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Paper Trails: Following the Money

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Paper Trails: Following the Money

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Jonathan Beltman

The 2016 election follows a pattern of increased spending on presidential campaigns starting at the beginning of the 21st century. This pattern reveals how much money has infiltrated the American political system. Running for any federal office is not a cheap process, which is especially true for the presidency. In many recent elections, the candidates who raise the most money have a better shot at winning, so candidates must raise millions of dollars to win an election. A top question to consider in all elections: Where is the money coming from?

A typical campaign comes with expenses including advertising, staffing, travel, and events. In order to finance their campaigns, candidates turn to groups and individuals who might support them by contributing funds. People or businesses that hold similar views as a candidate on certain issues may be inclined to donate to that candidate or to an organization that supports the candidate. It is often a small portion of the United States' population that contributes most of the money used in elections. The Federal Exchange Commission (FEC) carefully monitors money used in campaigns to ensure fairness and avoid potential corruption or foul play in the process. Most data collected by the FEC regarding donations is available to the public. The FEC has placed certain limits on contributions to candidates in order to better regulate elections. During this election cycle, many of the limits and regulations on campaign financing have come under scrutiny.

A controversial issue in this election's fundraising process is the *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision from 2010. The decision from *Citizens United* has massive implications on how campaigns may be funded. In summary, the Supreme Court ruled that businesses, non-profits, and unions are granted the same First Amendment rights as individuals; therefore, they may use funds to advocate for or against a candidate in federal elections. *Citizens United* removed or loosened many restrictions on how businesses and individuals may support candidates through Political Action Committees (PACs) and super-PACs. Many detractors of the ruling believe big money taints the democratic process of this nation. They argue that corporate money in elections will misrepresent political debates in favor of special interest and big business.

A candidate leading the charge against the *Citizens United* case is Bernie Sanders, a Democratic senator from Vermont. Sanders' campaign is built around a vision of democracy that does not include wealthy individuals and businesses "buying" elections. Part of his platform includes appointing judges who would repeal the *Citizens United* decision and reforming the election financing process to be more public and transparent.

Sanders is not the only candidate drawing attention to flaws in America's election financing process. Ben Carson, a retired neurosurgeon running as a Republican, is also avoiding the use of a PAC. Carson and Sanders want to focus on support from grassroots voters. Both men stress that, unlike other candidates, they will not be swayed by the special interests of large donors or corporations because their support comes from "the average American voter." So far, Carson and Sanders have had great success with their strategy despite many doubting their abilities to run successful campaigns through this method of fundraising. Their campaigns have raised more than any other campaigns through the third quarter, with the exception of Hillary Clinton's campaign. According to Bernie Sanders' website, his campaign had raised \$73 million last year from more than one million individuals. Sanders' fundraising set records for the

number of people donating this far out from the election, a record previously held by Barack Obama. Ben Carson's figures are similarly impressive on the Republican side.

As of the fourth quarter of 2015's fundraising calendar, it is estimated that the average donation to Bernie Sanders' campaign was under \$30, and the average donation to Ben Carson's campaign was under \$50. Other candidates have raised comparable totals of money from individual contributions, but it is because they have fewer donors who have donated significantly more. Many who have donated to candidates other than Sanders or Carson have donated the maximum individual donation of \$2,700. Because they have donated the maximum amount to their candidate's campaigns, they do not have the opportunity to give any more funds directly to the candidate's campaign later in the election process. Looking at Sanders specifically, 99.9% of those who donated to his campaign are not maxed out, so they have the opportunity to give more down the road before they reach the legal limit. This means that further along, Sanders will be able to request more donations from people who have already supported him if he needs it.

Bernie Sanders' and Ben Carson's campaigns are making bold and effective statements. They have both shown that it is possible to run a serious campaign without receiving big money from corporate interests. They have used grassroots movements to build campaigns that better represent the democratic process of the United States' elections.

As money is poured into the nation's elections that appear to be determined by the candidate's ability to raise money, it becomes more important for Americans to understand how candidates are being supported. Are they receiving money from wealthy donors, or from passionate everyday voters? It is not wrong for businesses and wealthy Americans to financially support candidates with similar ideals to their own, but a voter should ensure that the donations are not affecting the ideals of the candidate. In order to properly judge a campaign, it becomes increasingly important for an educated voter to know where the money comes from.

Dig Deeper

Interested in seeing where candidates' money comes from? Check out the [FEC's website](#) or [The Center For Responsive Politics](#) for interactive maps, charts, and lists on donors and donations.