

1-1-2011

Unions Matter

John S. Thomas
Pepperdine University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thomas, John S. (2011) "Unions Matter," *Pepperdine Policy Review*: Vol. 4, Article 1.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/ppr/vol4/iss1/1>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Public Policy at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pepperdine Policy Review by an authorized administrator of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact Kevin.Miller3@pepperdine.edu.

Unions Matter

John S. Thomas

Unions invested heavily in the last statewide election in California. It is worthwhile to examine the correlation between the political candidates' campaign war chests and union political funding. Meg Whitman, while largely self-funded, suffered a massive defeat at the hands of Jerry Brown. A credible argument can be made that Jerry Brown's message resonated, while Whitman was simply out of touch with the average California voter. On the surface this might be true, but digging deeper into the campaigns reveals another story. Jerry Brown was the beneficiary of over \$30 million spent by unions on negative advertising against Meg Whitman, highlighting her negatives throughout the election season.

The ability of unions to spend significant amounts of money has an even more profound impact on local elections. Looking at the 2009 and the 2011 municipal elections in the city of Los Angeles, it is undeniable that these groups affect election outcomes. In 2009 alone, unions spent nearly \$2.4 million to support their candidates of choice and to denigrate the opposition. By two and a half weeks before the March 8 2011 election, unions had spent over \$1.7 million, despite there being no major marquee races, such as City Attorney or Mayor, on the ballot.

During the hotly contested Los Angeles City Attorney race in 2009, Carmen Trutanich was the recipient of over \$964,000 in supportive independent expenditures, though nearly \$300,000 in union expenditures was also spent in attacking his candidacy. His opponent, former Councilman Jack Weiss, received \$287,000 in positive independent expenditures. Each campaign spent close to \$1.5 million dollars during a bitterly fought runoff.

John S. Thomas earned a BA from Southern Methodist University and received his MPP from Pepperdine's School of Public Policy. He is the founder and principal of Thomas Partners Strategies, a political consulting and strategy firm based in Los Angeles. Thomas managed the successful election campaign of Los Angeles City Attorney Carmen Trutanich.

It is easy to recognize the benefit of having an extra million dollars spent on one's behalf. It is very unlikely that Carmen Trutanich would have won the election, in a city that leans heavily Democrat and does not favor outsiders, without the support of local law enforcement unions. The impact of union spending is significant in large state-wide elections, but it is felt even more strongly in district elections for City Council and other local-level offices in Los Angeles.

In 2011, unions targeted current incumbent Councilman Bernard Parks by spending over \$400,000 in support of a virtually unknown opponent, Forescee Hogan-Rowles. Parks is armed with only \$131,000 to combat the massive union spending. The unions chose to support Hogan-Rowles almost exclusively as revenge against Councilman Parks who has been less than sympathetic toward their issues. Will Parks manage to hold onto his seat? The power of incumbency is strong and it will be interesting to see if Parks prevails despite the massive spending against him. One fact is certain: that Parks has a significant challenger can be solely attributed to unions.*

The power of union money is even greater in less popular races, such as for school board in the Los Angeles Unified School District. On average, a successful school board candidate will raise \$45,000 during his entire campaign. In 2011, unions spent over \$300,000 in independent expenditures for each candidate they supported, to ensure their victory. A candidate for school board simply cannot yell loudly enough to equal the firepower the unions lay down. If a candidate is lucky, he will be able to send three mailers to his district. Meanwhile, unions are easily able to produce thirty mailers during the same time period. Candidates pray they do not come into the crosshairs of the unions and can only dream of being buoyed by a large media blitz on their behalf. Unions make candidates' campaigns for school board largely irrelevant. A candidate for office does not necessarily have to have more money than his opponent; he just must have enough to compete. However there are cases when opposition funding is insurmountable. Being outspent six-to-one by unions prevents

* Bernard Parks won the March 8 election in Los Angeles City Council District 8, with a lead of 1,076 votes and almost seven percentage points over Forescee Hogan-Rowles.

a candidate from putting up a credible fight.

Is it possible to win a campaign against a candidate who is the darling of a union? Yes. However, the odds are certainly stacked against the candidate who is not the beneficiary of significant independent expenditures. No matter how qualified the candidate, how in-tune the message is with the current voters' mood, if there is not enough ammunition to spread the message, the campaign can easily be toppled by a less than sympathetic union.