DAY 4: MONEY: WHO GETS IT, WHO GIVES

It is said that “Money is the mother’s milk of politics,” which is especially true when it comes to electing the president.

Concerns over the role of big money in politics inspired legislation to publicly finance campaigns. Since 1976, public funds have been available to candidates who agree to restrictions on contributions and spending.

Presidential candidates spent $1.7 billion in the 2008 campaign, more than double the 2004 amount, based on Federal Election Commission filings. President Barack Obama, the first major-party presidential nominee to reject federal funding for the general election, spent $740.6 million. Arizona Senator John McCain, unlike Obama, accepted $84.1 million in public financing in addition to the $283.9 million raised privately, a decision that barred him from raising more money. Obama outspent McCain by a 4-1 margin between Sept. 1 and Nov. 24, 2008, FEC records show.

Both President Obama and Governor Mitt Romney have refused public funds for the 2012 election, so the sky’s the limit.

HOW MUCH CAN YOU GIVE?

Individuals may contribute up to $2,500 to a presidential candidate during the primary election campaign. If a candidate does not accept public financing for the general election, then individuals can contribute another $2,500.

THE ATTACK OF THE PACS AND THE SUPER PACS

If individuals are limited in the amount they can give, where does the enormous amount of money come from?

Groups that want to have influence in politics often form political action committees (PACs). PACs can contribute to candidates and parties and spend money independently, such as by running their own ads. Although business corporations and labor unions are prohibited from donating to candidates or spending their own money on campaigns, they can legally form PACs funded by donations from their individual members.

A totally new element in this 2012 presidential race is the candidate Super PAC. Because of the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2010 ruling in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, Super PACs can raise unlimited funds from individuals, corporations and unions to support or oppose federal candidates. Donors are expected to contribute an eye-popping amount of money to Super PACs this year in order to avoid normal campaign limits. The numbers for Super PACs reported so far indicate huge “independent” expenditure campaigns. Many Americans are concerned that allowing unlimited donations to SuperPACs will give wealthy donors — including corporations — a disproportionate amount of influence on the outcome of elections.

INDEPENDENT ADVOCACY TRULY INDEPENDENT?

For interest groups that want to help favored candidates and damage candidates they don’t like, there are ways to do so independently of the official campaigns and political parties:

Independent Expenditures

Individuals, corporations, unions and political action committees can spend unlimited money on advertising and other activities endorsing individual candidates. To keep these activities truly independent, the spending must be disclosed to the FEC and cannot be coordinated with a candidate’s campaign.

Issue Advocacy

By running ads promoting issues identified with a particular candidate, organizations can build support for a candidate without explicitly telling the audience how to vote. This is an increasingly popular way to influence the outcome of federal elections.

LEARN MORE

Follow the money! It’s often said that the best way to find out about the candidates is to see who supports them financially. For information about the top contributors to the presidential and federal elections, including industry sector contributors, check with fec.gov and opensecrets.org.

For state and local candidates, consult The Seattle Times and pdc.wa.gov.

NEXT: INITIATIVES AND REFERENDA

To learn more or register for Newspapers In Education, please email us at nie@seattletimes.com or call 206/652-6290.