



Political non-profits ramp up rhetoric ahead of elections

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WASHINGTON — A little-known group, the Committee for Truth in Politics, recently made a big splash: It spent \$5 million on television ads denouncing Democratic efforts in Congress to impose new regulations on the financial industry.

The public can't find out who's behind the ads, because the group doesn't have to disclose its donors under federal law.

The group's lawyer Jim Bopp, a Republican activist from Terre Haute, Ind., won't reveal details about donors or organizers, saying they must be protected from lawmakers who will "attack and punish people who are willing to step forward and tell the truth about politicians."

The organization is among a cluster of non-profit groups that have launched new operations in recent months in advance of key votes on the issue on Capitol Hill and November's elections for Congress.

The Committee for Truth in Politics spent more on TV ads than any other group from Jan. 22 to March 18, according to Evan Tracey of the Campaign Media Analysis Group, which tracks ads.

Overall, outside groups spent \$12.5 million on TV ads to slam proposals pushed by congressional Democrats and President Obama during that period, compared with \$1.5 million by those backing Democrats.

Campaign-finance watchdogs, such as Meredith McGehee of the Campaign Legal Center, predict even more activity in light of the Supreme Court's recent decision freeing corporations and unions to spend millions of dollars on campaign ads.

"There will be a lot of speakers in the market," McGehee said, "and the public will have a difficult time gauging who those speakers are and where their money comes from."

Surge seen after 2002

Independent political groups such as these multiplied after a 2002 campaign-finance law banned unlimited donations, known as soft money, to political parties. The non-profits spent more than \$195 million in 2008, more than triple the roughly \$60 million the

groups are estimated to have poured into 2004 races, according to the non-partisan Campaign Finance Institute, which studies money in politics.

Long-standing groups are active, too. This week, Americans United for Change, a liberal non-profit group established in 2005, announced automated calls and a new TV ad targeting Republicans who voted against the health care bill that passed the House of Representatives on Sunday.

New groups have been started by several prominent Republicans, including Liz Cheney, daughter of former vice president Dick Cheney, and Virginia Thomas, wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.

Fred Malek — a top GOP fundraiser involved in two other new groups, the American Action Forum and the American Action Network — said there's a surge of political activity among Republicans who are "concerned about big government, big spending and big debt. ... People feel there's an opportunity to reorient the direction of the country and to get our message out and change things."

Malek describes the two groups as advancing center-right ideas and not being affiliated with any political party.

McGehee said one reason several groups affiliated with GOP figures have formed in recent months is straightforward. "Republicans are out of power, and they are trying to find ways to activate people who are disaffected and disappointed," she said.

Democrats did the same thing when Republicans controlled the White House and Congress. For instance, the now-defunct America Coming Together, whose contributors included billionaire financier George Soros, poured millions into the 2004 elections. The left-leaning group was required to disclose its donors but raised and spent unlimited amounts of money by operating under federal tax laws.

Shopping-center developer Mel Sembler, a GOP fundraiser, said he has donated to Cheney's group, Keep America Safe. He declined to say how much. "I'm not overly familiar with it, except that we're crazy about Cheneys," he told USA TODAY.

Sembler said the rise of non-profit groups can be traced to the 2002 ban. "Everyone thought that money was going to go out of politics," he said. "It hasn't. It has gone to groups like this because people want to represent their own interest."

No need to report donors

Most of the new groups are known as 501(c)4s for the section of the tax code governing their activities.

They won't have to report their donors publicly as long they spend less than 50% of their funds to influence candidate elections and steer clear of funding television and radio ads

that mention a candidate close to Election Day or that call for the election or defeat of candidates.

Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., grew so angry about the recent Committee for Truth in Politics ad targeting him that he fired off a letter last month to Bopp, the group's lawyer, demanding to know who was behind it.

"We need to have as much transparency as possible in government," he said in an interview. "If these are a bunch of Wall Street brokers who are running these ads, I think people ought to know that."

Bopp isn't budging. "Incumbent politicians," he said, "always attack people who simply want to inform their constituents of what they are doing to them in office."