

Shadow Puppets: Outside Groups Pulling the Strings in 2016 Election

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Ostensibly independent groups reported to have close ties to a candidate account for 96 percent of total outside fundraising

This explosion of outside money, the vast majority of it not subject to contribution limits, is a consequence of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, says the Brennan Center. (Photo: Alexander Harbich/flickr/cc)

Representing a “fundamental shift in how presidential campaigns are funded in the United States,” so-called shadow campaigns are already dominating the 2016 election cycle, according to a [new study](#) issued Tuesday by the Brennan Center for Justice.

The report, [***Shadow Campaigns: The Shift in Presidential Campaign Funding to Outside Groups***](#), reveals that ostensibly independent groups—many of which in reality enjoy close ties to individual candidates—have raised hundreds of millions of dollars, greatly outpacing the candidates' own campaign committees.

Furthermore, the study finds, 95 percent of the outside money, or \$270 million, has been collected by groups not subject to contribution limits, raising questions “about whether big donors are attempting an end-run around the strict limits on contributions to candidates' formal campaign committees.”

“The advantage of funds raised through unlimited-contribution groups is obvious,” the report explains. “One wealthy donor can write a check for millions. Campaign committees, on the other hand, are limited to donations of \$2,700 for the primary election. In theory, candidates are not permitted to ‘coordinate’ with groups that can raise unlimited funds. But with flawed coordination rules that go almost entirely unenforced, in reality the path is open for candidates to work closely with, and even exert control over, supportive outside groups—even to the point of assigning close advisers to run them.”

This explosion of outside money, the vast majority of it not subject to contribution limits, is a consequence of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, says the Brennan Center.

“In *Citizens United*, the Supreme Court argued we don't need to worry about outside spending because it's independent—it can't corrupt candidates because they don't control it,” said Ian Vandewalker, author of the report and counsel in the Brennan Center's Democracy Program.

“But the biggest money in this election is going to the outside groups that seem to be the least independent, by any common-sense understanding of that word,” he continued. “When candidates fundraise for outside groups, give up former staff to run those groups, or count the groups’ money in their own fundraising announcements, everyone knows what’s going on.”

While the report shows Republicans generally benefiting more than Democrats from shadow campaigns, the candidate who [benefited the most](#) from this trend is clearly former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who is running for the Republican nomination. Shadow campaign groups supporting Bush and benefiting from his fundraising efforts—namely the Right to Rise Super PAC—took in \$108.5 million, a record-breaking amount that is almost 10 times the \$11.4 million raised by his campaign.

What’s more, the report points out, “despite the massive sums reported here, we know that our analysis underestimates the true extent of fundraising by outside groups, including those that are not subject to contribution limits and may have ties to their favored candidate, because ‘dark money’ organizations have not yet been required to report their revenue.”

At least one presidential candidate has shunned help from such shadow campaigns. Over the weekend, Democratic White House hopeful Bernie Sanders [called for](#) public funding of elections as a way to “allow people to run for office without having to beg money from the wealthy and the powerful.”

Referring to *Citizens United*, Sanders said: “We must overturn that decision before it’s too late. We are increasingly living in an oligarchy where big money is buying politicians.”

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