

# 2

## Campaign Finance and Political Action Committees

- **Contribution Limits**
- **Presidential Campaign Financing**
- **Party Expenditures**
- **Political Action Committees (PACs)**

One of the most important aspects of election campaigns, and political activities more generally, is money: who gives it, who spends it, who regulates it, and what effect it has on election results and on policymaking. Surprisingly, a huge quantity of information is available on the subject, and easily accessible through high-quality reporting by the federal agency that regulates it. This abundance stems chiefly from the large number of elections in the United States and the effort over the last four decades to collect data about them and make those data available to the public. This serves the public interest by allowing for more disclosure of who was donating to whose campaign.

Campaign finance law is in flux, as laws that are passed are often challenged in court. One example is the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002, a comprehensive attempt to regulate the role of money in campaigns, which enacted new contribution limits (Table 2-1), changed the law on “soft” money (Table 2-8), and otherwise reworked campaign finance law. Likewise, a fairly recent Supreme Court decision, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* in January 2010, allowed the emergence of “super” political action committees. These Super PACs could raise unlimited money from corporations, labor unions, and individuals, and spend that money supporting and opposing presidential or congressional candidates so long as they did not directly coordinate with the campaigns (Table 2-10). In *American Tradition Partnership, Inc. v. Bullock*, a Montana case, the U.S. Supreme Court held that *Citizens United* applied to state elections.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter presents information on the amounts of money collected and spent by individual presidential candidates (Tables 2-3 and 2-4), along with more aggregated information about expenditures by the political parties (Tables 2-6 through 2-8). The most recent campaign expenditures for all 435 representatives and 100 senators can be found in Chapter 5 on Congress (Tables 5-11 and 5-12).

One could easily be intimidated by all of the numbers on campaign finance. The publications of the Federal Election Commission (FEC) alone run to multiple volumes every two years, with detailed accountings of the receipts and expenditures of candidates in federal elections. Additional volumes are produced, though inconsistently and much less systematically, by various state agencies. Because such information is so voluminous, it is often summarized as we do here by how much was spent by various types of political action committees (Table 2-11), which PACs are the biggest contributors (Table 2-13), and so on. We encourage you to explore the FEC site to find more information about any specific campaign (or group of campaigns), or about specific donors.

This wealth of information has been collected since the mid-1970s, when the FEC was established. Although studies of campaign costs were conducted before then, the present time series are often limited to this span of about forty years. Laws regulating campaign contributions, expenditures, and interest group activities change so frequently that longer time series are often unobtainable and would be misleading even if they could be compiled. For example, the growth of PACs dates from 1974 because changes in the laws at that time allowed their establishment (Table 2-9). Similarly, data on public funding of presidential campaigns date from 1976 (Table 2-5). Data from before that would simply not be comparable.

Concern about money is not limited strictly to candidate spending. Indeed, researchers and watchdog groups are probably more concerned about interest group spending and about where candidates' funds come from and what, if anything, that money buys. Fortunately, more and more data are now available on interest group finances and on candidates' fundraising as well as on expenditures. Many of the data are related to PACs, the dominant organizations through which interest groups raise and spend money (Table 2-10). The information presented here is related primarily to the general categories of PACs (Tables 2-9, 2-11, 2-12, and 2-14); the list of the largest PAC contributors illustrates the variety of organizations that fall into these categories (Table 2-13).

Because money is at the heart of interest group activities, matters of campaign finance law are directly relevant to this chapter. At the federal level, these regulations consist mainly of fairly straightforward contribution limits—limits that were recently changed by the BCRA (Table 2-1) and *Citizens*

*United* (Table 2-10). At the state level, there is a myriad of contribution and expenditure limits (Table 2-2).

Of course, not all questions about efforts to influence the electoral or the political process involve money, at least not in a direct sense. Other aspects of interest group activity that can be quantified are depicted in Chapters 5 and 11, such as the growth and decline of labor unions (Table 11-8) and interest groups' ratings of members of Congress on how favorable their votes were to the groups' interests (Tables 5-11 and 5-12).

For obvious reasons, no one is able to collect systematically what would surely be the most captivating data on organized interests: that on any bribes, threats, and blackmail that may insinuate themselves into campaign finance. Available data provide unprecedented knowledge and research potential about the scope and possible influence of organized interests, and we encourage you to explore them. However, merely saying that a member voted a certain way after receiving money from a particular group is not evidence of bribery or of other untoward influences of money; as one potential explanation, groups often give their financial support to those who have already shown themselves to be supporters. We address these issues in some of the data essays we include in this chapter—linking campaign donations to public policymaking is often far more complicated than most armchair observers believe it to be!

## Notes

1. This case is one of the few cases each year decided by per curiam opinion—when the Supreme Court essentially deems the outcome so obvious that there is no need to go through a full process. See Table 7-7 for details on the number of per curiam opinions issued by the Court over time.

**Table 2-1** Contribution Limits under the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002

<i>Donors</i>	<i>Recipients</i>				
	Candidate committee per election	National party committee per calendar year	State/district/local party committee per calendar year	PAC per calendar year <sup>a</sup>	Additional national party committee accounts per calendar year <sup>b</sup>
Individual	\$2,800 <sup>c</sup>	\$3,500 <sup>c</sup>	\$10,000 (combined limit)	\$5,000	\$106,500 <sup>c</sup> per account
National party committee	\$5,000 <sup>d</sup>	Unlimited transfers	Unlimited transfers	\$5,000	
State/district/local party committee	\$10,000	Unlimited transfers	Unlimited transfers	\$5,000 (combined limit)	
PAC multicandidate	\$5,000	\$15,000	\$5,000 (combined limit)	\$5,000	\$45,000 per account, per year
PAC not multicandidate	\$2,800 <sup>c</sup>	\$35,500 <sup>c</sup>	\$10,000 (combined limit)	\$5,000	\$106,500 <sup>c</sup> per account
Candidate committee	\$2,000	Unlimited transfers	Unlimited transfers	\$5,000	

<sup>a</sup>“PAC” here refers to a committee that makes contributions to other federal political committees. Independent expenditure-only political committees (sometimes called “Super PACs”) may accept unlimited contributions, including from corporations and labor organizations.

<sup>b</sup>The limits in this column apply to a national party committee’s accounts for: (a) the presidential nominating convention; (b) election recounts and contests and other legal proceedings; and (c) national party headquarters buildings. A party’s national committee, Senate campaign committee, and House campaign committee are each considered separate party committees with separate limits. Only a national party committee, not the parties’ national congressional campaign committees, may have an account for the presidential nominating convention.

<sup>c</sup>These limits will be indexed for inflation. Amounts shown are for the 2019–2020 election cycle.

<sup>d</sup>Additionally, a national party committee and its Senatorial campaign committee may contribute up to \$49,600 combined per campaign to each Senate candidate.

*Source:* Federal Election Commission, “FEC Chart: 2019–2020 Campaign Cycle Contribution Limits,” February 7, 2019, [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov).

**Table 2-2** Contribution Limits on Funding of State Election Campaigns

<i>State</i>	<i>Individuals</i>	<i>Corporations</i>	<i>Labor unions</i>	<i>Political action committees</i>	<i>State parties</i>
Alabama	no	no	no	no	no
Alaska	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
Arizona	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
Arkansas	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
California	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Colorado	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
Connecticut	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
Delaware	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Florida	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Georgia	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Hawaii	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Idaho	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Illinois	yes	yes	yes	yes	no <sup>a</sup>
Indiana	no	yes	yes	no <sup>b</sup>	no
Iowa	no	prohibited	no	no	no
Kansas	yes	yes	yes	yes	no <sup>a</sup>
Kentucky	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	no
Louisiana	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Maine	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Maryland	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Massachusetts	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
Michigan	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
Minnesota	yes	prohibited	yes	yes	yes
Mississippi	no	yes	no	no	no
Missouri	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
Montana	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
Nebraska	no	no	no	no	no
Nevada	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
New Hampshire	yes	yes	prohibited	yes	yes
New Jersey	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
New Mexico	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
New York	yes	yes	yes	yes	no <sup>a</sup>
North Carolina	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	no
North Dakota	no	prohibited	prohibited	no	no
Ohio	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
Oklahoma	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
Oregon	no	no	no	no	no
Pennsylvania	no	prohibited	prohibited	no	no
Rhode Island	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	yes
South Carolina	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
South Dakota	yes	yes	yes	no	no
Tennessee	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Texas	no	prohibited	prohibited	no	no
Utah	no	no	no	no	no

**Table 2-2** (Continued)

<i>State</i>	<i>Individuals</i>	<i>Corporations</i>	<i>Labor unions</i>	<i>Political action committees</i>	<i>State parties</i>
Vermont	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
Virginia	no	no	no	no	no
Washington	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
West Virginia	yes	prohibited	yes	yes	yes
Wisconsin	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	no
Wyoming	yes	prohibited	prohibited	yes	no

*Note:* The definitions of “contributions” and “candidates,” as well as the limits on sizes of contributions and other restrictions (for example, from government employees, regulated industries), vary widely across states. For details, see source.

<sup>a</sup> Unlimited, except for primary elections in Illinois (subject to limitations), contested primary elections in Kansas (subject to limitations), and primaries in New York (prohibited).

<sup>b</sup> Unlimited, except for PACs designated for a specific candidate (subject to corporate limitations).

*Source:* National Conference of State Legislatures, “State Limits on Contributions to Candidates 2019–2020 Cycle,” [www.ncsl.org](http://www.ncsl.org).

**Table 2-3** Presidential Campaign Finance, 2020

Party/ candidate	Federal funds	Contributions from individuals		Contributions from parties		Contributions from other committees		Contributions from loans from the candidate		Transfers and offsets <sup>a</sup>		Other receipts	Total
Republicans													
Trump, Donald J.	\$0	\$458,351,485	\$0	\$846,953	\$0	\$0	\$281,551,284	\$3,600,506	\$744,350,228				
Democrats													
Biden, Joseph R.	0	823,098,083	8,200	563,064	—	—	250,433,267	77,361	1,074,179,975				
Others	0	3,900,718	15,499	2,200	12,084	—	10,740	139	3,941,379				
Total general election candidates	0	1,285,350,286	23,699	1,412,217	12,084	—	531,995,291	3,678,006	1,811,471,582				
Total primary-only candidates	184,988	184,988	670,801,679	16,361	484,339	1,475,658,316	93,595,620	10,660,198	2,251,431,975				
Grand total	184,988	1,285,535,274	670,825,378	1,428,578	496,423	1,475,658,316	625,590,911	14,338,204	4,062,903,557				
Party/ candidate	Operating expenditures	Transfers to other committees		Fundraising disbursements		Total loan repayments		Total contribution refunds		Other disbursements <sup>b</sup>		Latest cash on hand	Debits owed by campaign <sup>c</sup>
Republicans													
Trump, Donald J.	\$704,895,264	\$801	\$0	\$0	\$11,494,581	\$36,498,683	\$752,889,329	\$10,749,402	\$2,733,832				
Democrats													
Biden, Joseph R.	1,056,940,034	1192592	0	0	15,783,419	3,456	1,073,919,501	260,475	0				

(Table continues)

**Table 2-3** (Continued)

Party/ candidate	Operating expenditures	Transfers to other committees	Fundraising disbursements	Total loan repayments	Total contribution refunds	Other disbursements <sup>b</sup>	Total disbursements	Latest cash on hand	Debts owed by campaign <sup>c</sup>
Others	3,869,601	0	0	10,784	12,045	9,800	3,902,230	39,148	253,840
Total general election candidates	1,765,704,899	1,193,393	0	10,784	27,290,045	36,511,939	1,830,711,060	11,049,026	2,987,672
Total primary- only candi- dates	2,176,183,477	11,356,081	239,993	16,415,989	16,387,764	20,606,717	2,241,194,549	16,715,639	14,908,162
Grand total	3,941,888,376	12,549,474	239,993	16,426,773	43,677,809	57,118,656	4,071,905,609	27,764,665	17,895,834

*Note:* General election "Others" category and general election totals include two candidates, Howie Hawkins and Jo Jorgensen, not shown separately. The total for primary-only candidates exclude general election candidates. These data reflect the time period from January 1, 2019 - December 31, 2020. However, the FEC closed its office headquarters in mid-March 2020 due to COVID-19 contingencies, so reports submitted on paper between March 2020 and December 2020 are not included. Approximately 94 percent of reports submitted are done so electronically, and is mandatory for all filers who received contributions or make expenditures exceeding \$50,000 in a single year, so most information is included in these estimates.

<sup>a</sup> Although combined here, transfers and offsets are separate totals in the FEC source table.

<sup>b</sup> Includes legal and accounting disbursements, which is presented as a separate category in the FEC source table.

<sup>c</sup> There is also a total of \$31,947 in debts owed to campaigns for primary-only candidates (not shown).

*Sources:* Federal Election Commission, "Table 1: Presidential Campaign Receipts Through December 31, 2020" and "Table 2: Presidential Campaign Disbursements Through December 31, 2020," [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov).



**Table 2-4** Presidential Campaign Finance, Aggregated Contributions from Individual Donors to Leading Presidential Candidates, 2016 and 2020

Candidate	Total number of itemized individual donors	Total net individual contributions (millions)	Percentage of individual contributions from donors aggregating to			
			under \$200	\$200–999	\$1,000 or more <sup>a</sup>	
2016						
Clinton	535,305	405.0	3.8	24.1	72.1	
Trump	350,273	102.5	10.7	36.4	52.9	
Johnson	6,445	3.4	5.3	37.2	57.5	
Stein	5,115	2.6	4.0	48.8	47.2	
2020						
Biden	4,115,097	886.0	16.5	33.5	50.0	
Trump	1,825,158	566.8	13.1	36.6	50.3	
Jorgensen	2,389	0.9	9.3	47.0	43.7	

*Note:* Amounts are from FEC data released on November 27, 2017 and March 22, 2021. Similar data for earlier years can be found in previous editions of *Vital Statistics on American Politics*.

<sup>a</sup> The maximum amount an individual donor could give to a candidate was \$2,700 in 2016 and \$2,800 in 2020. Individuals could contribute up to this amount in the prenomination period and again in the general election period.

*Source:* OpenSecrets.org, “Donor Demographics,” [www.opensecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org); federal election data from the Federal Election Commission, [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov).

## A Data Literacy Lesson

### Making Comparisons over Time

To paraphrase the cinematic philosopher of the 1980s, Ferris Bueller, data comes at you pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it. We think Table 2-4 provides an interesting example of this: not in the data itself, but in the source and how quickly it can change. If you were trying to find the most recent version of this data, a logical place to start is to look at the source we used. In this case, we found the information from Open Secrets, and (at least as we write this) that's where we'd suggest you start for more details. Depending on when you read this, though, that might not be the case anymore.

If you look at earlier editions of this book, you'll see that the information about individual donors' contributions to presidential campaigns was presented just a little bit differently, and the source was the Campaign Finance Institute (CFI). As of June 2021, the CFI website was still up and running and appeared to have data from as recently as 2019. A little digging though, and you can find that the CFI merged with the National Institute on Money in State Politics in 2018, forming the new National Institute on Money in Politics. In June 2021, the (still relatively new) National Institute on Money in Politics merged with the Center for Responsive Politics, another national nonprofit organization with a focus on tracking the effects of money in politics, to form Open Secrets. That's a lot of organizational change in a short period of time. Each iteration of the organization gathered, aggregated, and presented the data in a slightly different way.

Aside from the scavenger hunt that finding data can become when data-collecting organizations go through institutional mergers and changes, these changes present different options for what data are available. This becomes particularly important when you are working to draw conclusions over long time periods. In Table 2-4, we have presented information about individual donors at the aggregate level for the past two presidential elections. These are both from the same source and present the same information so you can reasonably make comparisons between the 2016 and 2020 election cycles. If this essay were about using data to identify noteworthy changes, we might talk about how changes might be indicators for research questions. (For example, does the increase in the number of individual donors from less than one million combined in 2016 to over six million in 2020 tell us something about political engagement? But we digress because that's not the focus of this essay...)

You can find information about individual donors at the aggregate level in previous editions of this book, but it would be difficult to draw comparisons using the two different volumes because they use two different sources. The Campaign Finance Institute, which is now two-times removed, reported donation levels at \$200 or less, while Open Secrets reports a level of \$200–\$499. (We've collapsed that with the \$500–\$999 donation levels.) This difference of \$1.00 is insignificant in the scope of the thousands of dollars an individual can legally contribute to a candidate. But the difference in reporting is substantial because we no longer have the ability to compare across those elections. We don't know where the split is for those

contributions that were \$200 exactly and we'd be over-interpreting if we tried. That dollar, as we said, does not make a substantive difference, but it means we cannot make comparisons of today with any election before 2020.

It's possible that by the next edition of this book, we'll be splitting the donation amounts differently again, depending on whether the merged Open Secrets organization reports it differently than it has up to now. And, if it merges with another organization in the meantime, we'll be watching to catch those changes, no matter how fast they occur.

**Table 2-5** Public Funding of Presidential Elections, 1976–2020 (millions)

Year	Spending limits		Maximum entitlement, primary matching funds <sup>b</sup>	Public funds for each major-party convention <sup>c</sup>	Public funds for each major-party nominee for general election <sup>d</sup>	Coordinated party spending limit <sup>e</sup>
	Primary <sup>a</sup>	Primary plus 20% <sup>a</sup>				
1976	\$10.9	\$13.1	\$5.5	\$2.2	\$21.8	\$3.2
1980	14.7	17.7	7.4	4.4	29.4	4.6
1984	20.2	24.2	10.1	8.1	40.4	6.9
1988	23.1	27.7	11.5	9.2	46.1	8.3
1992	27.6	33.1	13.8	11.0	55.2	10.3
1996	30.9	37.1	15.5	12.4	61.8	12.0
2000	33.8	40.5	16.9	13.5	67.6	13.7
2004	37.3	44.8	18.7	14.9	74.6	16.2
2008	42.1	50.5	21.0	16.8	84.1	19.1
2012	45.6	54.7	22.8	18.2	91.2	21.7
2016	48.1	57.7	24.1	—	96.1	23.8
2020	51.9	62.3	25.6	—	103.7	26.5

*Note:* Amounts are in current dollars, and reflect what public funding limits are, but are not indicative of whether candidates used the public funding option.

<sup>a</sup> \$10 million + COLA. (COLA is the cost-of-living adjustment over the base year of 1974.) Campaigns are also allowed to exempt fundraising costs up to 20 percent of the overall limit, which, in effect, raises their total spending limit by 20 percent. Legal and accounting costs, up to 15 percent of the overall limit, if incurred to comply with the law, are also exempt from the limit.

<sup>b</sup> Eligible candidates in the presidential primaries may receive public funds to match the individual contributions they raise up to half of the national spending limit. Contributions from political action committees (PACs) and party committees are not matchable. Although an individual has been able to give up to \$1,000 to a primary candidate (before the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 raised that limit to \$2,000), only the first \$250 of that contribution is matchable. Presidential candidates become eligible for matching funds by raising more than \$5,000 in matchable contributions in each of twenty different states. Candidates must agree to use these public funds only for campaign expenses.

<sup>c</sup> From 1976 to 2012, each major party convention committee was entitled to \$4 million plus a cost-of-living adjustment, and minor parties were entitled to partial funding based on their party's share of the vote in the prior presidential election. In 2014, this public funding was eliminated by Section II of Public Law 113–94, the “Gabriella Miller Kids First Research Act.”<sup>d</sup> \$20 million + COLA. Legal and accounting costs incurred to comply with the law are exempt from the limit and may be defrayed from private monies raised in separate compliance funds (subject to contribution limitations and prohibitions). The major party candidates who win their party's nominations for president are each eligible to receive a grant to cover all the expenses of their general election campaigns. Nominees who accept the funds must agree not to raise private contributions (from individuals, PACs, or party committees) and to limit their campaign expenditures to the amount of public funds they receive. They may use the funds only for campaign expenses. The last year a major party candidate accepted the general election grant was in 2008. A third-party presidential candidate may qualify for some public funds after the general election if he or she receives at least 5 percent of the popular vote.

<sup>e</sup> The amount the national party may spend on behalf of its nominee is set by a formula: \$.02 multiplied by voting-age population of the United States multiplied by the price index and rounded to the nearest \$100. The party may work in conjunction with the campaign, but the money is raised, spent, and reported by the national party committee.

*Source:* Federal Election Commission, [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov).

**Table 2-6** Financial Activity of the National Political Parties, 2001–2020 (millions)

Party	2001–2002	2003–2004	2005–2006	2007–2008	2009–2010	2011–2012	2013–2014	2015–2016	2017–2018	2019–2020
Democratic										
Raised	\$217.2	\$688.8	\$483.1	\$763.3	\$618.1	\$800.1	\$657.2	870.1	783.2	1,527.5
Spent	208.7	665.6	472.4	746.5	603.5	784.1	634.6	843.2	750.4	1,424.3
Contributions	2.3	1.8	4.1	2.5	2.0	2.3	1.8	2.3	2.2	2.9
Coordinated expenditures <sup>a</sup>	7.1	33.1	20.7	38.0	24.9	39.5	13.1	37.5	20.1	40.6
Independent expenditures <sup>b</sup>	1.7	176.5	108.1	156.2	107.4	113.8	123.6	141.2	114.5	183.4
Republican										
Raised	424.1	782.4	599.0	792.9	542.1	803.5	565.7	752.4	766.2	1,662.1
Spent	427.0	752.6	608.2	766.1	546.4	786.9	552.9	706.7	745.0	1,579.2
Contributions	4.7	2.6	1.9	8.6	2.4	2.6	2.6	1.9	1.9	4.0
Coordinated expenditures <sup>a</sup>	16.0	29.1	14.2	32.0	27.1	36.3	14.5	39.2	17.8	46.6
Independent expenditures <sup>b</sup>	1.9	88.0	115.6	124.7	76.1	140.3	105.3	113.3	118.2	209.3

*Note:* Amounts in current dollars. This table includes only federal activity. Total receipts and disbursements do not include monies transferred among committees. Building funds and state and local election spending are not reported to the Federal Election Commission. Data for earlier years can be found in previous editions of *Vital Statistics on American Politics*. Comparisons with earlier years must be made cautiously since subsequent data revisions can differ appreciably from previously published data.

<sup>a</sup> Party committees are also allowed to spend money on behalf of federal candidates, in addition to the money party committees may contribute directly. This spending may be coordinated with a candidate.

<sup>b</sup> The 1996 election cycle was the first in which party committees were permitted to make independent expenditures.

*Sources:* Federal Election Commission, "Party Table 2a: Democratic Party Committees' Federal Financial Activity through December 31 of the Election Year," "Party Table 3: Republican Party Committees' Federal Financial Activity through December 31 of the Election Year," [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov).

**Table 2-7** Financial Activity of National, State, and Local Party Committees, 2019–2020 (millions)

<i>Committee</i>	<i>Raised</i>		<i>Spent</i>			<i>Cash on hand</i>	<i>Debts owed</i>		
	<i>From individuals</i>	<i>From other committees</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Contributions made</i>	<i>Coordinated expenditures</i>			<i>Independent expenditures</i>	<i>Total</i>
Democratic National Committee	\$231.7	\$1.4	\$491.7	\$0.00	\$17.1	\$0.00	\$461.5	\$38.8	\$3.2
Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee	240.8	12.0	303.9	0.7	15.3	91.2	300.3	9.8	20.0
Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee	211.6	53.2	345.8	0.8	7.3	90.8	330.4	21	14.0
Democratic state and local committees	117.8	63.5	599.5	1.4	0.8	1.3	545.4	37.6	3.1
Total Democratic Republican National Committee	802.0	130.0	1,527.5	2.9	40.6	183.4	1,424.3	107.1	40.3
National Republican Senatorial Committee	469.1	0.7	890.6	0	25.4	7.1	833.5	80.5	0
National Republican Congressional Committee	225.5	13.3	338.3	1.3	9.8	120.6	331.4	14.4	9.0
National Republican state and local committees	159.9	45.5	280.9	0.5	5.6	80.7	284.9	12.6	0
Total Republican	81.1	58.6	478.1	2.2	5.8	0.8	455.2	23.0	1.3
Total	935.6	118.2	1,662.1	4.0	46.6	209.3	1,579.2	130.5	10.3

*Note:* See notes to Table 2-6, this volume.

*Sources:* Federal Election Commission. "Party Table 2a: Democratic Party Committees' Federal Financial Activity through December 31 of the Election Year," "Party Table 3a: Republican Party Committees' Federal Financial Activity through December 31 of the Election Year," www.fec.gov.

## A Data Literacy Lesson

### Finding What Isn't There

When we look at things, we're trained to describe and explain and get meaning from what we see. If someone asks you to explain a flower, you might describe the color, the shape, the size, and even the feel. If someone asks you to explain a table of data (let's say one about the financial activity of national, state, and local parties) you might identify descriptive data and attempt to interpret relationships, commonalities, and differences. As you look at Table 2-7 (and also, by the way, at Table 2-8, which presents similar data over a longer time period), you might be inclined to draw some conclusions about the Democratic and Republican parties' spending and fundraising habits. You might note, for example, that the Republican Party both raised and spent more money than the Democratic Party in 2019–2020, but that the amounts for both are in the same ballpark. You might note the differences in how the parties raise money at different levels, with the Republicans raising most from individuals at the National Committee level and progressively raising less down to the state and local levels, while the Democrats collected the most from individual donations to their Senatorial Campaign Committee, followed by the National Committee, then the Congressional Campaign Committee and finally the state and local committees. These all suggest interesting questions that are worth further exploration, but we think there's another interesting thing to consider. It might seem counterintuitive, but we wonder what we'd find if we look for what isn't there.

It's certainly harder to see what isn't included but, as we've said elsewhere throughout this book, data rarely stand alone in a singular table. If you're interested in exploring how major political parties raise and spend money this table is certainly a good place to start. But does this table include all the information you need to continue that exploration? Consider the very first row: as you look at Democratic National Committee money raised, \$231.7 million were raised from individuals and \$1.4 million were raised from other committees, with a total of \$491.7 million raised. Do any questions come to mind as you look at those?

If we were approaching this for the first time, we might question the math:  $231.7 + 1.4$  does *not* equal \$491.7. Where did the rest of the money raised by the DNC come from? We also might wonder about the \$1.4 million raised from "other committees." What other committees, exactly?

We could start by going to the table the FEC shares. While we get some minor pieces of the puzzle (there are \$26.4 million in transfers from "other national" and "state/local" committees that add to the money raised, but still don't come close to the total of \$491.7 million), the source for these data might lead to more questions (What are the other national and state/local committees that are sending money to the DNC? What are Levin Funds and what do they have to do with the relationship between different levels of political party organizations?) that lead us, in turn, to other sources, like federal legislation and scholarly articles that provide insight and analysis on these questions.

We've noticed that numbers are often treated as conclusive, as if the final answer to everything will be a number. There would certainly be a satisfying simplicity in that.<sup>1</sup> But we think there's a power in the numerical data that isn't in them

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providing answers but, rather, suggesting questions. Some of the most interesting questions to explore are found in the space of what isn't reported.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, if you're a fan of Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, we will concede that the answer is 42, but we still wonder what the question is for that answer.



**Table 2-8** National Party Campaign Finance: “Soft” and “Hard” Money, 2002–2020 (millions)

<i>Committee</i>	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Democratic National Committee	\$73.3	\$399.9	\$133.2	\$258.3	\$223.9	\$292.3	\$160.7	\$347.0	\$177.7	\$461.5
Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee	49.8	88.3	121.7	162.6	129.1	144.9	169.2	177.4	145.8	300.3
Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee	47.0	92.4	140.8	176.5	163.6	183.2	206.1	216.4	297.5	330.4
Democratic state and local committees	97.8	153.7	147.6	272.3	161.8	294.8	182.6	366.0	232.8	545.4
Total Democratic	208.7	665.6	472.4	746.5	603.5	784.1	634.6	843.2	750.4	1424.3
Republican National Committee	\$186.8	\$382.6	\$254.6	\$415.5	\$210.8	\$386.2	\$194.6	\$323.1	\$326.7	\$833.5
Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee	59.6	78.7	89.7	93.8	112.5	113.8	129.0	133.9	151.2	331.3
Republican Congressional Campaign Committee	130.7	184.8	178.1	118.2	132.1	156.7	153.5	160.6	200.6	284.9
Republican state and local committees	111.1	164.2	152.5	208.3	125.8	241.7	136.0	189.7	148.7	455.2
Total Republican	427.0	752.6	608.2	766.1	546.4	786.9	552.9	706.7	745.0	1579.2

*Note:* Amounts in current dollars. Totals do not include transfers among national party committees.

*Sources:* Federal Election Commission. “Party Table 2a: Democratic Party Committees’ Federal Financial Activity through December 31 of the Election Year.” “Party Table 2b: Republican Party Committees’ Federal Financial Activity through December 31 of the Election Year.” [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov).

**Table 2-9** Number of Political Action Committees (PACs), by Type, 1989–2020

Year	Corporate	Labor	Trade/ membership/ health <sup>a</sup>	Cooperative	Corporation without stock	Independent expenditure-only committees <sup>b</sup>	Political		Other nonconnected	Total
							committees with non-contribution accounts <sup>c</sup>	PACs		
1989–1990	1,098	166	590	31	107	—	—	—	877	2,869
1991–1992	1,140	185	603	33	114	—	—	—	992	3,067
1993–1994	1,160	196	616	29	114	—	—	—	984	3,099
1995–1996	1,838	358	1,168	45	134	—	—	—	1,075	4,618
1997–1998	1,824	352	1,083	45	133	—	—	—	1,156	4,593
1999–2000	1,726	350	1,028	41	120	—	—	—	1,231	4,496
2001–2002	1,743	337	1,070	41	117	—	—	—	1,265	4,573
2003–2004	1,757	329	1,068	38	110	—	—	—	1,562	4,864
2005–2006	1,808	312	1,083	37	115	—	—	—	1,657	5,012
2007–2008	1,794	299	1,128	44	114	—	—	—	1,841	5,220
2009–2010	1,816	311	1,102	40	121	—	—	—	2,041	5,431
2011–2012	1,851	300	993	41	118	1,251	65	532	2,160	7,311
2013–2014	1,804	288	967	41	114	1,618	105	558	2,053	7,548
2015–2016	1,803	289	97	42	104	2,722	180	572	1,981	7,790
2017–2018	1,732	279	961	46	103	2,217	343	664	2,318	8,663
2019–2020	1,669	275	951	46	94	2,319	522	727	2,252	8,855

Note: “—” indicates not available. Counts for other years can be found in earlier editions of *Vital Statistics on American Politics*. The counts reflect federally registered PACs. Registration does not necessarily imply financial activity.

<sup>a</sup> As of July 2011, health organizations are no longer an organization type but are included in either the trade or membership category.

<sup>b</sup> Independent expenditure-only committees may receive unlimited contributions from individuals, corporations, and labor unions for the purpose of financing independent expenditures and other independent political activity.

<sup>c</sup> Committees with non-contribution accounts, permitted to make contributions to federal candidates, solicit and accept unlimited contributions from individuals, corporations, labor organizations, and other political committees. These contributions are in a segregated bank account for the purpose of financing independent expenditures, other ads that refer to a federal candidate, and generic voter drives in federal elections, while maintaining a separate bank account, subject to all of the statutory amount limitations and source prohibitions.

Source: Federal Election Commission, “PAC Table 1: Summary of PAC Activity” for each respective year, www.fec.gov.

**Table 2-10** PACs: Receipts, Expenditures, and Contributions, 1975–2020

<i>Election cycle<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Receipts<sup>b</sup> (millions)</i>	<i>Expenditures<sup>b</sup> (millions)</i>	<i>Contributions to congressional candidates<sup>c</sup> (millions)</i>	<i>Percentage of receipts contributed to congressional candidates</i>
1975–1976	\$54.0	\$52.9	\$22.6	42
1977–1978	80.0	77.4	34.1	43
1979–1980	137.7	131.2	60.2	44
1981–1982	199.5	190.2	87.6	44
1983–1984	288.7	266.8	113.0	39
1985–1986	353.4	340.0	139.8	40
1987–1988	384.6	364.2	159.2	41
1989–1990	372.1	357.6	159.1	43
1991–1992	385.5	394.8	188.9	49
1993–1994	391.8	388.1	189.6	48
1995–1996	437.4	429.9	217.8	50
1997–1998	502.6	470.8	219.9	44
1999–2000	604.9	579.4	259.8	43
2001–2002	685.3	656.5	282.0	41
2003–2004	915.7	842.9	310.5	34
2005–2006	1,085.5	1,055.3	372.1	34
2007–2008	1,212.4	1,180.0	412.8	34
2009–2010	1,197.8	1,174.1	431.5	36
2011–2012	2,259.1	2,198.4	444.5	20
2013–2014	2,368.6	2,304.8	435.9	18
2015–2016	4,046.3	3,973.3	444.0	11
2017–2018	4,674.2	4,554.1	465.6	10
2019–2020	13,227.9	12,947.1	448.8	3

*Note:* Amounts in current dollars. The 2012 presidential election was the first after a Supreme Court decision, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* in January 2010, allowed the emergence of “super” political action committees (PACs). Super PACs can raise unlimited money from corporations, labor unions, and individuals, spending that money supporting and opposing presidential or congressional candidates, but cannot directly coordinate with the campaigns.

<sup>a</sup> Data cover January 1 of the odd-numbered year to December 31 of the even-numbered year.

<sup>b</sup> Receipts and expenditures for 1975–1984 exclude funds transferred between affiliated committees.

<sup>c</sup> Primarily contributions to candidates for election in the even-numbered year, made during the two-year election cycle. Some contributions went to candidates running for office in future years, or to debt retirement for candidates in past cycles.

*Sources:* 1975–1976: Joseph E. Cantor, “Political Action Committees: Their Evolution and Growth and Their Implications for the Political System,” Report no. 83, Congressional Research Service (Washington, D.C., 1982), 87–88; 1977–1978: Federal Election Commission, “FEC Releases First PAC Figures for 1985–86,” press release, May 21, 1987, 1; 1979–1988: “PAC Activity Falls in 1990 Elections,” press release, March 31, 1991, 10; 1989–2010: “Table 4: Summary of PAC Activity, 1990–2010”; 2011–2020: “PAC Table 1: Summary of PAC Activity,” “PAC Table 2: PAC Contributions to Candidates,” www.fec.gov.

**Table 2-11** Spending, by Type of PAC, 1997–2020 (millions)

Election cycle <sup>a</sup>	Separate Segregated Funds (SSFs)				Nonconnected committees				Total
	Corporate	Labor	Trade/ membership <sup>b</sup>	Cooperative	Corporations without stock	Independent expenditure-only committees <sup>c</sup>	Committees with non-contribution accounts <sup>c</sup>	Other PACs <sup>d</sup>	
1997–1998	\$141.4	\$103.0	\$141.5	\$4.3	\$8.6	—	—	\$94.8	\$493.7
1999–2000	162.8	129.4	178.6	3.3	12.2	—	—	125.2	\$611.5
2001–2002	184.3	159.3	175.9	3.7	9.6	—	—	153.8	\$686.5
2003–2004	225.3	184.4	219.8	3.9	9.3	—	—	495.9	\$1,138.5
2005–2006	272.9	198.5	251.9	4.6	11.1	—	—	328.7	\$1,067.7
2007–2008	299.7	252.3	294.9	9.9	12.7	—	—	310.7	\$1,180.3
2009–2010	302.8	256.9	268.8	6.3	15.9	90.9	—	333.1	\$1,274.6
2011–2012	343.0	279.4	264.5	6.7	16.2	796.9	175.3	316.3	\$2,198.4
2013–2014	370.7	289.2	290.5	7.0	19.4	687.2	312.6	328.0	\$2,304.8
2015–2016	385.7	331.5	300.2	7.0	15.7	1805.9	769.0	358.2	\$3,973.3
2017–2018	404.8	342.2	261.7	8.4	14.4	1540.7	1458.2	523.6	\$4,554.1
2019–2020	408.5	385.6	280.7	7.3	13.2	3385.9	7656.5	809.2	\$12,947.1

Note: “—” indicates not available. Amounts in current dollars. Detail may not add to totals because of rounding. Data for earlier years may be found in previous editions of *Vital Statistics on American Politics*.

<sup>a</sup> Data cover January 1 of the odd-numbered year to December 31 of the even-numbered year.

<sup>b</sup> This category combines the Federal Election Commission categories of trade and membership.

<sup>c</sup> For details, see notes for Table 2-9, this volume.

<sup>d</sup> This category includes the Federal Election Commission category of leadership PACs (initiated in 2011–2012).

Sources: 1997–2012: Federal Election Commission, “PAC Table 1: Summary of PAC Activity through December 31 of the Election Year”; 2013–2014: “PAC Table 1: Summary of PAC Activity, January 1, 2013 through December 31, 2014”; 2015–2016: “PAC Table 1: Summary of PAC Activity, January 1, 2015 through December 31, 2016”; 2017–2018: “PAC Table 1: Summary of PAC Activity, January 1, 2017 through December 31, 2018”; 2019–2020: “PAC Table 1: Summary of PAC Activity, January 1, 2019 through December 31, 2020.” 2013–2020 sources available at [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov).

**Table 2-12** Contributions and Independent Expenditures, by Type of PAC, 2003–2020

Election cycle/PAC type	Number <sup>a</sup>	Contributions to federal candidates <sup>c</sup>		Independent expenditures <sup>d</sup>		
		Receipts <sup>b</sup>	Amount	Percentage of receipts	Amount	Percentage of receipts
<b>2003–2004</b>						
Corporate	1,402	\$238,984,115	\$115,641,547	48%	\$223,729	0.1%
Labor	206	191,651,043	52,103,572	27	20,737,373	10.8
Trade/membership/health	722	181,837,429	83,221,870	46	18,138,069	10.0
Cooperative	34	4,187,378	2,872,363	69	4,993	0.1
Corporations without stock	75	9,639,838	4,182,321	43	111,095	1.2
Nonconnected	819	289,423,580	52,467,328	18	18,159,133	6.3
Total	3,258	915,723,383	310,489,001	34	57,374,392	6.3
<b>2005–2006</b>						
Corporate	1,464	278,345,927	135,925,970	49	250,345	0.1
Labor	204	218,185,504	55,815,069	26	10,056,447	4.6
Trade/membership/health	745	218,448,147	101,803,507	47	19,050,740	8.7
Cooperative	35	6,166,566	3,454,915	56	3,865	0.1
Corporations without stock	89	11,441,713	4,885,718	43	377,849	3.3
Nonconnected	887	352,947,674	70,217,568	20	8,083,013	2.3
Total	3,424	1,085,535,531	372,102,747	34	37,822,259	3.5
<b>2007–2008</b>						
Corporate	1,470	313,350,975	158,323,496	51	221,207	0.1
Labor	203	262,055,837	62,675,294	24	58,630,780	22.4
Trade/membership/health	794	240,983,640	112,897,919	47	44,911,854	18.6
Cooperative	39	10,283,949	6,861,823	67	0	0.0
Corporations without stock	84	13,025,360	5,461,525	42	582,735	4.5
Nonconnected	1,023	372,720,837	66,627,495	18	30,834,925	8.3
Total	3,613	1,212,420,598	412,847,552	34	135,181,501	11.1

(Table continues)

Table 2-12 (Continued)

Election cycle/PAC type	Contributions to federal candidates <sup>c</sup>			Independent expenditures <sup>d</sup>		
	Number <sup>a</sup>	Receipts <sup>b</sup>	Amount	Percentage of receipts	Amount	Percentage of receipts
2009–2010						
Corporate	1,470	316,954,250	165,455,021	52	360,039	0.1
Labor	203	259,066,268	64,162,708	25	25,881,237	10.0
Trade/membership/health	794	227,397,841	115,335,850	51	31,734,037	14.0
Cooperative	39	10,060,381	4,959,203	49	0	0.0
Corporations without stock	84	14,253,911	7,488,570	53	712,598	5.0
Nonconnected	1,023	451,730,393	74,089,193	16	10,308,213	2.3
Total	3,613	1,279,469,044	431,490,545	34	68,996,124	5.4
2011–2012						
Corporate	1,851	361,088,386	181,141,433	50	—	—
Labor	300	282,589,623	57,476,379	20	—	—
Trade/membership <sup>e</sup>	993	270,443,042	121,324,660	45	—	—
Cooperative	41	7,318,621	5,345,052	73	—	—
Corporations without stock	118	17,343,198	7,529,555	43	—	—
Nonconnected <sup>f</sup>	4,008	1,320,350,343	73,532,041	6	—	—
Total	7,311	2,259,133,213	446,349,121	20	78,044,150	3.5
2013–2014						
Corporate	1,804	384,831,590	178,086,417	46	—	—
Labor	288	305,740,812	50,647,727	17	—	—
Trade/membership <sup>e</sup>	967	302,705,703	119,232,896	39	—	—
Cooperative	41	7,699,678	4,928,775	64	—	—
Corporations without stock	114	19,705,058	7,025,307	36	—	—
Nonconnected <sup>f</sup>	4,334	1,347,934,933	76,025,813	6	—	—
Total	7,548	2,368,617,774	435,946,935	18	47,449,852	2.0
2015–2016						
Corporate	1,803	\$405,476,939	\$182,762,062	45	—	—
Labor	389	342,382,387	46,728,402	14	—	—
Trade/membership <sup>e</sup>	973	319,722,996	123,074,945	38	—	—
Cooperative	42	8,021,080	4,726,798	59	—	—
Corporations without stock	104	15,707,065	7,527,678	48	—	—
Nonconnected <sup>f</sup>	5,455	2,954,949,795	79,192,956	3	—	—
Total	8,766	3,726,537,266	444,012,840	12	52,125,823	1.4

2017–2018							
Corporate	1,732	\$417,247,320	\$178,089,875	43	—	—	—
Labor	279	365,802,911	53,817,857	15	—	—	—
Trade/membership <sup>e</sup>	961	274,735,696	120,321,020	44	—	—	—
Cooperative	46	9,069,475	5,096,426	56	—	—	—
Corporations without stock	103	14,326,066	7,444,232	52	—	—	—
Nonconnected <sup>f</sup>	5,542	3,593,033,432	100,808,176	3	—	—	—
Total	8,663	4,674,214,900	464,577,585	10	57,854,221	—	1.2
2019–2020							
Corporate	1,669	\$429,563,082	\$165,747,241	39	—	—	—
Labor	275	384,279,535	51,824,216	13	—	—	—
Trade/membership <sup>e</sup>	951	303,134,221	117,317,488	39	—	—	—
Cooperative	46	7,775,702	5,133,600	66	—	—	—
Corporations without stock	94	14,258,153	6,650,350	47	—	—	—
Nonconnected <sup>f</sup>	5,820	12,088,845,195	102,086,283	1	—	—	—
Total	8,855	13,257,855,888	448,759,178	3	65,040,522	—	0.5

Note: “—” indicates not available. Amounts in current dollars. Data for earlier years can be found in previous editions of *Vital Statistics on American Politics*.

<sup>a</sup> For 2003–2010, the numbers shown are those PACs that actually made contributions.

<sup>b</sup> Not adjusted for money transferred between affiliated committees. Receipts are for all PACs whether or not they made contributions to candidates in the election cycle.

<sup>c</sup> Figures include contributions to all federal candidates, including those who did not run for office during the years indicated.

<sup>d</sup> Independent expenditures include money spent for candidates and against candidates.

<sup>e</sup> As of July 2011, health organizations are no longer an organization type but are included in either the trade or the membership category.

<sup>f</sup> This category includes independent expenditure-only committees which are prohibited from making contributions to candidates.

Sources: Federal Election Commission, “PAC Activity Increases for 2004 Elections,” press release, April 13, 2005; “PAC Activity Continues Climb in 2006,” press release, October 5, 2007; “Growth in PAC Financial Activity Slows,” press release, April 24, 2009; “Table 1: PAC Financial Activity, 2009–2010,” “Table 3: 2009–2010 Summary of Independent Expenditures,” “Independent Expenditure Table 1: Independent Expenditures Made for or against Candidates through December 31 of the Election Year (2012 and 2010),” “PAC Table 1: Summary of PAC Activity through December 1 of the Election Year,” “PAC Table 2: PAC Contributions to Candidates, January 1, 2011–December 31, 2012,” “PAC Table 1: Summary of PAC Activity, January 1, 2013 through December 31, 2014,” “PAC Table 2: PAC Contributions to Candidates, January 1, 2013–December 31, 2014,” “Independent Expenditure Table 2: Independent Expenditures Made For or Against Congressional Candidates, January 1, 2013 through December 31, 2014,” www.fec.gov.

## A Data Literacy Lesson

### The Wild Growth of Nonconnected PACs

It is not a typo—we checked it multiple times. The bottom of Table 2-12 shows that so-called “Nonconnected” Political Action Committees (PACs) gave about \$1.3 million to candidates in 2013–2014, a shade under \$3 million in 2015–2016, about \$3.5 million from 2017–2018, and then an astonishing \$12 million from 2019–2020. Sometimes, when we look at a table, we have to work hard to find the key numbers hidden within the rows and columns. This number, a more than three-fold increase in a two-year period, jumps right out at us, and begs for explanation.

Let’s start with a definition. There are two kinds of political action committees (organizations that pool funds from their members and donate them to candidates or campaigns). So-called connected PACs are affiliated with a political party, a candidate, or exist as a separate segregated fund that is established by a labor union or corporation.<sup>1</sup> A nonconnected PAC is a political committee that is not a party committee, an authorized committee of a candidate, or a separate segregated fund established by a corporation or labor organization. When the idea of a political action committee was first introduced into the lexicon in the 1970s, most of these PACs were associated with parties, candidates, unions, or corporations. As recently as 2003–2004, only about one-quarter of PACs were nonconnected. If we look at Table 2-12, that number is now close to two-thirds. (Out of 8,855 PACs donating to candidates in 2019–2020, 5,820 were classified as nonconnected.)

There are two significant consequences to this trend. First, the barriers to entry for those who wish to raise money for or against candidates have been lowered. If you wish to use your money to affect the results of elections, you no longer need to be associated with a campaign, a corporation, or a union to start a political action committee. Anyone who wishes to start an unconnected PAC can do so, relatively easily. (We do recommend consulting a good lawyer before doing so, as campaign finance laws are rather complex, and we don’t want you to end up in prison.)

Voters, of course, are far more likely to give money to PACs rather than starting their own, and here we see another critical difference between nonconnected and connected PACs. PACs connected to labor unions and corporations are permitted to seek their contributions from a “restricted class” of donors, which generally consists of managers and shareholders of the corporation or members of the labor union. Nonconnected PACs are free to seek money from anyone, giving them a significant leg up in the drive to raise money and, in so doing, gain influence.

A second consequence of the growth of nonconnected PACs concerns political polarization. Nonconnected PACs are more likely to represent ideological and/or single-issue constituencies. This can have the effect of pulling political activity away from the center and toward the ideological poles. If we consider an issue such as abortion, an increasing number of single-issue pro-life or pro-choice groups means more money being raised on the issue, and increased ability to use this money to enforce ideological rigidity. Candidates know that if they depart even a little bit from the orthodoxy of these single-issue nonconnected PACs, large amounts of money can be raised to support their opponents, or (more likely) to fund a primary challenger who will toe the group’s line on this issue. Abortion, of course, is just one such issue on which nonconnected PACs make moving to the center to find common ground an electorally dangerous act.



In our experience, numbers tell us something real. When a type of political action committee goes from representing about one-quarter of the PACs to representing two-thirds of them in a short period of time, and when their contributions increase by almost a factor of ten in a six-year period, that should tip us off that something big is changing. A few minutes spent visiting the FEC site to see what these different categories mean, followed by a few minutes reading about this concept of a nonconnected PAC and the challenges associated with them, have now led us to more evidence of the potential causes of polarization and the collapse of the center in American politics.

All of this from just noticing one very large, and anomalous, number.

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<sup>1</sup> The Federal Election Commission (FEC) has helpful resources explaining the different types of political action committees, particularly at <https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/registering-pac/understanding-nonconnected-pacs>.

**Table 2-13** Top Twenty PACs in Overall Spending and in Contributions to Federal Candidates, 2019–2020

<i>Rank</i>	<i>PAC</i>	<i>Overall spending</i>
1	Win The Era PAC	\$104,963,611
2	Emily's List	\$79,603,956
3	SEIU COPE (Service Employees International Union Committee on Political Education)	\$75,441,290
4	The Good Land Committee, Inc.	\$45,341,044
5	End Citizens United	\$42,245,587
6	Democracy Engine, Inc., PAC	\$29,393,358
7	National Rifle Association of America Political Victory Fund	\$22,739,549
8	UAW - V - CAP (UAW Voluntary Community Action Program)	\$22,639,912
9	American Federation Of State County & Municipal Employees PEOPLE	\$21,421,473
10	People Powered Action	\$18,568,037
11	Democratic Action	\$16,769,222
12	D.R.I.V.E.—Democrat, Republican, Independent Voter Education (The PAC of The International Brotherhood of Teamsters)	\$16,326,214
13	CHC Bold PAC	\$15,024,503
14	UA Union Plumbers & Pipefitters Vote! PAC (United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing & Pipefitting Industry of the United States and Canada)	\$13,217,494
15	1199 Service Employees Int'l Union Federal Political Action Fund	\$13,110,706
16	National Association of Realtors Political Action Committee	\$12,607,348
17	United Food and Commercial Workers International Union Active Ballot Club	\$12,312,480
18	Engineers Political Education Committee (EPEC)/ International Union of Operating Engineers	\$12,077,559
19	Let America Vote PAC	\$12,031,578
20	Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) PAC	\$11,603,313

<i>Rank</i>	<i>PAC</i>	<i>Contributions to federal candidates and other committees<sup>a</sup></i>
1	Democracy Engine, Inc., PAC	\$28,250,918
2	SEIU COPE (Service Employees International Union Committee on Political Education)	\$26,026,821
3	National Rifle Association of America Political Victory Fund	\$11,036,600

**Table 2-13** (Continued)

<i>Rank</i>	<i>PAC</i>	<i>Contributions to federal candidates and other committees<sup>a</sup></i>
4	Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) PAC	\$10,871,200
5	Engineers Political Education Committee (EPEC)/ International Union of Operating Engineers	\$10,635,142
6	Jstreet PAC	\$9,770,821
7	UAW - V - CAP (UAW Voluntary Community Action Program)	\$8,672,852
8	National Association of Realtors Political Action Committee	\$7,076,213
9	National Association of Letter Carriers of U.S.A. Political Fund (Letter Carrier Political Fund)	\$7,043,750
10	National Air Traffic Controllers Association PAC	\$5,938,600
11	Votesane PAC	\$5,852,282
12	United Food and Commercial Workers International Union Active Ballot Club	\$5,629,708
13	D.R.I.V.E.—Democrat, Republican, Independent Voter Education (The PAC of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters)	\$5,539,563
14	Communications Workers of America-COPE Political Contributions Committee	\$5,222,523
15	Comcast Corporation & NBC Universal Political Action Committee—Federal	\$5,109,000
16	CHC BOLD PAC	\$5,079,425
17	International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Political Action Committee	\$4,585,900
18	AT&T Inc./Warnermedia LLC Federal Political Action Committee (AT&T/Warnermedia Federal PAC)	\$4,521,000
19	Air Line Pilots Association PAC	\$4,504,000
20	Club for Growth PAC	\$4,454,519

*Note:* Amounts in current dollars. Information for earlier years can be found in previous editions of *Vital Statistics on American Politics*.

<sup>a</sup> Includes contributions to candidate committees, other PACs, and party committees.

*Source:* Federal Election Commission, “PAC Table 4b: Top 50 PACs by Disbursements, January 1, 2019–December 31, 2020” and “PAC Table 4c: Top 50 PACs by Contributions to Candidates and Other Committees, January 1, 2019–December 31, 2020,” [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov).

**Table 2-14** PAC Congressional Campaign Contributions, by Type of PAC and Incumbency Status of Candidate, 1999–2020 (millions)

Election cycle/PAC type	House						Senate						
	Candidate party			Type of contest			Candidate party			Type of contest			
	Dem.	Rep.	Incumbent	Challenger	Open seat <sup>a</sup>	Total	Dem.	Rep.	Incumbent	Challenger	Open seat <sup>a</sup>	Total	
1999–2000													
Corporate	\$22.0	\$40.0	\$54.50	\$2.30	\$5.30	\$62.10	\$5.10	\$16.90	\$16.00	\$1.50	\$4.60	\$22.10	
Trade/membership/health	22.3	32.6	45.7	3.4	5.7	55	3.8	9.4	9.3	1.2	2.8	13.3	
Labor	39.9	3.5	30.1	8	5.3	43.5	6.2	0.4	2.3	2.8	1.5	6.6	
Nonconnected	11.4	15.6	15.0	5.7	6.2	27.1	3	5.5	4.9	1.5	2.2	8.6	
Total <sup>b</sup>	98.2	94.7	150.1	19.8	23	193.4	18.7	33.2	33.5	7.1	11.3	51.9	
2001–2002													
Corporate	23.6	44.6	59.7	1.6	6.9	68.2	7.0	16.4	15.8	4.3	3.4	23.4	
Trade/membership/health	23.0	34.2	47.1	2.1	8	57.2	4.9	9.3	9.5	3.1	1.7	14.3	
Labor	39.9	4.3	31.4	5.2	7.7	44.4	7.0	0.5	4.1	2.4	1.1	7.5	
Nonconnected	14.0	18.1	18.5	4.8	8.9	32.2	5.8	6.6	6.6	4.1	1.8	12.5	
Total <sup>b</sup>	102.6	104.2	160.9	13.8	32	206.9	25.4	33.8	37	14.2	8.1	59.2	
2003–2004													
Corporate	24.8	54.3	72.6	1.9	4.6	79.1	8.9	16.3	17.2	1.2	6.7	25.2	
Trade/membership/health	23.0	40.1	55.4	2.3	5.4	63.2	5.7	9.3	9.9	1.1	4	15	
Labor	37.3	5.4	32.9	5.2	4.6	42.8	6.8	0.8	4.3	0.9	2.3	7.6	
Nonconnected	11.4	23.8	21.6	6	7.6	35.2	6.3	8.3	6.9	2.2	5.4	14.6	
Total <sup>b</sup>	98.6	126.6	187.1	15.6	22.5	225.4	28.4	35.3	39.3	5.6	18.8	63.7	
2005–2006													
Corporate	31.7	64.2	90.0	1.7	4.2	95.9	9.1	17.1	21.9	1.7	2.6	26.2	
Trade/membership/health	30.3	49.0	70.2	3.4	5.7	79.3	6.0	9.8	12.1	1.8	2.0	15.8	
Labor	42.1	5.5	32.2	10.3	5.1	47.6	5.8	0.5	3.3	2.1	0.9	6.3	
Nonconnected	18.2	32.0	31.5	10.5	8.2	50.2	7.1	9.4	9.5	4.3	2.7	16.5	
Total <sup>b</sup>	124.9	154.2	229.3	26.2	23.5	279.2	28.6	37.5	47.7	10	8.3	66.1	

2007–2008												
Corporate	57.3	54.4	103.2	5.0	3.6	111.7	11.4	21.8	27.4	2.7	3.1	33.3
Trade/membership/health	48.0	40.0	76.0	7.2	4.8	88.0	7.3	12.5	15.2	2.6	2.0	19.8
Labor	49.9	3.9	37.9	11.3	4.6	53.8	6.6	0.5	2.8	3.0	1.2	7.1
Nonconnected	25.3	19.6	27.9	11.6	5.4	44.9	7.8	10	10.9	4.4	2.5	17.8
Total <sup>b</sup>	185.6	122.4	253.5	35.7	18.8	308.1	33.9	45.9	57.7	13.0	9.1	79.8
2009–2010												
Corporate	58.0	55.7	102.1	6.4	5.3	113.7	13.6	23.2	22.6	3.2	11	36.8
Trade/membership/health	45.6	40.8	74.2	6.7	5.5	86.4	8.3	13.1	12.6	2.2	6.6	21.4
Labor	50.8	3.5	46.6	3.7	3.9	54.2	7.1	0.6	2.9	1.4	3.4	7.7
Nonconnected	25.1	24.7	31.8	12.4	5.6	49.8	9.9	10.9	9.6	3.4	7.8	20.8
Total <sup>b</sup>	184.4	129.2	262.8	30	20.7	313.6	39.9	49	48.9	10.4	29.5	88.8
2011–2012												
Corporate	45.1	88.9	125.4	5.0	4.1	134.5	20.9	24.7	34.9	4.4	6.5	45.8
Trade/membership <sup>c</sup>	34.2	62.4	84.8	7.2	4.9	96.9	11.5	12.5	16.8	2.7	4.6	24.2
Labor	44.1	5.2	32.2	11.8	5.4	49.4	7.3	0.5	4.8	1.2	2.1	8.1
Nonconnected	21	29.4	34.1	11.5	4.9	50.6	12.4	9.8	12.3	4.2	5.8	22.3
Total <sup>b</sup>	148.1	192.1	285.4	36.1	19.8	341.3	53.5	48.9	70.7	12.8	19.7	103.2
2013–2014												
Corporate	49.2	89.7	130.7	2.2	6.0	138.9	14.9	24.3	28.5	5.3	5.4	39.1
Trade/membership <sup>c</sup>	36.8	60.7	88.1	2.9	6.5	97.6	8.2	13.5	14.8	3.3	3.6	21.7
Labor	39.3	5.2	35.3	4.3	4.8	44.5	5.8	0.3	4.3	0.5	1.3	6.2
Nonconnected	19.6	30.8	35.3	7.9	7.3	50.4	12.1	13.5	14.9	5.5	5.3	25.6
Total <sup>b</sup>	149.3	192.3	298.9	17.6	25.1	341.6	41.8	52.5	63.6	14.8	15.9	94.3
2015–2016												
Corporate	49.3	94.0	138.0	1.3	4.0	143.3	8.9	28.4	32.3	1.0	4.0	37.3
Trade/membership <sup>c</sup>	35.6	64.0	92.1	2.6	4.9	99.6	5.9	16.2	18.0	1.4	2.7	22.1
Labor	34.8	6.0	30.5	6.3	3.9	40.8	4.9	0.6	1.7	2.6	1.3	5.5
Nonconnected	21.2	33.4	40.6	7.2	6.8	54.5	9.2	13.9	15.0	4.3	3.8	23.1
Total <sup>b</sup>	140.8	197.4	301.2	17.5	19.6	338.2	28.9	59.2	67.1	9.3	11.8	88.1

(Table continues)

**Table 2-14 (Continued)**

Election cycle/PAC type	House					Senate						
	Candidate party		Type of contest			Candidate party		Type of contest				
	Dem.	Rep.	Incumbent	Challenger	Open seat <sup>a</sup>	Dem.	Rep.	Incumbent	Challenger	Open seat <sup>a</sup>		
2017–2018					Total					Total		
Corporate	52.3	95.6	142.3	0.8	4.9	147.9	16.6	12.7	23.4	3.2	2.8	29.4
Trade/membership <sup>c</sup>	37.5	63.7	92.5	2.4	6.2	101.2	10.1	8.4	13.6	2.9	2.0	18.5
Labor	39.8	7.3	33.3	7.5	6.4	47.1	5.9	0.4	5.0	0.6	0.7	6.4
Nonconnected	33.6	41.9	50.1	13.5	12.0	75.6	14.2	10.2	16.0	5.2	3.3	24.5
Total <sup>b</sup>	163.3	208.5	318.2	24.1	29.5	371.8	46.8	31.8	57.9	11.9	8.8	78.7
2019–2020												
Corporate	63.5	69.3	128.6	1.7	2.5	132.8	7.3	25.5	30.3	0.8	1.7	32.8
Trade/membership <sup>c</sup>	48.0	49.4	89.2	4.0	4.2	97.4	5.0	14.6	16.7	1.2	1.6	19.5
Labor	40.9	5.6	39.7	4.4	2.4	46.5	4.4	0.6	2.6	2.0	0.4	5.0
Nonconnected	38.2	35.9	51.4	15.3	7.4	74.0	11.6	15.0	18.1	6.4	2.2	26.6
Total <sup>b</sup>	190.6	160.1	308.9	25.3	16.5	350.7	28.3	55.6	67.6	10.4	5.9	84.0

*Note:* Amounts are current dollar amounts contributed during the two-year election cycle indicated to all candidates in primary, general, runoff, and special elections. Figures are for all House and Senate candidates, not just those up for election in the two-year cycle. Data for earlier years can be found in previous editions of *Vital Statistics on American Politics*.

<sup>a</sup> “Open seat” refers to candidates in elections in which an incumbent did not seek reelection.

<sup>b</sup> Includes PACs classified by the Federal Election Commission as cooperatives and corporations without stock.

<sup>c</sup> As of July 2011, health organizations are no longer an organization type but are included in either the trade or membership category.

*Sources:* Federal Election Commission, “PAC Contributions to Candidates 1996 through 2010 Election Cycles,” “PAC Table 2: PAC Contributions to Candidates, January 1, 2011–December 31, 2012,” “PAC Table 2: PAC Contributions to Candidates, January 1, 2013 through December 31, 2014,” “PAC Table 2: PAC Contributions to Candidates, January 1, 2015 through December 31, 2016,” “PAC Table 2: PAC Contributions to Candidates, January 1, 2017 through December 31, 2018,” “PAC Table 2: PAC Contributions to Candidates, January 1, 2019 through December 31, 2020.” 2013–2020 sources available at [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov).

## A Data Literacy Lesson

### The Incumbency Advantage and Campaign Finance

As an institution, the U.S. Congress is wildly unpopular.<sup>1</sup> And yet, as Tables 1-18 and 1-19 show, members of Congress manage to get reelected at shockingly high rates. There are many familiar explanations for this “incumbency advantage.” For example, gerrymandering sometimes is done in a way that protects incumbent members of Congress. Additionally, members of Congress have many resources at their disposal to advertise their name or perform constituent services for their voters that help them buck the institutional unpopularity. In the end, as political scientist Richard Fenno argued long ago, it may well be that people hate Congress, but actually like their own individual member.

One other source of the incumbency advantage is campaign finance. Take a look at Table 2-14, particularly the columns labeled “Type of Contest.” Here, we see the distribution of money based upon whether the candidate is an incumbent, a challenger seeking to defeat the incumbent, or a candidate for an open seat (i.e., where there is no incumbent). From 2019–2020, for example, \$308.9 million of the \$350.7 million spent by political action committees on House elections went to incumbents. (For the Senate, it was \$67.6 million out of \$84 million.) If Congress is so unpopular, why do so many political action committees give so much money to return incumbents to office?

Understanding this might require us to reorient ourselves around this topic. It is a common belief—perhaps a misconception—that members of Congress “follow the money”; that is, they vote whichever way their donors want them to vote. This belief does not come from nowhere; we can all point to examples of this unsavory behavior occurring. And yet, we should be a little bit skeptical about this supposition. While quantitative data are hard to come by on this question, it seems fair to posit that the vast majority of people running for office would not be willing to abandon long-held positions for the possibility of gaining a little bit of extra campaign money (especially when the identity of donors is publicly available on the Federal Election Commission website at [www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov)). While some mercenaries may exist in Congress, we believe the vast majority of members are devoted to advocating for their deepest beliefs, not selling them out for a campaign donation. (We hope we’re right.)

Instead of believing that votes follow money, it might be useful to reverse the causal arrow—money might follow votes. Imagine a political action committee is drawing up their list of who to support. They can use multiple strategies. On the one hand, they can donate to members of Congress who have opposed them, in an attempt to change their mind. On the other hand, they could restrict their giving to those who have supported them, hoping to keep them in office. The latter strategy strikes us as far more sensible, in light of what we argue above.

There is, however, a second level to the decision, one that more directly connects to Table 2-14. PACs could choose to support members who are already in office (incumbents) and have been supportive of them, or they could choose to support candidates who are challenging members who have opposed their PAC. While the latter is more satisfying (how cool would it be to orchestrate the defeat of a political opponent?!), such a strategy is not as cost-effective. For the reasons noted

above, it is hard to defeat an incumbent member of Congress. Most political action committees, then, tend to concentrate their donations on reelecting their supporters, rather than defeating or converting their opponents.<sup>2</sup>

When looking at data, we often like to see relationships where the direction is clear. In this case, such clarity eludes us. Incumbents get more money because they are more likely to win their elections; moreover, incumbents are more likely to win because they get more money. Table 2-14 tells us that PACs prefer to give to incumbents; in doing so, the PACs are both responding to the fact that incumbents are more likely to win, and creating that fact. More sophisticated data analysis could help unpack this relationship somewhat, but it cannot obscure the fact that these complexities exist, and have real-world implications.

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<sup>1</sup> For a fun story about some unpleasant things that get even higher polling numbers than Congress, see <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/01/10/graph-of-the-day-congress-is-less-popular-than-lice-colonoscopies-and-nickelback>.

<sup>2</sup> Open-seat elections provide opportunities to elect new friends without dealing with the incumbency advantage, and hence tend to attract large amounts of donations. Because there are so few of these elections, the amount of money spent on open-seat elections appears relatively small in the table.