issues… because we’re talking about their members having a voice in politics.*

However, this strategy requires careful study and crafting to understand how to realize the potential benefits. It is certainly possible that if not carefully crafted, this frame could easily reinforce cynicism as people conclude that elected officials don’t care about their views anyway.

**Voice/Political Inequality**

This frame is about whose voice is loudest and ensuring that the public voice counts.

In another video supporting the campaign, Wozniak outlined how big money corrupts “America’s operating system.” He highlights several areas he thinks big money in politics has failed the tech industry, ranging from net neutrality to the “overreach of the NSA.” “Right now if a politician wants to get elected, the most important thing is if they can make this tiny group of people happy,” Wozniak says. “What makes them happy isn’t necessarily what makes the rest of us happy. That’s how we end up having to fight both tooth and nail on stuff that’s so bad for the Internet and everyone who uses it.” (Tech Crunch, 6/24/14)

Currently, this framing is typically tied to money as speech, but there may be other variations that allow for a broader interpretation of “voice”. In fact, this is potentially another way of talking about representation, power and “people in” that might be particularly compelling.

*When we talk about silencing voices, I think that’s better; when we talk about loudspeakers and how come they get to buy a bigger megaphone, that’s really helpful because that also indicates that money is just actually how they’re able to convey their speech more loudly than you… But I think that silencing and domination / I want something that evokes power, you know, because it’s*
Beyond “Bought”

basically, in the end, it’s not just / they want it to be about their speech, but what this is actually about is about political power.

So like if I give $25, then there’s a match from the government of 6 to 1, so that my $25 is actually $300—or $350, whatever that math is—and that it’s empowering, it’s giving more / gives me more say in the process… a handful of wealthy people shouldn’t have more say in the process than I do. They should be equal. I think that’s been another place where people have responded… why do you get a thousand votes, and I get one?

Corporate Influence

Instead of focusing on the politicians who are “being bought” this frame focuses on those who are trying to shape public policy, and all the ways they try to influence it at the local, state and federal level, through campaigns as well as lobbying, etc.

Ultimately, the United States is caught in a vicious cycle wherein the wealthy dominate the democratic process, use their political power to craft favorable economic rules, and then channel their increased riches back into further political control. (Seton Hall Law Review, Lioz, 11/1/13)

This approach puts the attention on who is doing the influencing (as opposed to who is receiving the money) which may avoid the worst of the anti-government reactions. Surveys demonstrate that vast majorities of Americans (across party lines) believe there is too much corporate money in politics and corporations have too much influence, so this approach should get traction. Furthermore, “influence” as the problem definition may allow for an opportunity to include more issues in the frame (lobbyists, gerrymandering, voting rights, influence at the local level, etc.), which has the potential to link allies in common purpose and create more of a movement than each issue in isolation.

People are hiring a bevy of lobbyists at a very high cost, because it’s affordable relative to the potential cost to their business or their industry, or the potential gains to be seen. So for them, this is just, you know, part of the way they become successful at whatever it is they’re trying to do. It’s a cost of doing business.

One caution with this approach is that it may easily slide into a broader critique of the role of corporations in American life which, while important, may deflect attention from this particular agenda.
**Beyond “Bought”**

**Corporate Responsibility**

This frame highlights corporate action and policies rather than government action and policies.

“Shareholders investing in this company deserve to know how their money is being spent, whether those expenditures align with our values, or carry any risk, reputational or otherwise,” Jewler said. He continued, “So I’m wondering, for one, how much money does Google provide to the Chamber of Commerce, and for what purposes? And, being that Google is one of the top corporate players in lobbying, and is also one of the less transparent in doing so, do you have any plan to be more transparent with shareholders and the public?” (Public Citizen, 5/20/14)

“Google says that it cares about clean energy,” said Brant Olson, campaign director at Forecast The Facts, “but it’s funding the American Legislative Exchange Council, a notorious enemy of renewable energy currently working to undermine solar energy in statehouses across the country.” (Public Citizen, 5/14/14)

Shifting attention to the role of corporations affords an opportunity to bring attention to a range of corporate-centered solutions like transparency for shareholders. It may also avoid some of the anti-government cynicism if a variety of corporate activities are exposed.

*Shifting the way that we think about transparency and goals of transparency or disclosure policies… to be less about trying to root out corruption in government and more about trying to root out the efforts by private actors to bend government to their will. That’s an important shift that I think gets lost a lot in the transparency and disclosure communities.*

Corporations have at times been leaders in positive social change (such as employee benefits for gay and lesbian couples and sustainable environmental behavior), so this direction may lead to a range of positive consequences.
Beyond “Bought”

Secrecy

This is the frame typically advanced by those seeking transparency reforms.

Added Lisa Gilbert, director of Public Citizen’s Congress Watch division, “Only those who have something to hide seek secrecy. Duke has a record of recent bad behavior and should seek to break that pattern by moving to political spending transparency.” (Common Cause, 5/1/14)

In North Carolina’s Supreme Court primary on May 5, for example, Justice Robin Hudson endured attack ads charging that she coddled child molesters and “sided with the predators” in a dissent while on the bench. The ad’s source was not her two opponents but a shadowy independent group that received $900,000 from the Republican State Leadership Committee in Washington, which channels donations from corporations and individuals to promote conservatives in state politics. She survived, but with four of seven seats on North Carolina’s top court up for election this fall, including hers, an even larger flood of outside money can be expected. (NYT, 5/18/14)

Beyond transparency, secrecy is incompatible with democracy and a healthy functioning government. So while this frame is perhaps not broad enough to encompass all the desired reforms, it may not only lift transparency measures but also give a boost to other reforms as well if we connect it to healthy, functioning democracy.

Checks and Balances

A Checks and Balances Frame would be something along the following lines:

The founders built all kinds of things into the Constitution designed to curb tyranny and corruption, because they were smart about human nature. Because we’re human, we need to build in protections against destructive tendencies/temptations. And this system of protections needs to evolve as threats evolve.

Since it builds off a commonly known feature of our democratic system (checks and balances) it should communicate a great deal of meaning and be readily accepted. This is one example of tying the Democracy value to other cherished beliefs – it may be more powerful and concrete (and therefore more effective) than a typical Democracy frame. One question for investigation is the extent to which “we the people” acts as the check and balance, or if the policy solution is the check and balance.
Beyond “Bought”

The Appearance of Corruption

This is distinct from the Corruption Frame in a number of ways.

First, it’s easier to prove. Polls and common sense, make it clear that most Americans agree there’s a big problem in representation, whereas proving that laws have been broken, influence bought, etc., etc., is quite hard.

It has the potential to provide a unifying theme that could unite a lot of the advocates.

It sets a broader definition for the law. It’s about undermining faith in our system of government, which policymakers (including the Court), would be obligated to address.

So that kind of alienation, I was saying, that is, in itself, a democratic harm that the court should take into account

However, even if it is compelling to the public, it may or may not provide a compelling rationale for policymakers to act.

Helping the Public See the Big Picture

Topos has found in lots of issue areas that it’s not easy for laypeople to quickly grasp the full scope of a problem, especially the parts of the problem that are abstract and unfamiliar. Simplifying models can help to bring the issue into clearer focus, which may be especially relevant on this issue where, e.g., the damage to the system is not perfectly captured by, "money," "bribery," "corruption" etc. (Each of these and other labels are vivid and clear, but also misleading and too limiting.) Just as the Public Structures concept helps people see aspects of government that are normally invisible, a simplifying model on this issue might help people see the broader threats to democracy and self governance.

Next Steps

Our experience suggests that a number of the hypothetical framing directions outlined here could be potentially effective in creating new public understanding that overcomes many of the obstacles and downsides in the current conversation. Some of the frames we suggest have the potential to be big, unifying narratives, while others are designed for more targeted purposes. In each case, they are likely to be more effective than some of the common frames that advocates often default to.

This said, we believe it is crucial to rigorously test the recommended framing approaches with the public to confirm the strengths and weaknesses of each.
Beyond “Bought”

Methodology

This white paper is based on: 1) an analysis of in-depth interviews with 18 experts and 2) a review of advocate websites, press releases, editorials and media coverage. We extend our sincere gratitude to the following experts who were generous with their time and who provided very thoughtful consideration of the topics we covered:

Marge Baker, People for the American Way
Marissa Brown, Democracy Initiative
Michael Brune, Sierra Club
David Donnelly, Public Campaign Action Fund
Courtney Hight, Sierra Club
Thomas Hilbink, Open Society Foundations
Liz Kennedy, Demos
Sheila Krumholtz, Center for Responsive Politics
Ellen Miller, Sunlight Foundation
Lawrence Norden, Brennan Center for Justice
Trevor Potter, Campaign Legal Center
Paul Ryan, Campaign Legal Center
Gabriella Schneider, Sunlight Foundation
Josh Silver, Represent.us
Jonathan Soros, Friends of Democracy
David Vance, Campaign Legal Center
Wendy Weiser, Brennan Center for Justice
Rob Weissman, Public Citizen

Though many of these experts were willing to have their comments cited publicly, Topos made the decision to keep all quotes confidential to promote frank conversation and to protect the privacy of all parties.

In addition, Topos reviewed dozens of websites, press releases, editorials, articles, etc., to determine which frames are in use. The selections included in this report are simply intended to illustrate the framing dynamics, and are not intended to quantify frames or imply that one organization or author relies primarily upon a particular frame.
Topos has as its mission to explore and ultimately transform the landscape of public understanding where public interest issues play out. Our approach is based on the premise that while it is possible to achieve short-term victories on issues through a variety of strategies, real change depends on a fundamental shift in public understanding. Topos was created to bring together the range of expertise needed to understand existing issue dynamics, explore possibilities for creating new issue understanding, develop a proven course of action, and arm advocates with new communications tools to win support.

For more information:

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