**Somebody just put a price tag on the 2016 election. It’s a doozy.**

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The final price tag for the 2016 election is in: $6.5 billion for the presidential and congressional elections combined, according to [campaign finance watchdog OpenSecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2017/04/election-2016-trump-fewer-donors-provided-more-of-the-cash/).

The presidential contest — primaries and all — accounts for $2.4 billion of that total. The other $4 billion or so went to congressional races. The tally includes spending by campaigns, party committees and outside sources. It's actually down, slightly, in inflation-adjusted terms from 2012 and 2008.

$6.5 billion is a staggering sum. With that much money you could fund the Corporation for Public Broadcasting [for 15 years](http://www.cpb.org/aboutcpb/financials/budget), fix the Flint, Mich., lead pipe problem [30 times over](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/06/flint-water-crisis-lead-pipes-infrastructure-cost) or give every public school teacher [a $2,000 raise](https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372).

Instead, Americans used that money to fuel a [596-day political contest](http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/10/21/450238156/canadas-11-week-campaign-reminds-us-that-american-elections-are-much-longer) that [most of us were 'disgusted' by](http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/21/politics/pew-poll-hillary-clinton-donald-trump/) well before it was over.

Clinton's unsuccessful campaign ($768 million in spending) outspent Trump's successful one ($398 million) by nearly 2 to 1. The Democratic National Committee and left-leaning outside groups also outspent their Republican counterparts by considerable margins.

But Trump benefited immensely from “earned media” — the free TV time he got by virtue of being an unconventional candidate who frequently said [outlandish](http://www.politico.com/blogs/2016-gop-primary-live-updates-and-results/2016/05/trump-ted-cruz-father-222730) and [offensive](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/31/us/politics/donald-trump-khizr-khan-wife-ghazala.html) things. Trump received about $5 billion in free media, [according to an estimate by media analysis firm MediaQuant](https://www.mediaquant.net/2016/11/a-media-post-mortem-on-the-2016-presidential-election/), compared with only $3.24 billion for Clinton. Those figures aren't included in OpenSecrets' tally of direct spending.

The amount of money we spend on candidates stands in sharp contrast with how much we like them once they actually get in office. Despite spending $4 billion on House and Senate candidates, for instance, less than a quarter of us actually approve of how Congress is doing its job, [according to Gallup](http://www.gallup.com/poll/208472/congress-approval-drops-down-february-high.aspx?g_source=Politics&g_medium=newsfeed&g_campaign=tiles).

Similarly, we spent $2.4 billion on the presidential race to elect a man who [most people now consider to be](https://poll.qu.edu/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2448) dishonest (61 percent), lacking in leadership skills (55 percent), indifferent to the plight of normal Americans (57 percent), hotheaded (66 percent) and, broadly speaking, embarrassing (52 percent).

This disconnect is partly a consequence of our polarized politics. 86 percent of Republicans view Trump favorably, while 87 percent of Democrats dislike him, [according to the Pew Research Center](http://www.people-press.org/2017/02/22/in-trump-era-what-partisans-want-from-their-congressional-leaders/). People who spent money on Trump during the campaign are still likely to be pleased with the return on their “investment,” in other words. But people who gave to Clinton, or to any losing candidate for that matter, essentially threw their money away.

Much of political campaign spending is wasted, in other words — the people who give to a winning candidate get to put their candidate of choice in office. The people who give to a losing candidate get nothing in return.

This stands in sharp contrast with other democracies, where governments often place strict limits on how much spending campaigns can do. In Britain, for instance, political parties can [only spend $29.5 million in the year before an election](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/05/world/europe/britains-campaign-finance-laws-leave-parties-with-idle-money.html?_r=4&mtrref=www.nytimes.com&gwh=85E480D0692688A4DFB91DC6B32FE13C&gwt=pay) and televised campaign ads are banned.

Similarly, [spending limits in Canada](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/party-financing/#h3_jump_0) mean that the typical candidate for the country's Parliament spent [between $12,000 and $90,000](http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/money-no-guarantee-of-success-in-2015-federal-election-almost-half-of-top-100-spenders-lost-analysis-finds), on average, during the 2015 election. By contrast, American candidates for the House [spent close to $500,000 in 2016](https://www.opensecrets.org/overview/index.php?cycle=2016&type=A&display=A), while Senate candidates spent around $1.5 million.

Overseas elections are typically much shorter than ours. Britain's 2015 election [lasted 139 days](http://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/10/21/450238156/canadas-11-week-campaign-reminds-us-that-american-elections-are-much-longer). Canada's longest election lasted [just 78](http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/two-down-76-to-go-the-longest-election-campaign-since-we-first-re-elected-john-a). In Japan, campaigns are [limited to 12 days by law](https://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2014/11/12/explainer-how-do-japanese-elections-work/).

Here in the States we're wedded to the idea that money is speech. In [a 2010 Gallup survey](http://www.gallup.com/poll/125333/public-agrees-court-campaign-money-free-speech.aspx) 57 percent of respondents said that money given to a candidate is a form of free speech, while only 37 percent disagreed.

But if money is speech, then giving it to a losing candidate is akin to shouting into the void.

**Somebody just put a price tag on the 2016 election. It’s a doozy. Questions**

1. What was the final price tag for the 2016 election for President and Congress?

2. *Critical Thinking*: Why do you think it costs so much to run for public office?

3. How much was spent on the presidential race?

4. How big of a raise could you give teachers ☺ if that money was re-directed?

5. How did Clinton’s campaign spending compare to Trump’s campaign spending?

6. *Critical Thinking*: Why do you think Clinton was able to out fundraise Trump? Explain.

7. What is “earned media?” How did Trump benefit from it?

8. According to the article, what percentage of Republicans approved of Trump in 2017? What percentage of Democrats approved of Trump in 2017?

9. *Critical Thinking*: Why do you think Republicans and Democrats have such different views on President Trump? Explain.

10. In other countries what do governments often put strict limits on?

11. In the United States what do we consider money to be a form of?

12. *Critical Thinking*: Do you think we should put greater limits on campaign spending? Explain.