

FOLLOWING THE MONEY IN 2016

A GUIDE TO PACs, SUPER PACs AND ALL THE REST

A presidential candidate's actual campaign is only one element in the contest for the White House. Here's a look at all of the campaign-style organizations that presidential hopefuls and their allies can tap to chase the top prize in American politics.

OFFICIAL CAMPAIGNS

When voters think of a presidential campaign, this is what comes to mind: a central organization with the candidate at its top. The candidate makes the strategic decisions in consultation with advisers, and the person whose name is on the ballot has the final say.

A campaign is limited in how much cash it can raise from donors — a maximum of \$2,700 for the primary and another \$2,700 for the general election. The names of those donors, and how the money is spent, must be disclosed to the Federal Election Commission.

POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEES

A group that raises and spends money to influence the outcome of elections. A PAC is limited in how much it can give and raise from individuals, other PACs or party committees in a calendar year. Many are sponsored by trade associations, such as the American Medical Association, or members of labor unions. PACs must disclose to the FEC where they get their money and how they spend it.

SUPER PACs

A pair of Supreme Court decisions in 2010 gave rise to a new kind of political action committee, known as super PACs. These groups can raise unlimited amounts of money from donors, including corporations and groups such as labor unions. They can spend unlimited amounts of money to advocate for and against candidates for office, but cannot directly fund a candidate.

Super PACs are not allowed to coordinate their actions with candidates or campaigns. In short, they can't talk with the people they're spending money to support. Super PACs must disclose donors and spending to the FEC.

527s

Taking their name from part of U.S. tax code, a 527 can raise unlimited amounts from individual donors, labor unions and corporations. They are permitted to tell voters expressly how to cast ballots and can give money to candidates. They must disclose their finances, but do so much slower to the IRS than PACs and super PACs report to the FEC.

501(c)3s and 501(c)4s

These are tax-exempt nonprofits known as social welfare groups. In the eyes of the IRS, they are charities — the Humane Society of the United States, for example, is a 501(c)3.

A 501(c)3 can tell voters about candidates' positions, but cannot explicitly tell them how to cast a ballot. They can raise and spend unlimited amounts of money, and they disclose their donors to the IRS. The IRS, however, does not make that information public.

The other type of tax-exempt social welfare group is a 501(c)4, which cannot have the primary goal of influencing elections. Rather, they exist to educate voters about issues and can do some limited political activity. They can raise and spend unlimited amounts, but voters cannot find out who is picking up the tab.

ONLINE RESOURCES

RESEARCHING A CANDIDATE FOR FEDERAL OFFICE

Federal Election Commission
Center for Responsive Politics

<http://1.usa.gov/1jpzoHb>
<https://www.opensecrets.org/>

RESEARCHING A CANDIDATE FOR STATE AND LOCAL OFFICE

National Institute on Money in State Politics
Project Vote Smart

<http://www.followthemoney.org/>
<http://votesmart.org/>

RESEARCHING DONORS AND FUNDRAISERS

Federal Election Commission
Center for Responsive Politics

<http://1.usa.gov/1jptzKO>
<https://www.opensecrets.org/indivs/>

RESEARCHING 'OUTSIDE GROUPS' -- FROM SUPERPACS TO 501(c)4s

Center for Responsive Politics
Sunlight Foundation
IRS
GuideStar
Citizen Audit
Center for Political Accountability

<http://bit.ly/1jpzuyv>
<http://bit.ly/1jpzAWO>
<http://1.usa.gov/1KaA2gA>
<http://www.guidestar.org/Home.aspx>
<https://www.citizenaudit.org/>
<http://bit.ly/1KaAQlr>

RESEARCHING TELEVISION ADVERTISING

Federal Election Commission
Sunlight Foundation

<https://stations.fcc.gov/>
<http://politicaladsleuth.com/>

