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Covering the intersection of money and politics

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How To Influence An Election



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Information collected by the Federal Election Commission can tell you which individuals and political action committees (often connected to corporations) are giving directly to candidates' campaigns.

What won't it tell you? Who's funding the special interest and non-profit groups that are becoming a major part of the 2010 midterm elections. Here's a bit of the story from [Monday's Washington Post](#):

Interest groups are spending five times as much on the 2010 congressional elections as they did on the last [midterms](#), and they are more secretive than ever about where that money is coming from.

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, according to data analyzed by The Washington Post.

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

The bulk of the money is being spent by conservatives, who have swamped their Democratic-aligned competition by 7 to 1 in recent weeks. The wave of spending is made possible in part by a series of Supreme Court rulings unleashing the ability of corporations and interest groups to spend money on politics. Conservative operatives also say they are riding the support of donors upset with Democratic policies they perceive as anti-business.

This represents a major shift in the way elections are influenced. The Supreme Court's 5-4 decision in the *Citizens United* case last January cleared the way for corporations and unions to give unlimited amounts of money to special interest groups that run election ads. Many groups are organized as non-profits, which means they don't have to disclose their donors. Others are "independent expenditure-only" committees, sometimes called "super PACs," which do have to disclose their donors—and this year have raised a significant amount of money.

Numerous groups fall into these categories. Non-profits encompass a wide variety of organizations, such as Tea Party organizers FreedomWorks and liberal advocates MoveOn. Super PACs include groups like American Crossroads (backed by Republican strategists Ed Gillespie and Karl Rove), Club for Growth Action and Women Vote!, an organization affiliated with Emily's List.

American Crossroads has raised \$7.9 million so far this year, according to the most recent disclosure documents on file with the FEC. Most of the donors are individuals, but the larger donations come from companies like American Financial Group (\$400,000) and Dixie Rice Agricultural Corp. (\$1 million). The affiliated Crossroads GPS, which doesn't have to disclose donors, has spent \$14 million on political ads so far this fall, is launching a \$4.4 million ad campaign this week in battleground Senate states this week, [Politico.com has reported](#). Tuesday, [several campaign finance watchdogs complained to the Internal Revenue Service](#) that Crossroads GPS is abusing its tax-exempt status as a "social action organization" to sway elections.

Club for Growth Action has raised far less than the Crossroads groups—about \$1.2 million, largely through a \$607,000 donation from an affiliated group. However, the conservative organization is heavily influential in 2010. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, another watchdog organization, the Club for Growth's political action committee (which discloses donors) [has spent more than \\$3 million to back a variety of candidates](#), notably Tea Party favorites Pat Toomey, Marco Rubio and Sharron Angle. They're running for Senate in Pennsylvania, Florida and Nevada, respectively. [The Club for Growth has also spent \\$1.7 million on political ads and related communications](#).

While conservative organizations are getting much press about election influence, left-leaning organizations are also heavily invested in political ads. Women Vote!, a get-out-the-vote program associated with Emily's List, has raised \$1.5 million, including \$250,000 from the Service Employees International Union. The AFL-CIO has doled out \$14.7 million on independent expenditures for the 2010 election cycle, [according to the Center for Responsive Politics](#).