What Money Can and Can't Buy

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It looks as if it's a lot easier for big political money to buy Congress than it is to win the hearts of grassroots voters. The Puerto Rico statehood bill, which last year appeared to be a freight train rolling down hill, ran off the track in the Puerto Rico plebiscite on December 13.

The majority of Puerto Ricans rejected a much ballyhooed opportunity to vote for statehood and voted instead for "None of the above." The election was clearly an endorsement of the status quo, the option advocated by those who want Puerto Rico to retain its present commonwealth status.

The nonbinding plebiscite on Puerto Rico's future was a stiff rebuke to Governor Pedro Rossello, a vigorous advocate of statehood, and to the governing New Progressive Party (NPP), which called the referendum, rigged the language in favor of statehood, and spent millions of dollars on the campaign to win it. It was the second time in six years that the island rebuffed statehood.

The Gingrich-Gephardt Puerto Rico statehood bill that passed the House last March 4 by 209 to 208 may have had more money spent in its behalf than any other bill considered by the 105th Congress. Congressional leaders sidelined tax cuts, Social Security and Medicare reform, regulatory relief, and all the other bills that their constituents care about and, with little notice, rushed Puerto Rico statehood to the floor for a roll-call vote.

The Senate refused to go along, offering instead a courtesy resolution promising to "review" any expression of Puerto Rican views. In its "review" of the way Puerto Rico slapped down the notion of statehood, Congress should also review the gross amounts of money that were spent in behalf of this unpopular notion and the deceptive techniques used to bamboozle the House into passing it.

The National Journal called Puerto Rico "a Treasure Island for lobbyists" because the statehood faction was paying at least 30 high-powered Washington firms. Former White House chief of staff Harold Ickes

lobbied the Democrats, while Republicans were stroked by Bob Dole's new law firm, former RNC chairman Haley Barbour, and former Christian Coalition executive director Ralph Reed.

The statehood faction spent $1 million to get Bill Clinton re-elected, hedging its bets with $132,000 to Bob Dole. They gave members of Congress and the political parties $500,000 in campaign contributions, with Senator Ted Kennedy's PACs receiving $188,000.

The statehood advocates ran expensive full-page newspaper and television ads and gave dozens of Capitol Hill staffers all-expense-paid vacations in Puerto Rico. One Puerto Rican mayor was arrested for demanding a $2.5 million "political contribution" kickback from a $17.5 million disaster-relief FEMA contract.

The most intriguing part of the lobbying campaign was the use of public opinion polls to persuade Republicans in Congress to back their bill. It's a case study in how polls can be manipulated to produce the opinions for which the client is paying.

The statehood faction hired Republican pollster Richard Wirthlin to counteract the conventional wisdom that Puerto Rico statehood would diminish the Republican majority in Congress by adding two more Democratic Senators and six to eight more Democrats in the House.

Wirthlin produced an expensive "confidential" poll, complete with color graphics, designed to predict that Puerto Ricans would really vote for Republicans. This incredible conclusion was based on alleged support for selected issues among Puerto Rican voters.

After admitting that, in a contest between a generic Democratic candidate against a generic Republican, Puerto Ricans would vote 55% for the Democrat to only 27% for the Republican, Wirthlin claimed that Puerto Ricans would vote 72% for a GOP pro-life candidate to 22% for a Democratic pro-choice candidate.

The Democrats are not stupid enough to run a pro-abortion candidate in a state where the polls show that 82% of Puerto Ricans want to prohibit abortion. But, funny thing, Wirthlin's elaborate survey did not report how Puerto Ricans would vote if both Republican and Democratic candidates were pro-life.

Wirthlin's confidential briefing told Republicans that, on a Presidential ballot, George W. Bush would come "within just five points of Vice President Al Gore (40% to 45%)." It would have been more honest to say that we can expect Puerto Ricans to cast their electoral votes for Al Gore over George W. Bush.

Then, Wirthlin's confidential briefing argued that Puerto Rico would elect Republicans because 91% favor prayer in public schools. This cheerful statistic was based on ignoring the fact that, if Puerto Rico became a state, school prayer would be illegal.

The statehood faction also hired pollster Frank Luntz, who came up with the theory that supporting statehood would help Republicans to appeal to the Hispanic vote. Luntz's polling methods are considered highly controversial, and his conclusions were completely unrealistic because there is no evidence that Puerto Rico statehood is a high-priority issue among any Hispanics except Puerto Ricans.

The NPP is estimated to have spent $10 million of its own money, plus $350 million in Puerto Rican government money, for lobbying and public relations over the last six years. With access to that kind of cash, you can be sure the statehood lobbyists will be back on Capitol Hill in 1999.