

Spending by outside groups in US Senate elections has doubled since 2010

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Non-candidate spending on Senate elections has more than doubled between 2010 and 2014, according to a report published Tuesday by the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law.

In 80 percent of the most closely contested elections in 2014, the majority of expenditures came from outside groups, defined by the report as “expenditures reported to the FEC made by anyone other than a candidate.” In some cases, spending by outside groups was more than double what the candidates themselves spent.

These figures represent the direct consequences of the 2010 *Citizens United* Supreme Court ruling, which prohibited the government from restricting independent political expenditures by outside funding groups such as super PACs, which fund election campaigns without making contributions to individual candidates or parties.

Of all federal elections as a whole since *Citizens United*, 195 individuals and their spouses provided 60 percent of the \$1 billion spent by super PACs—a figure of around \$600 million.

The top spending super PAC, the Senate Majority PAC, had an average large contribution more than twice the size of the national average household income. In second place was Ending Spending PAC, which had a figure more than six times the average household income.

The report’s findings demonstrate increasingly direct means by which elections are bought by corporations and wealthy individuals. Conversely, voter turnouts have reached historic lows. The latest round of congressional elections last year saw the lowest voter turnout in Post-war US history.

Ian Vandewalker, who co-authored the report, told the WWSW that spending on political campaigns rose

sharply after *Citizens United*. He warned that all of the trends the report identifies would increase in the coming period. “In particular, this upcoming presidential election will likely be the most expensive in history,” he said.

The researchers paid special attention to the 11 most competitive Senate election campaigns. “Toss up” races such as these, where initial polls suggest that no candidate has the clear advantage, have become the main targets for donations. During the 2014 Senate election, 90 percent of spending was concentrated on these 11 contests.

The report also highlighted the extent to which outside spending has concentrated within these important toss up races. In four of the elections, candidates made only a third or less of the total election expenditures. North Carolina’s election cost a total of \$116 million, making it “likely the most expensive legislative election in U.S. History,” according to the report.

The 11 races that received the majority of funding usually ended in landslide victories for the candidate that had the most outside spending. The races in Kentucky and Arkansas, for example, were decided by more than 15 points on Election Day. Some of the closest races, conversely, were typically ones with lower expenditures.

The report noted that, “in the 2014 elections, the 100 biggest donors to all types of political committees together gave \$323 million, almost matching the \$356 million in small donations that came from an estimated 4.75 million people.”

The report noted that “spending by groups that do not fully disclose their donors,” known as “dark money,” has more than doubled since 2010.” \$485 million of the \$1 billion spent by outside groups in the last three

Senate cycles came from dark money, essentially half of all spending. The winners of the 11 most competitive Senate elections in 2014 had at least \$131 million in dark money behind them.

Single-candidate groups have grown significantly as well. These groups rely almost exclusively on wealthy individuals that have already maxed out on the legal limit they can donate. Corporations were also able to circumvent the ban on contributing directly to candidates by giving to single-candidate super PACs. Of the 11 most competitive Senate races in 2014, there were 16 single-candidate groups that spent over \$1 million each, with one group spending \$5.9 million.

The report noted that six of the top 10 single-candidate spenders in their sample hid some or all of their donors. The report predicts that dark money groups will become an even larger part of election spending in future cycles, and that they will become more common than single candidate super PACs, which are required to report their donors.

The US government has responded to these developments not by reigning in outside spending, but by eliminating existing restrictions on donations to individual candidates. In April, the United States Supreme Court ruled to remove the cap on the total amount of money individuals can contribute to candidates, eliminating yet another constraint on the direct domination by the financial oligarchy over political life.



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