

From Grassroots to the Airwaves: Paying for Political Parties and Campaigns in the Caribbean

*Steven Griner
Daniel Zovatto*

Most political leaders interviewed for this study agreed that campaign costs were increasing; paradoxically, though, no one could say with any exactitude how much campaigns cost. Simple observation suggests growing “Americanization” of campaigns: increased reliance on media advertising, foreign consultants to mould the message and high tech rallies, all with concomitant high prices. Where estimates were given, they ranged from US\$2 million (Antigua and Barbuda) to US\$6 million (Jamaica) per party per campaign. The researchers of this study place a number of qualifications on these figures, however. Estimates vary depending on their source: official parties tend to provide lower estimates, while opposition parties and civil society organisations assume higher expenditures. Most did not even venture a guess.

Media publicity appears to be of growing importance, but many political leaders confess that they invest in this medium “just in case” and not because they view it as crucial to electoral victory. With small populations, single-member districts and first-past-the-post, winner-take-all systems, politicians have not abandoned the tried and tested “rum, roti and sardines” campaign described in chapter one. Personal patronage plays a big role in campaigns, probably more so than in the other subregions of the hemisphere. Indeed, according to a recent poll conducted in Suriname, nearly seventy-two percent of citizens surveyed believed that the best way to reach the electorate in their country was through public meetings, rallies, and personal contact with the politicians.

Patronage on the “rum and roti” level makes estimating campaign costs difficult; the lack of disclosure makes quantifying these costs impossible. Only four of the fourteen countries in this study have any type of legislation on the books requiring disclosure of campaign expenditures. Even in this handful of countries, required disclosure is limited to expenditure from public funds and, in practice, disclosure is rarely enforced. In most countries of the Caribbean, expenses for candidates and parties are considered separate and if one is regulated, it is the candidate. Parties, generally lacking legal definition, are subject to very few controls. Some candidates, to access unregulated party funds, have even declared that they personally have spent no funds whatever.

Similarly, and perhaps more worryingly, contributions are not regulated. Only four CARICOM countries (Antigua and Barbuda, Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago) have anything on the books requiring disclosure of contributions, and even in these four countries, most admit that the regulation is not enforced. Interviews in one country revealed that the political leaders “were not even aware” of the disclosure requirement.

Contributors insist on confidentiality, arguing that they could be victimised if their party is voted out of office. Interviews and research undertaken for this study indicate, however, that most contributing individuals and firms give simultaneously to competing candidates or parties. Most of those interviewed believed that the number of contributors has decreased in the last five years. As campaigns become more expensive, individual contributions are becoming bigger and individual contributors more influential.

While suspicions still remain among contributors and parties about increased disclosure requirements, reform in this area appears further along than other campaign or political party financing regulation. The pressure for increased regulation has originated from outside the political party structures, usually from civil society organisations, but parties in Trinidad, Jamaica and Suriname have passed meaningful legislation in this regard. Balanced enforcement of this legislation, however, remains to be seen.

Most concede that there is little public support for public financing of political parties or campaigns. This lack of support emanates from negative public perceptions both of political parties and the state. On the one hand, parties are viewed as too corrupt to merit funding from scarce resources. On the other, the state is perceived as too weak (*vis a vis* the parties) to ensure equitable distribution and disclosure of these funds. Although direct public funding is a generally unpopular option, an equitable allocation of free airtime on state-owned media could potentially constitute an important in-kind contribution to political parties; Jamaica, St. Lucia, Suriname and Trinidad already provide some free time on state-owned media, albeit minuscule in comparison to the total amount purchased on the free market.

Political party and campaign financing reform efforts seem particularly ephemeral in the Caribbean. A funding scandal can be a cause celebre for an opposition party, but when that party comes to power it hesitates to change the familiar rules of the game. Even ruling political parties advocate reform during election time, but the issue is given low priority once the campaign fervour has died. Where legislation does try to limit campaign expenditures, limits fail to reflect the economic realities of mounting a modern campaign. Legislation in Guyana, Trinidad and Jamaica — the only countries that have attempted to limit campaign expenditures — do not take into account these increasing costs, or a devaluing currency. Candidates who abided by such restrictive figures would not be competitive in most constituencies. Likewise, sanctions levied for violations are also quite low, making it more cost-effective to violate the

law than to abide by it. In most cases, enforcement of campaign financing legislation is practically non-existent, rendering the risk of penalty for violators close to zero.

Political party regulation, in finance and otherwise, is complicated by the absence of a juridical definition of parties. The constitutions of the Caribbean do not define political parties and there is little legislation regulating them. Indeed, few countries have legal requirements for registering as a political party. There are few laws that recognise parties or regulate or limit the manner in which, and the extent to which, they are funded by either the private or public sector. (Suriname is the exception.) To the extent that they do exist, limits apply to candidates, who easily obviate them through their political parties. Many constitutional reform commissions comprised of members outside of political party structures have advocated for a juridical definition of political parties and greater disclosure requirements. Examples include Belize, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

As noted by Doug Payne, the media in the Caribbean are freer and under less threat than in any other subregion of the developing world. Primarily through the advent of talk radio, voices of virtually all shades within the political spectrum are heard. Yet, in each of the 14 Caribbean countries studied, the market determines access to the media and political parties are spending more for it. Radio, as noted in Chapter II, is utilised most, while television is the most expensive and used to a lesser degree. By some estimates, media expenditures account for between a quarter and a third of total campaign expenditures. An interesting model with regard to ensuring equal access to the media is The Bahamas. While no free space is provided to political parties, an Electoral Broadcasting Council ensures implementation of broadcasting rules for state-run media. In some other countries, equal access to the media is on the books, but seldom enforced.

It is sometimes said of political financing in the Caribbean, “if you can’t pay, you can’t play”. The extent to which money influences electoral and policy outcomes in CARICOM states is difficult to gauge accurately. However, current absences and deficiencies in the regulation of political financing sustain uneven and badly lit playing fields, increasing the likelihood and minimising the penalties for cheating. Campaign finance regulation, including equal access to the media, can ensure that whoever desires to play is provided with a fair chance to win.

