



Three Myths About... *Money in Politics*

In recent election cycles, a common refrain in the media has been that there is too much money in politics – much of it undisclosed, “dark money.” To this end, politicians and organizations that advocate more stringent regulation of political speech have proposed lower contribution limits, taxpayer-financed campaigns, and greater disclosure of the private information of Americans, all of which infringe upon the political speech rights guaranteed under the First Amendment. Here’s the reality behind three common myths often asserted about money in politics:

Myth #1: *The majority of money spent in elections is undisclosed.*

FALSE. Candidates, political parties, political action committees, and super PACs all must disclose the names, addresses, occupations, and employers of donors who contribute over \$200. So-called “dark money” – spending by 501(c) organizations that are not required to report the private information of their supporters to the government – has **never been more than 5%** of total election spending.¹

Myth #2: *Nonprofit groups who don’t have to disclose their donors are buying elections.*

FALSE. The percentage of independent spending by organizations that are not required to disclose their donors **declined** from 2010 to 2012, and again from 2012 to 2016.² In fact, only 20 organizations that did not disclose their donors spent more than \$1 million on all independent expenditures in 2016 – and most are well-known groups like Planned Parenthood and the NRA.³

Myth #3: *Money buys elections.*

FALSE. There are many examples of candidates who received the most financial backing who were defeated. Unsuccessful candidates, like Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election or Eric Cantor in the 2014 congressional primaries, demonstrate that the individual receiving the most votes – not the candidate that spends the most – always wins.

THE VERDICT: Contrary to most reporting, the vast majority of money spent in politics is fully disclosed and does not “buy” election victories. This growing level of political spending should be encouraged, as it represents everyday Americans participating in their community and in civic life.

Further Reading

1 Luke Wachob, “Putting ‘Dark Money’ In Context: Total Campaign Spending by Political Committees and Nonprofits per Election Cycle,” Institute for Free Speech. Available at: http://www.ifs.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2017-05-08_Issue-Brief_Wachob_Putting-Dark-Money-In-Context.pdf (May 16, 2017).

2 “Total Outside Spending, by Percentage Disclosure, Cycle Totals,” Center for Responsive Politics. Available at: <https://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/disclosure.php> (June 28, 2017).

3 “Political Nonprofits: Top Election Spenders,” Center for Responsive Politics. Available at: https://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/nonprof_elec.php (Retrieved on July 6, 2017).



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