



Campaign Finance Reform Blast

League of Women Voters of Boulder County

Election Spending in Competitive Senate Races

The website for the Brennan Center for Justice recently (January 2015) published a research article on outside spending in Senate races since “Citizens United” (<https://www.brennancenter.org/publication/election-spending-2014-outside-spending-senate-races-citizens-united>), for the Senate election cycles of 2010, 2012, and 2014. They focused on senate races because it was widely considered possible that party control of the Senate might change hands in those years. In the report the use of the term “outside spending” refers to all expenditures reported to the FEC made by anyone other than the candidates themselves, including by parties. Since 2010’s *Citizens United* decision, outside spending in competitive Senate races has exploded, with significant increases in the influence of a few wealthy donors, dark money spending that conceals donors’ identities from the public, and single-candidate super PACs that circumvent contribution limits.

The study shows that outside money is highly focused on competitive races. Outside spenders outspent the candidates in 80 percent of the 2014 competitive Senate races, sometimes by more than double.

Key findings:

Outside spending on Senate elections has more than doubled since 2010, to at least \$486,000,000 in 2014. (This does not include additional spending on sham issue ads that are not required to be reported to the FEC.)

In the 10 most competitive races of 2014 for which the Brennan Center has complete candidate spending data (Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, and New Hampshire) outside groups accounted for 47 percent of all spending, followed by 41 percent by the candidates and 12 percent by the parties.

Of the 10 highest-spending Super PACs, 8 received less than 1 percent of their individual contributions from small donors of \$200 or less.*

Dark money** in Senate elections has more than doubled since 2010, from \$105 million in inflation-adjusted dollars, to \$226 million in 2014. The 2014 winners in the 11 most competitive races had more than \$131 million in dark money supporting them.



Contribution limits and transparency, cornerstones of the regulation of money in politics, are threatened by the greater spending power of outside groups.

***Ten Highest Spending Super PACs:**

Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee

Senatorial Majority PAC

National Republican Senatorial Committee

Crossroads GPS

U.S. Chamber of Commerce

Ending Spending Action Fund

Next Generation Action Committee

Freedom Partners Action Fund

American Crossroads

National Rifle Assn of America Political Victory Fund

Details about these PACs and their spending can be found in the full Brennan Center Report.

**** Dark Money as defined by Open Secrets:** Politically active nonprofits -- principally 501(c)(4)s and 501(c)(6)s -- have become a major force in federal elections over the last three cycles. The term "dark money" is often applied to this category of political spender because these groups do not have to disclose the sources of their funding -- though a minority do disclose some or all of their donors, by choice or in response to specific circumstances.

These organizations can receive unlimited corporate, individual, or union contributions that they do not have to make public, and though their political activity is supposed to be limited, the IRS -- which has jurisdiction over these groups -- by and large has [done little](#) to enforce those limits. Partly as a result, spending by organizations that do not disclose their donors has increased from [less than \\$5.2 million in 2006](#) to well [over \\$300 million in the 2012 election](#).