



CENTER FOR  
AMERICAN POLITICS  
& CITIZENSHIP

## **Campaign Finance and Public Opinion**

Analysis from the Washington Post/University of Maryland Poll  
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## Introduction

One essential goal of the October 2015 Washington Post-University of Maryland poll was to assess statewide public opinion on the issue of how our campaigns for elected office are financed. Record-breaking trends in political spending are widely expected to continue in the 2016 election cycle, largely prompted by the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010). This case held that the First Amendment prohibited the government from restricting campaign spending by both public and private organizations. These changes have occurred in a rapidly evolving and polarizing political environment. With an issue as politically charged as campaign finance, it seems appropriate, and even obvious, that the public (those who should most be represented in the political process) have their views on the issue heard and understood across multiple demographic and partisan dimensions.

In this report, The Center for American Politics and Citizenship (CAPC) reviews Marylanders' opinions on campaign finance across demographic groups (age, gender, race, income, etc), political parties, state-level differences, and future vote choice, based on preferences in both the Democratic nomination for President and in Maryland's upcoming U.S. Senate race.

## Demographic Differences

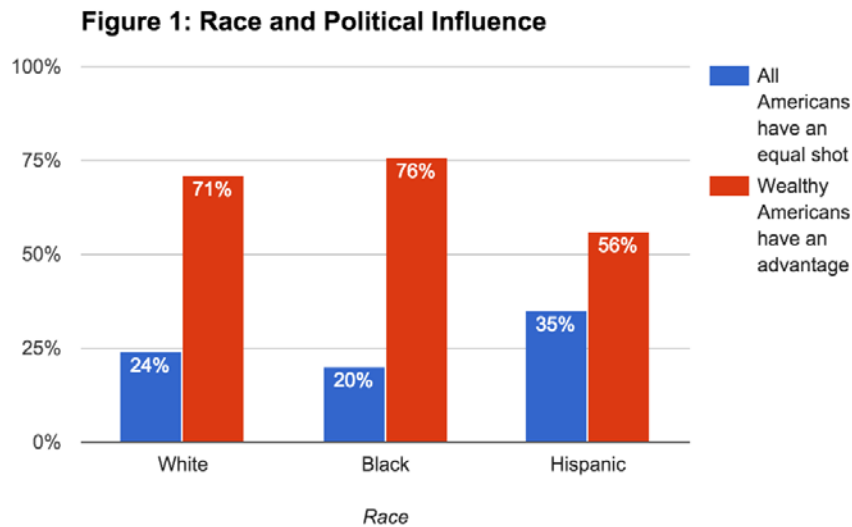
Age is a demographic characteristic where we see consistent differences in opinions on a number of issues involving campaign finance. Perhaps surprisingly, while most respondents across all demographic categories say that the role of money in American political campaigns has “too much” rather than “too little” or “the right amount of” influence, young people (age 18-29) are the most likely age group to answer “the right amount”, and the least likely to view the influence of money in politics as an “extremely important” problem (Table 1). The differences here are not enormous, but they do raise some big questions: Are young people simply inured to the current political environment? Are they just used to billion-dollar elections, having come of age in the new millennium (many reaching adulthood after the *Citizen's United* decision)? Or is it simply that they are more concerned with finding a job during an economic crisis that hit young people particularly hard?

*Table 1: Age and Opinions of Influence of Money in the Political Process*

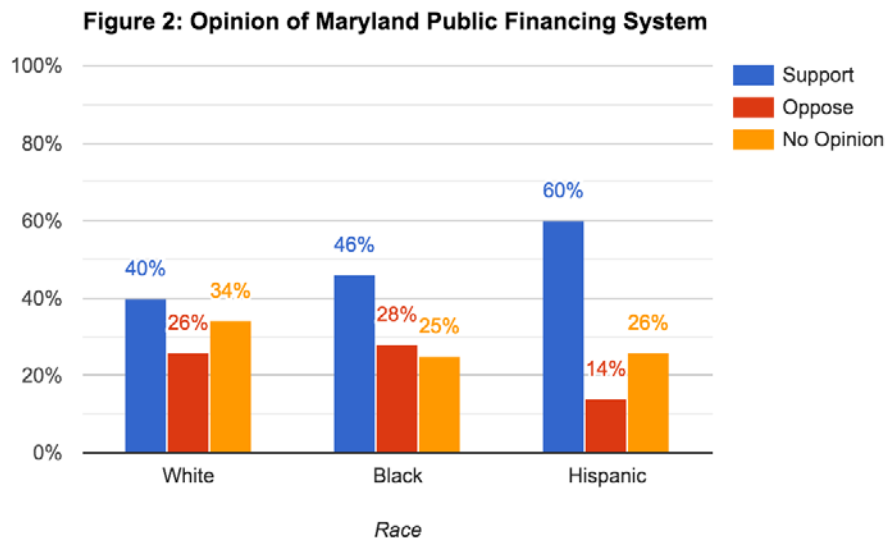
	Age 18-29	Age 30-39	Age 40-49	Age 50-64	Age 65+
<b>Too Much Influence</b>	79.1%	82.2%	84.8%	80.8%	84.8%
<b>Too Little Influence</b>	1.4%	7.8%	3.8%	4.0%	1.3%
<b>Right Amount of Influence</b>	17.0%	8.4%	11.0%	12.3%	10.6%
Don't Know/No Opinion	2.6%	1.7%	0.4%	3.0%	3.3%

Other demographic characteristics do not necessarily follow any predefined narratives or substantive expectations. For example, we see little difference between men and women on the “too much/too little influence” question; although, of those who answered “too much influence,” men are slightly more likely to view this as an “extremely important” problem. Men are also a few percentage points more likely to believe that wealthy Americans have an outsized influence on the electoral process as opposed to all Americans having an equal chance. Men are also slightly more likely to support Maryland's public financing system for elections.

Examining opinion across racial/ethnic groups also presents an informative picture of views on campaign finance. Here, we consider three groups: Whites; Blacks; and Hispanics. Respondents of all races said that the role of money has too much influence. A majority of all races also said that the wealthy have an advantage (Figure 1). However, Hispanics were significantly (by more than 10 percentage points) less likely to respond this way, and took a comparatively conservative position on all campaign finance questions.

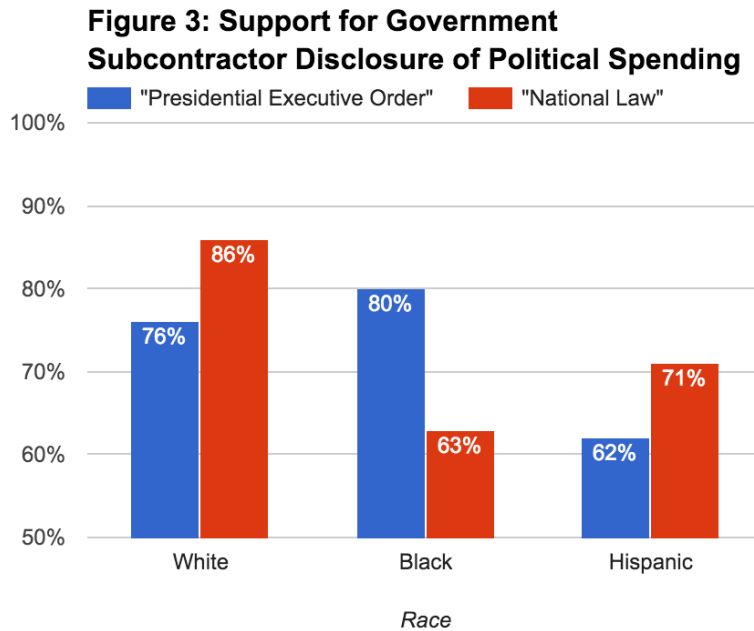


Hispanics were also far more likely to support Maryland’s public financing system than all other races (Figure 2). Indeed, while 60% of Hispanics support the current public financing system, fewer than half of Whites and fewer than half of Blacks said they support the current system. Not surprisingly, a large proportion of all groups did not have an opinion, likely reflecting a lack of knowledge about the system.

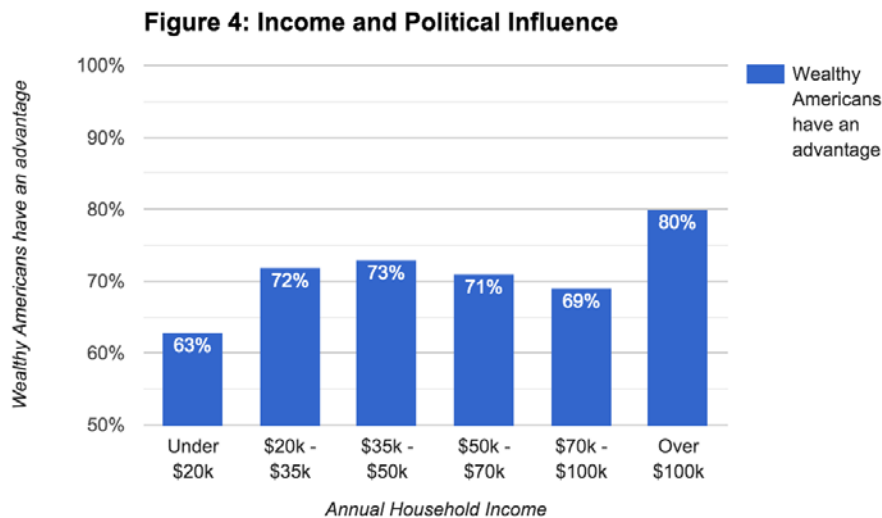


Another specific policy position on which respondents differed across race was on requiring federal government subcontractors to disclose their political spending. The poll asked questions on support for a

“presidential executive order” or a “national law” requiring this type of disclosure. Across all races, save for Blacks, support was significantly lower for the executive order option than for the national law option (Figure 3). This may be indicative of latent support for President Obama.

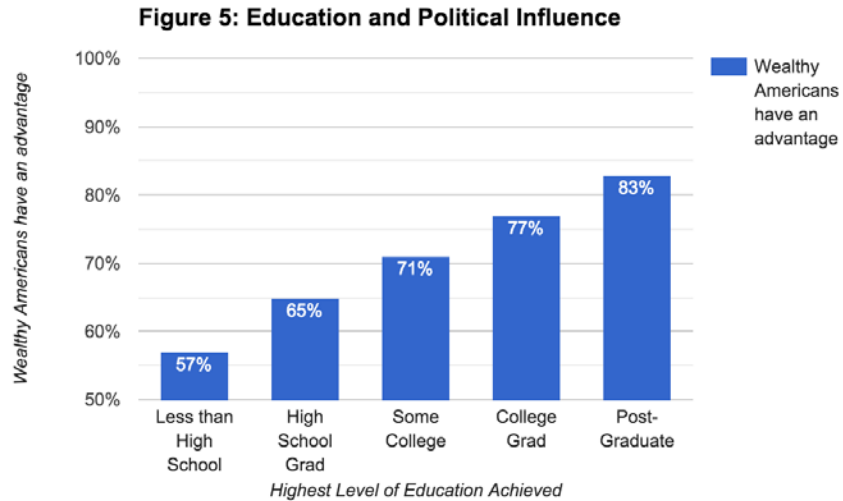


Finally, perhaps the most significant (and maybe unexpected) demographic differences have to do with income levels. Not only were the poorest Marylanders least likely to believe that money has too much influence in elections, but income levels were positively correlated across the board with more liberal campaign finance positions. Most striking was the self-realization among the very wealthy—8 in 10 believe that the concentration of wealth gives them an advantage in elections (Figure 4).



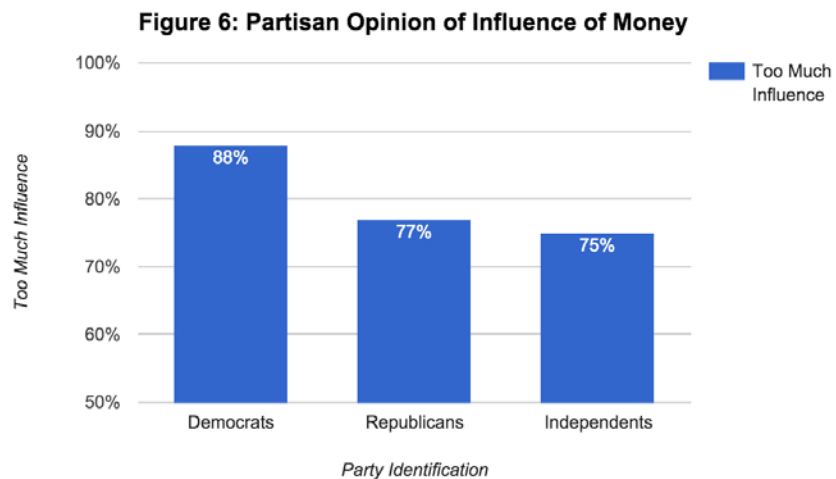
What could explain this counterintuitive result? One possibility is that this finding among the very wealthy, while fascinating in their self-awareness, is best explained by education levels. By this we mean that the better-educated are likely to know more about the issue, and perhaps by extension are more likely

to view it as a problem or understand the outsized influence the wealthy have on elections. Figure 5 (below) shows this expected positive correlation[SR1]. Another possible explanation is that many in the wealthiest subgroup of poll respondents (Over \$100k) do not consider themselves wealthy, and thus believe that those with more wealth than themselves have a political advantage.

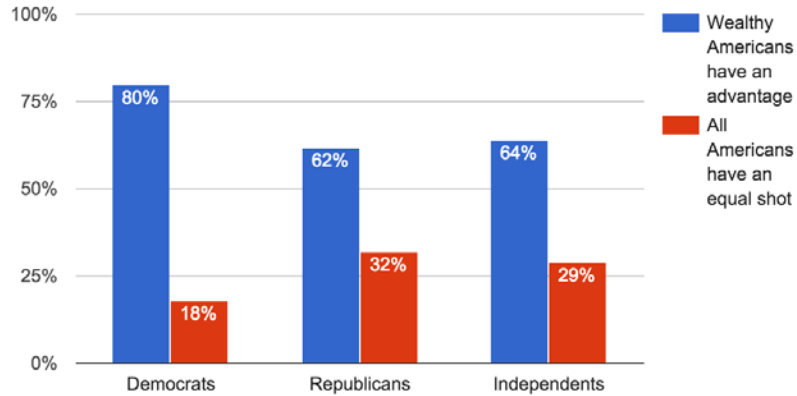


## Political Differences

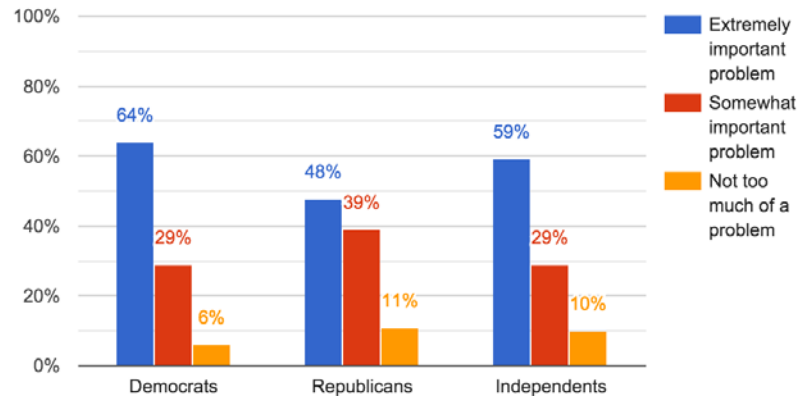
Despite having everything to do with politics, campaign finance has not always been a consistently salient issue for both political parties. Still, some partisan differences are perceptible in this poll's results in a number of interesting ways. The bottom line is that while a wide majority of both parties' voters view money as having too much influence in politics, Democrats seem somewhat more concerned than Republicans. Graphical representations of partisan opinions on money's influence (Figure 6), its perceived skew towards the wealthy (Figure 7), and the seriousness of the problem (Figure 8) demonstrate these differences.



**Figure 7: Partisan Opinion of Political Influence**



**Figure 8: Partisan Opinion of Campaign Finance Issue Importance**

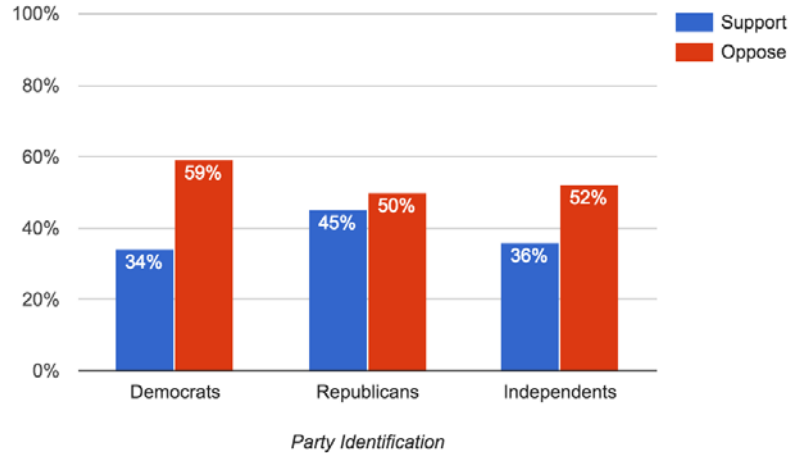


In short, Democrats are not only more likely to perceive campaign finance as a problem, but they are more likely to perceive it as a **big** problem. Further, majorities of both parties even oppose the Citizens United decision, though Republicans just barely cross this threshold (Figure 9).

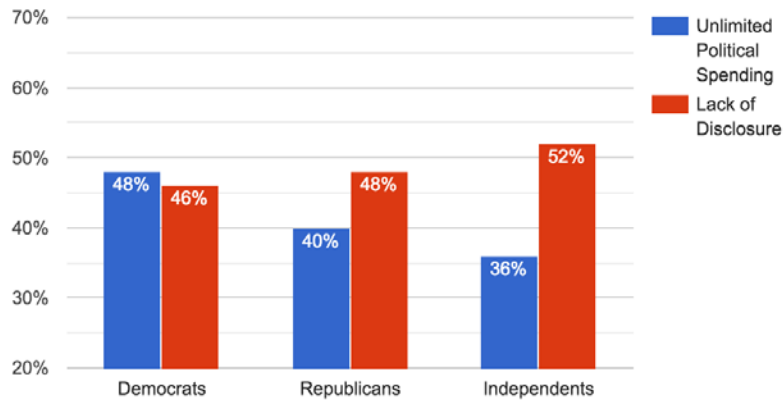
The one place where voters with different party identification seem to diverge is with questions that get at what people really believe is behind the problem of money in politics: that people and corporations can spend unlimited amounts of money, or that people and corporations do not need to disclose these amounts (i.e. dark money).

Here, we see no majority opinion in either party for each of these options. Figure 10 shows Marylanders' views across party on which is the biggest problem. We see that Democrats are nearly evenly split on which is the predominant issue, slightly in favor of the "unlimited amounts" argument, while Republicans are more clearly concerned with transparency. Those who do not identify with either the Democratic or Republican party were more clearly of the view that the lack of disclosure is the bigger problem, with 52% choosing that option compared to 36% choosing unlimited spending.

**Figure 9: Partisan Opinion of Citizens United**



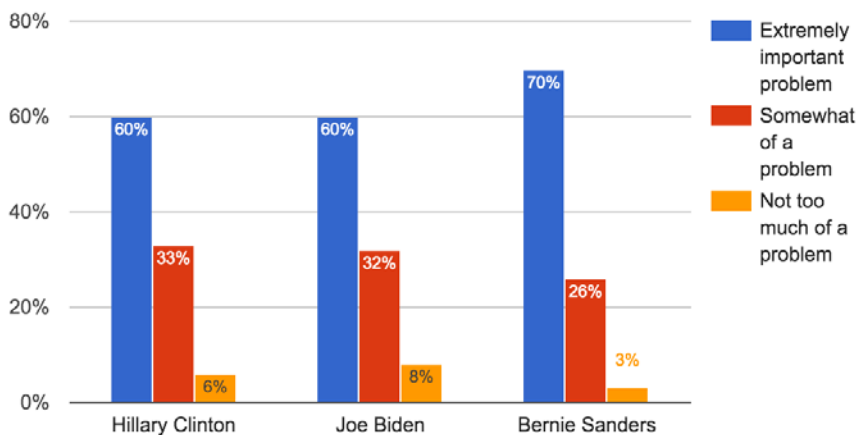
**Figure 10: Partisan Opinion on Biggest Campaign Finance Problem**



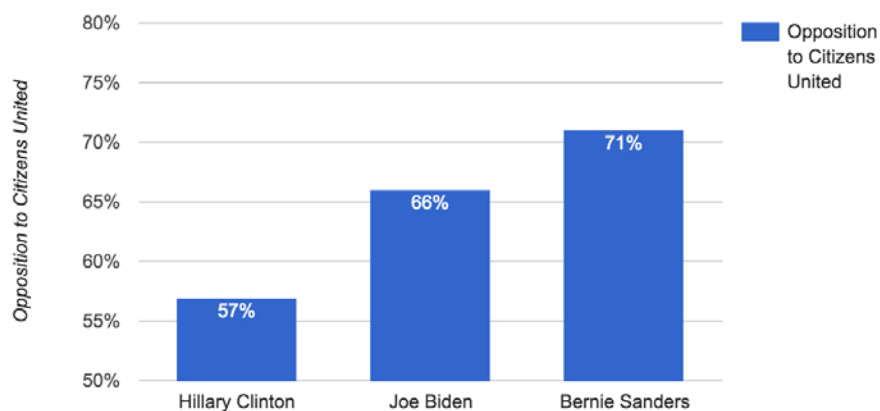
Finally, party interests are of course represented in future political races, and the campaign finance issue may play a role here as well. With Senator Bernie Sanders (D) making a splash in the Democratic Presidential Primary, in part by making campaign finance and income inequality some of his main talking points, the poll sought to differentiate between his supporters and Secretary Hillary Clinton's.

As suspected, Sanders' supporters are not only more likely to believe money to have too great an influence on the electoral process, but also to believe that this is an extremely important issue (Figure 11). Whether this is an effect of Sanders' message getting through to voters, or simply a flocking of already-like-minded voters to his candidacy, remains to be seen. We see similar distributions of voters on the other campaign finance questions, with Sanders supporters more likely to oppose Citizens United and to believe that the wealthy have an outsized influence on the electoral process (Figures 12 and 13). The inclusion of Vice President Biden in the poll complicates matters (the poll was taken before he made his official decision not to run), so it will be interesting to see the dispersion of his voters on this and other issues as the race continues.

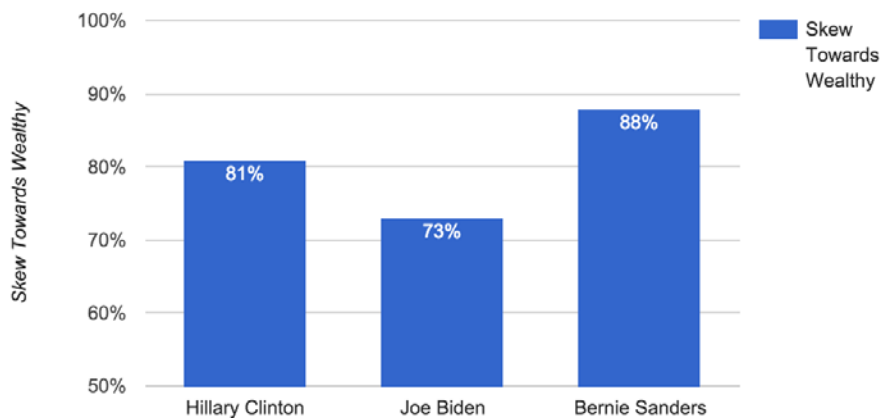
**Figure 11: Democratic Presidential Primary Support and Too Much Influence of Money**



**Figure 12: Presidential Choice and Opposition to Citizens United**



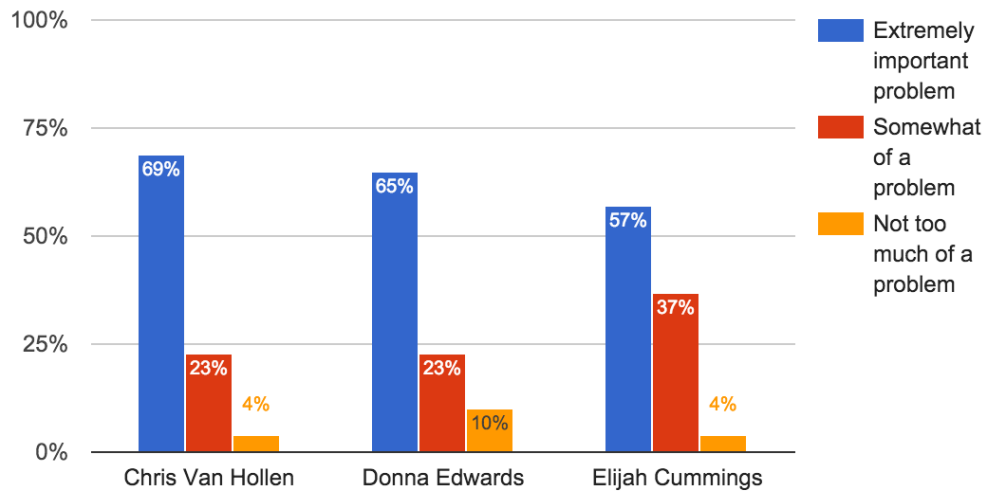
**Figure 13: Presidential Choice and Opinions of Money's Influence**





Turning to the Democratic Primary contest for the soon-to-be open Maryland Senate seat, there does seem to be a notable level of difference among the candidates' supporters with respect to the role of money in politics. Chris Van Hollen's supporters respond with more alarm to the issue than either Donna Edwards' or Elijah Cummings' supporters (Figure 14).

**Figure 14: U.S. Senate Primary Support and Problem Magnitude of Influence of Money**



*How big of a problem is the outsized influence of money in politics?*

## Conclusion

The collaboration between the Washington Post and the University of Maryland's Center for American Politics and Citizenship has revealed a number of interesting findings about the opinions of voters on issues relating to the influence of money in politics. As the 2016 presidential campaign progresses, it remains to be seen whether candidates will take any action as a result of bipartisan public support for campaign finance reform. It is difficult to imagine any sweeping reforms taking place in the near future; but if they do, perhaps representatives will consider whether to promote policies that reflect the public preferences this poll has attempted to capture.