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## Upfront

### **No Strings Attached** **Nonprofits not muzzled by government money**

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## POLITICAL ADVOCACY

# No Strings Attached

## *Nonprofits not muzzled by government money*

Critics of the Bush administration's "faith-based" initiatives have argued that directing public monies to religious organizations that provide social services might inhibit such organizations from engaging in political activity. By becoming dependent on such money, critics argue, religious organizations would likely become reluctant to criticize government policies for fear of losing funding.

Yet a study published last April in the *American Sociological Review* seems to cast doubt on that argument. University of Arizona researchers Mark Chaves, Laura Stephens, and Joseph Galaskiewicz examined nonprofits whose primary purpose is something other than political advocacy, such as religious organizations and social service agencies. Their results – entitled "Does Government Funding Suppress Nonprofits' Political Activity?" – show that government funding not only did not dampen political activity by either religious or secular nonprofits, but also seemed to increase their level of certain political activities.

The researchers analyzed data from 1,236 religious groups by the National Congregations Study, an annual survey of a representative sample of U.S. religious organizations, and from a longitudinal study of 326 secular nonprofits in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. Representatives from these nonprofits were asked whether the organization had engaged in various lobbying

or political activities, and whether they received government funds. Running a series of statistical logistic regressions on the data gathered through these surveys, the researchers found no evidence that government funding suppressed political activity among either the religious congregations or the Minnesota-based secular nonprofits that received funding.

"We are tempted to conclude

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that government funding in fact enhances nonprofits' political activity, but a more cautious interpretation of our results is that government funding does not suppress it," the researchers wrote. They point out that while nonprofits receiving government funding might feel constrained at times from engaging in political advocacy, other forces might make them more inclined to be politically active. The authors suggested, for example, that govern-

ment funds may encourage nonprofits to engage in certain political activities that might enhance or protect their funding.

In addition, the government's reliance on certain nonprofits to deliver needed services might empower those nonprofits to engage in political activity that otherwise might have jeopardized their funding. "Our results suggest either that these competing mechanisms balance each other or that the mechanisms by which public funding enhances political activity are somewhat stronger," the researchers concluded.

The authors also noted that further studies are needed to determine whether these results hold among nonprofits in other sectors, and whether government funding might inhibit the intensity of a nonprofit's political activity, if not its occurrence. Their study does, however, point out the dual role that many nonprofits hold in civil society as advocates for various groups of individuals and as service deliverers. This unique position, the researchers argued, might make nonprofits less beholden to the government than conventional wisdom might suggest.

–Rosanne Siino