

## **Cost of Political Campaigns/Superpacs/Media Bias/Dirty Tricks**

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**October 19, 2012**

### Introduction

In 1757, Colonel George Washington was in command of Virginia troops at Winchester, in the County of Frederick, nestled in the Lower Valley region that now encompasses several counties of Virginia and West Virginia. That year he was also an unsuccessful candidate for a seat in the Virginia House of Burgesses. According to regional historian Jeffrey Weaver, Washington received 40 votes in that first election, losing to an opponent who netted 271 votes.<sup>1</sup>

In 1758, he tried again, and was the top vote getter. That year, he had a powerful supporter on his side, Colonel James Wood, said to be a political boss in the valley. Wood managed the campaign while Washington was away on military command duties.<sup>2</sup>

After his victorious election, Colonel Washington received a bill for election expenses. In today's measure, it totaled about \$195 for the following items: "A hogshead and a barrel of punch, thirty-five gallons of wine, forty-three gallons of strong cider, and dinner for his friends."<sup>3</sup>

Soon after that election, the Virginia House of Burgesses passed a law stating "that no one should be qualified to hold a seat in that house, who should, 'before his election

...directly or indirectly give ...any person or persons having voice or vote in such election any money, meat, drink, entertainment or provision, or make any present, gift, reward, or entertainment, &c., &c., in order to be elected.”<sup>4</sup>

Historian Weaver notes that had this law been in place prior to Washington’s election, he would have been ineligible to serve. In subsequent years, there is no evidence that George Washington ever violated campaign laws.<sup>5</sup>

So, even before we were a nation, there were regulations about how one may spend money to influence elections. While history is fascinating, the subject for this paper’s assignment is the cost of political campaigns in this age when the cost for a state legislative race far exceeds \$195.

The mission of this paper is to enlighten your quest to be an informed voter. This paper will examine the cost of campaigns and who is spending money to impact elections at the local, state and federal levels and through what mechanisms. Examples of the extraordinary amounts being raised and spent this year will be provided – we will know in 19 days to what success.

There are many ways to legally financially support a candidate for public office or an issue on a ballot. Individuals, companies, political action committees or political parties may contribute directly to a candidate’s campaign committee. “By Indiana law, candidate committees are required to disclose detailed financial records of campaign contributions and expenditures.”<sup>6</sup> For statewide and state legislative offices, campaign

finance reporting is done through the Indiana Elections Division in the Office of Secretary of State. Candidates running for local offices file campaign finance reports with their locale's County Election Board, managed by the County Clerk of the Courts.

In general, Indiana law does not limit the amount of contributions individuals or Political Action Committees can make to local and state candidates. However, various limits are placed on corporations and labor organizations, such as: "\$5,000 apportioned in any manner among all statewide candidates."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, at the county level, the limit for corporations and labor unions is \$2,000 apportioned in any manner among all candidates for district, county, local and school board offices."<sup>8</sup>

While there are limits on corporate and union giving, the owners or principals of corporations or the officers and members of unions can personally give as much as they desire, in Indiana's state and local races.

Companies and unions form Political Action Committees, or PACs, as a way to increase their giving ability. As of 2011, the most recent year of publication of the entire list by the Secretary of State's office - there were 609 Political Action Committees in Indiana. The listing shows 13 of those PACs were headquartered in Allen County. They include PACs of three teachers union organizations, one construction trade union, two fire fighters union organizations, and four corporate-sponsored PACs. There are two conservative philosophically-motivated PACs and one special-interest, ideological PAC not related directly to companies or unions, the Allen County Right-to-Life PAC.<sup>9</sup>

Of these, one of the most active this year, as reported in pre-primary filings (the latest available), was the Northeast Indiana PAC for Better Government, well known among local republicans as the group founded by Don McArdle and Dick Freeland and other area businessmen. Between January 1 and April 13, 2012, it received \$102,000 from six individuals and companies, and it spent \$82,000 on five recipients, the largest being the Senate Majority Campaign Committee which received \$32,000.<sup>10</sup>

Such details are included in finance reports which PACs must file with the Indiana Elections Division. They must report the full name and address of each person making the contribution or receiving the expenditure.<sup>11</sup>

Contributions and expenditures of PACs that spend money in federal-level campaigns must be reported at the federal level, where there are limits on the size of contributions:

“A PAC can give \$5,000 to a candidate committee per election (primary, general or special). They can also give up to \$15,000 annually to any national party committee, and \$5,000 annually to any other PAC. ... Some PACs also fund political advertisements designed to aid their preferred candidates.”<sup>12</sup>

\$5,000 here, \$15,000 there. What about all the big money we hear about? The money flowing to and from national PACs does add up. The top 20 PAC contributors to federal House and Senate races in 2011 and 2012 include, at the top, the National Association of Realtors which has contributed nearly \$2.9 million – 45% of which went to democrat candidates and 54% to republicans. Second on that list is the National Beer

Wholesalers Association at \$2.7 million, with 41% going to democrats and 59% to republicans.<sup>13</sup>

Individuals, companies, unions and PACS contributing directly to candidate committees represent the tip of the iceberg of political spending this 2011-2012 federal election cycle. To understand why this is the case, it is important to understand how campaign finance law has drastically changed just in the last two years.

It is the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971 that “is the basis of all modern campaign finance regulations.”<sup>14</sup> Amendments to the Act in 1974 “set spending limits for candidates, although this provision was later struck down by the Supreme Court as an infringement on free speech. The 1974 amendments also created the Federal Election Commission to enforce and administer campaign finance regulations.”<sup>15</sup>

The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, also known as the McCain-Feingold law, was a major revision to election law. It banned unlimited amounts of soft money contributions, which were supposed to pay for generic activities such as voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts, and “barred special interest groups from spending soft money on so-called “issue ads” that identify a specific federal candidate. Such ads were widely viewed as thinly veiled attempts to support or oppose a candidate’s election with unlimited funds.”<sup>16</sup>

In January 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the prohibition against such issue ads was unconstitutional. The case was *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. In a 5-to-4 decision, the high court ruled “to allow corporations and unions

to use their general treasuries to pay for political advertisements that expressly call for the election or defeat of a candidate.”<sup>17</sup> The Supreme Court ruling also reversed part of the 2002 Reform Act by allowing “nonprofit groups to use corporate or union funds to air electioneering communications within 30 days of a primary election and 60 days of a general election.”<sup>18</sup>

President Barak Obama characterized the Supreme Court’s ruling as ‘a major victory for big oil, Wall Street banks, health insurance companies and the other powerful interests that marshal their power every day in Washington to drown out the voices of everyday Americans.’”<sup>19</sup>

The slim majority of Justices who carried the decision did so to uphold free speech as promised in the First Amendment. Writing for the majority, Justice Anthony M. Kennedy wrote, as quoted in the New York Times: “When government seeks to use its full power, including the criminal law, to command where a person may get his or her information or what distrusted source he or she may not hear, it uses censorship to control thought. This is unlawful. The First Amendment confirms the freedom to think for ourselves.”<sup>20</sup>

In another part of the same decision, the Supreme Court affirmed the value of transparency. In an 8-1 decision, the court ruled that the disclosure of political spending can “provide shareholders and citizens with the information needed to hold corporations and elected officials accountable.”<sup>21</sup>

The result of this ruling was the birth of Super PACs, also known as independent expenditure committees.

Super PACs may raise and spend unlimited sums of money for the sole purpose of making independent expenditures to support or oppose political candidates. Unlike traditional political action committees, super PACs may not donate money directly to candidates.<sup>22</sup>

**Independent expenditures** are ads that expressly advocate the election or defeat of specific candidates and are aimed at the electorate as a whole. Under federal rules, these expenditures must be made completely independent of the candidates, with no coordination, and they can only be made by the organization's PAC.<sup>23</sup>

Strict rules govern these expenditures and they must be reported to the Federal Election Commission.<sup>24</sup>

According to the Center for Responsive Politics' [OpenSecrets Blog](#), Super PACs are driving what some consider the major campaign funding story of the current federal election cycle: the amount of outside spending – spending done independently of any candidate.

According to a blog post on October 8:

Cycle-to-date comparisons of spending -- that is, comparing spending at the same point in each cycle -- show that non-party outside spending in 2012 was greater than that of the 11 previous cycles combined as of October 6. That's \$517 million so far this cycle, compared to less than \$444 million *combined* for every cycle going back to 1990.<sup>25</sup>

Since the trend in recent years has been for most election spending to occur in the last 30 days of the election, Open Secrets blogger Robert Maguire estimates that outside money spending could surpass \$1 billion for this federal election.<sup>26</sup>

Since the Supreme Court ruling which opened the door to the creation of Super PACs also paved the way for requirements that they disclose their donors, a review of their finance report filings with the FEC will provide the interested voter with much information about who is contributing. However “some super PACs get around this requirement by listing 501(c) nonprofit groups as their donors -- these groups are not required to disclose their funders.”<sup>27</sup>

Robert Maguire’s research about this year’s increase in outside spending reveals that the donors of much of this money cannot be traced. He reports: “Over the week ending on October 6, almost \$57 million was spent by non-party outside groups -- a jump of about \$10 million over the previous week. Groups that partially disclose their sources of funding or don't disclose at all accounted for more than 60 percent of that total, at more than \$35 million.”<sup>28</sup>

Where is that money going? According to Maguire’s research of filing data submitted by early October,

The vast majority of spending by nondisclosing groups over the last 12 weeks went to aid conservative causes -- that is, either to support Republicans or oppose Democrats around the country. Pro-conservative spending by nondisclosing groups totaled more than \$103 million over this period; the comparable total on the liberal side was \$16 million. This trend has been consistent throughout the 2012 cycle as a whole – with conservative nondisclosing groups outspending liberal ones by more than \$100 million.”<sup>29</sup>

Super PAC dollars can be spent on any campaign, not just federal ones. For instance, there has been some amazing Super PAC involvement in the Indiana race for governor.



The Republican Governor's Association Right Direction PAC is a Washington, D.C.-based super PAC, registered with federal regulators to make independent expenditures supporting or opposing candidates. According to the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter campaign finance report of Republican Gubernatorial candidate Mike Pence, he received \$1 million from the RGA Pac.

The Indianapolis Star reported that "the donation was the first single contribution to an Indiana gubernatorial candidate to reach seven figures in nearly a decade," however, "a loophole between federal and state election laws makes it impossible to pinpoint exactly who supplied the money."<sup>30</sup>

The Republican Governors Association is a 527 organization and as such can accept unlimited contributions from corporations, unions and individuals. "Because Right Direction is registered with both the state and the FEC, the Indiana Election Division cannot regulate its spending activity. [Division] Co-Director Trent Deckard says state law constrains his agency to regulating PACs that are solely registered with the state."<sup>31</sup>

Another disclosure question has surfaced in the governor's race. On October 8, a television ad appeared on Fort Wayne stations linking Republican Governor Candidate Mike Pence to the Tea Party and Richard Mourdock. The message was credited to the Believe in Indiana PAC. Not recalling this name as one I had come across in my research, I visited the [believeinindiana.org](http://believeinindiana.org) website but found no information about the origins of the PAC. I also searched the Indiana Elections Division site and did not find it. I sent the Elections Division an email inquiring about the PAC, and received this reply

from staff person Brad King: “I do not see any record of an entity named “Believe in Indiana” on the state’s campaign finance database as a political action committee or any other type of committee.”<sup>32</sup>

Later on October 8<sup>th</sup>, I again searched through Google<sup>®</sup> and found a story on the web site of WISH television in Indianapolis. Reporter Jim Shella found a federal filing for the Believe in Indiana PAC with “Pete Rimsans, a local lobbyist for the Building and Construction Trades, is listed as the contact.”<sup>33</sup>

According to Shella’s report, state Republican officials believe the federally-registered PAC is coordinating messages between the Donnelly for U.S. Senate and the Gregg for Governor campaigns. However, “there are no state rules that prevent coordination like the ones that apply in federal races.”<sup>34</sup>

So, who is Believe in Indiana? The web site today states it is a 527 committee, a nonprofit that does not have to disclose its donors. So, just as with the Republican Governors Association, the state cannot require Believe in Indiana to disclose who is giving it money to help John Gregg’s candidacy.

While much cannot be determined about who is contributing campaign money, there are several web sites which are tracking enormous amounts of data and making it available to the public. One of the most prominent is the web site mentioned earlier, [opensecrets.org](http://opensecrets.org), operated by the Center for Responsive Politics, which describes itself as “Nonpartisan, independent and nonprofit,” with a “mission to:

- **Inform** citizens about how money in politics affects their lives
- **Empower** voters and activists by providing unbiased information
- **Advocate** for a transparent and responsive government”<sup>35</sup>

Opensecrets.org allows one to search for federal-level campaign spending multiple ways such as by organization, by candidate, by race or by party. Here are some examples of the type of information available.

The national American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees PAC is number 11 on the Opensecrets list of top 20 PAC contributors to federal House and Senate races in 2011 and 2012. AFSCME has contributed \$9.5 million to federal house and senate candidates this election cycle. It also spent another \$6.6 million on independent expenditures.

Just in the last two weeks, AFSCME has spent another \$310,000 of independent expenditures in Indiana.<sup>36</sup> That was likely part of a joint advertising campaign announced on October 2. AFSCME’s PAC joined two others, the Majority PAC and Center Forward PAC, to pay for “a \$1 million advertising campaign in Indiana... to highlight Republican Richard Mourdock’s opposition to the auto bailout in a Senate race that looks increasingly competitive. The Democratic-leaning groups say they’re countering the American Crossroads attack ads against Joe Donnelly.”<sup>37</sup>

“American Crossroads and Crossroads GPS, both formed in 2010, are the heavy hitters of the multicandidate outside spending groups. They were started and continue to operate in consultation with GOP operatives Karl Rove and Ed Gillespie.”<sup>38</sup>

So far, Crossroads GPS has spent more than \$2.1 million in advertising against democrat Joe Donnelly, including more than \$1 million just last week. Crossroads GPS is a 501(c) organization, so it does not have to disclose its donors.<sup>39</sup>

A visit to [opensecrets.org](http://opensecrets.org) yesterday, October 18, 2012, revealed there are 942 registered Super PACs, although fewer than 200 are actively raising and spending money this year. Those who are active have certainly been busy, raising more than \$462 million and spending nearly \$394 million, as of yesterday.<sup>40</sup>

“The conservative super PAC backing Mitt Romney's presidential campaign -- and the source of much of his strength through the hard-fought 2012 Republican primaries” is Restore Our Future.<sup>41</sup> So far, it has made nearly \$97.3 million in Independent Expenditures this year.<sup>42</sup>

“Priorities USA Action is the top liberal super PAC supporting President Obama in the 2012 election. The group was founded in April 2011 by two of Obama's former White House aides, Bill Burton and Sean Sweeny...”<sup>43</sup> It has spent nearly \$44.3 million on federal elections this year.<sup>44</sup>

President Obama's campaign has raised just over \$432 million and spent \$345.7 million so far this year. Mitt Romney's campaign has raised \$279.3 million, has spent \$228.9 million and has a campaign debt of \$15 million.<sup>45</sup>

The amounts are mind-boggling. The Center for Responsive Politics asserts that one thing every voter should know about money being spent on campaigns and lobbying is:

Money Follows Power. ... Individuals and interest groups will give campaign contributions to politicians in the best position to deliver what they're looking for. That means incumbents get vastly more than challengers, committee chairmen and legislative leaders get more than rank-and-file members, and parties in power get more than parties in the minority.<sup>46</sup>

The Center bases its “money follows power” rule of thumb on federal campaign finance data for the past several years. The presidential and congressional races this year may be challenging this assertion, with conservative and republican independent expenditures outpacing liberal amounts, in total.

The sheer size of the independent expenditures, particularly those that come from organizations that do not disclose their donors, has reinvigorated debate about campaign finance reform. As the enormous spending of 2012 is reviewed along with the election results, here are four topics and initiatives to watch for in the months ahead.

First, free speech and the First Amendment.

Terre Haute native and Indiana University alumnus James Bopp is the attorney who represented Citizens United in its legal battle that ended with a landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling.

...Bopp has viewed campaign-finance laws as tools that protect people already in power. Politicians, he says, ‘hate it when groups go around and talk about what they are doing, what their positions are. The genesis of this whole thing is the candidates wanting to stifle criticism ...they’re going to use the government to protect their power.’<sup>47</sup>

In the Citizens United Case, the Supreme Court ruling equated limiting the ability to spend money on political issues is the same as limiting free speech.

...the Court held that corporations and unions have a First Amendment right to spend unlimited funds on campaign advertisements, provided that these communications are not formally “coordinated” with any candidate. In so holding, it found that the political speech rights of American voters and corporate entities are indistinguishable.<sup>48</sup>

While the topic of what constitutes free speech continues to be debated, expect initiatives designed to increase disclosure regulations. One is a proposal to have the Securities and Exchange Commission mandate the disclosure of political expenditures by publicly-traded corporations. The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law is among leading advocates for such mandates, stating that the SEC has “both the authority and the responsibility to protect shareholders and the public” to take such action.”<sup>49</sup>

Another avenue that will continue to be pursued is Congressional action to require greater disclosure of donors. The Disclose Act of 2012 was a bill that “would have required any independent group that spends more than \$10,000 on campaign ads during an election cycle to file a report identifying any donors who gave \$10,000 or more.”<sup>50</sup>

Republicans blocked debate on the bill this past July. Democrats said it would have forced unlimited secret campaign spending out into the open. One of the bill’s sponsors, Rhode Island Senator Sheldon Whitehouse said the bill “was blocked by

Republican leaders because they see the ‘immediate financial advantage’ that secret money is giving GOP candidates in the 2012 election.”<sup>51</sup>

To paraphrase James Bopp, those with the most to gain by the status quo want to keep it that way.

While laws and regulations are debated in Washington, the place to watch for the most interesting and creative campaign finance reform will be in states and local communities. From Colorado, to North Carolina to Maine, states and communities are implementing ideas for voluntary limits on campaign donations and expenditures and are creating mechanisms for public financing for campaigns.<sup>52</sup>

Public financing for campaigns at the federal level is basically extinct. This is the first election in which neither major-party candidate will accept presidential public financing in the general election. The Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law characterizes this as a “troubling trend:”

*Citizens United* is not solely responsible for the demise of the presidential public financing—the program has needed modernization and repair for years. But, by inviting unlimited sums of outside money into the system, *Citizens United* granted greater political power to corporations, nonprofits, unions and wealthy individuals at the expense of the political parties and actual candidates. Candidates and parties now face a substantial monetary disadvantage vis-à-vis special interests. As a result, the funding program’s \$20 million-dollar grant no longer provides enough cash to ensure that the candidates can be heard over the din.<sup>53</sup>

However laws may change, voters today do have access to a great deal of information about individuals, companies, unions and others who are contributing to campaigns. Local candidate campaign finance reports are available at the Allen County Election Board website. State-level races file reports that can be viewed at the Indiana Elections Division website. The Federal Elections Commission and Internal Revenue Service also make reports available on-line. And there are web sites such as [opensecrets.org](http://opensecrets.org). Surfing these sites will help you understand the alliances between candidates and the groups supporting them, enlightening your quest to be an informed voter.



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