
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Reporting highlights lack of information about donors behind political ad surge

Kudos | Remapping Debate | New York Times, Washington Post

October 12, 2010 — As is evident to all observers, spending on political advertising by non-profit and other groups theoretically independent of the Democratic and Republican parties is up — way up — in this heated midterm campaign cycle. But, as some solid reporting has demonstrated, the identities of the donors actually bankrolling more and more of that spending remain shrouded in mystery.

A strong article by T.W. Farnam and Dan Eggen for The Washington Post succinctly summarized the situation:

The \$80 million spent so far by groups outside the Democratic and Republican parties dwarfs the \$16 million spent at this point for the 2006 midterms. In that election, the vast majority of money - more than 90 percent - was disclosed along with donors' identities. This year, that figure has fallen to less than half of the total...

The trends amount to a spending frenzy conducted largely in the shadows.

As Farnam and Eggen note, this anonymous spending is flowing largely to conservative non-profits, which are using the money to target Democratic candidates for office. The Post focuses on one of those groups, the American Future Foundation, which has said it will devote up to \$800,000 to its attack on Rep. Bruce Braley of Iowa. Where that money is coming from, though, is a secret — the group's donors have not been disclosed in records filed with the Federal Election Commission, because the law doesn't require them to be. Asking directly didn't offer much help, the Post reports: "Fund officials could not be reached for comment."

Meanwhile, an interesting story by Michael Luo for The New York Times noted that Citizens United — the case generally pointed to as marking a major shift in the legal landscape that had guided the scope of permissible disclosure requirements — may have actually marked a smaller shift in legal doctrine than earlier, less-heralded cases (a point that was made at the time by some experts in the field). Luo pointed out that the true import of Citizens United may have been its "psychological impact" on big donors, who now know their political spending is blessed by the top court. The story was accompanied by a typically strong illustration from the Times's graphics team, showing how the money moves around and which channels are new.

The standout in this group, though, is Mike McIntire's Week in Review piece for the Oct. 2 New York Times, "The Secret Sponsors." McIntire sets out to learn what he can about one of these ad-buying organizations, the Coalition to Protect Seniors — including who its members are, and where its money comes from. And while McIntire checks FEC filings and contacts the group directly (through an email web form; it doesn't have a listed phone number), he does more than that, too. Tracking the address on its website (A Mail Boxes Etc. in Wilmington, Del.) Calling political operatives in D.C. (No one knew a thing.) Checking the coalition's incorporation filings and the owner of its web domain (They traced back to a registered service agent and a hosting service, two ways of masking your identity.) Looking up the address on its FEC filings (Another Wilmington location.)

Finally, McIntire tracks down the coalition's ad buyer, Jay Handline, who happens to work for a health care tech company in Florida while maintaining a sideline as a jazz choreographer. That leads to this memorable exchange:

I tried the Fenwick number again, and this time Mr. Handline picked up. He said he was not a member of the coalition and only placed its television ads, adding that he got the job through someone in the health care field for whom he had done similar work in the past. He would not name the person

"But they're not a member of the coalition either," he said.

So who are the members?

"I really can't give you any details."

And that's that. Thirteen hundred words and who knows how many hours later, McIntire was no closer to knowing who was behind the Coalition to Protect Seniors. But his piece is a great example of the point that, sometimes, the news is what you can't find out — and what people don't say can be as important as what they do.

This content can be found at <http://www.remappingdebate.org/article/reporting-highlights-lack-information-about-donors-behind-political-ad-surge>