
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.

