

GOP SuperPACs didn't give Trump money, but they did help create his juggernaut campaign.

*Since the introduction of SuperPACs as a campaign tool in 2010 following the Citizens United Supreme Court decision, there has been increasing concern over the role of outside money in US political contests. **Melissa Smith** writes that past narratives about money's influence have been turned on their head in the current election season, with the Republican Party's nominee, Donald Trump, receiving less than \$900,000 from SuperPACs compared to the tens of millions raised by his now vanquished GOP rivals. She argues that if there had been fewer than 17 Republican candidates in the 2016 race, and SuperPACs had cut their losses earlier on losing candidates, then Trump might well not have become the GOP's nominee.*

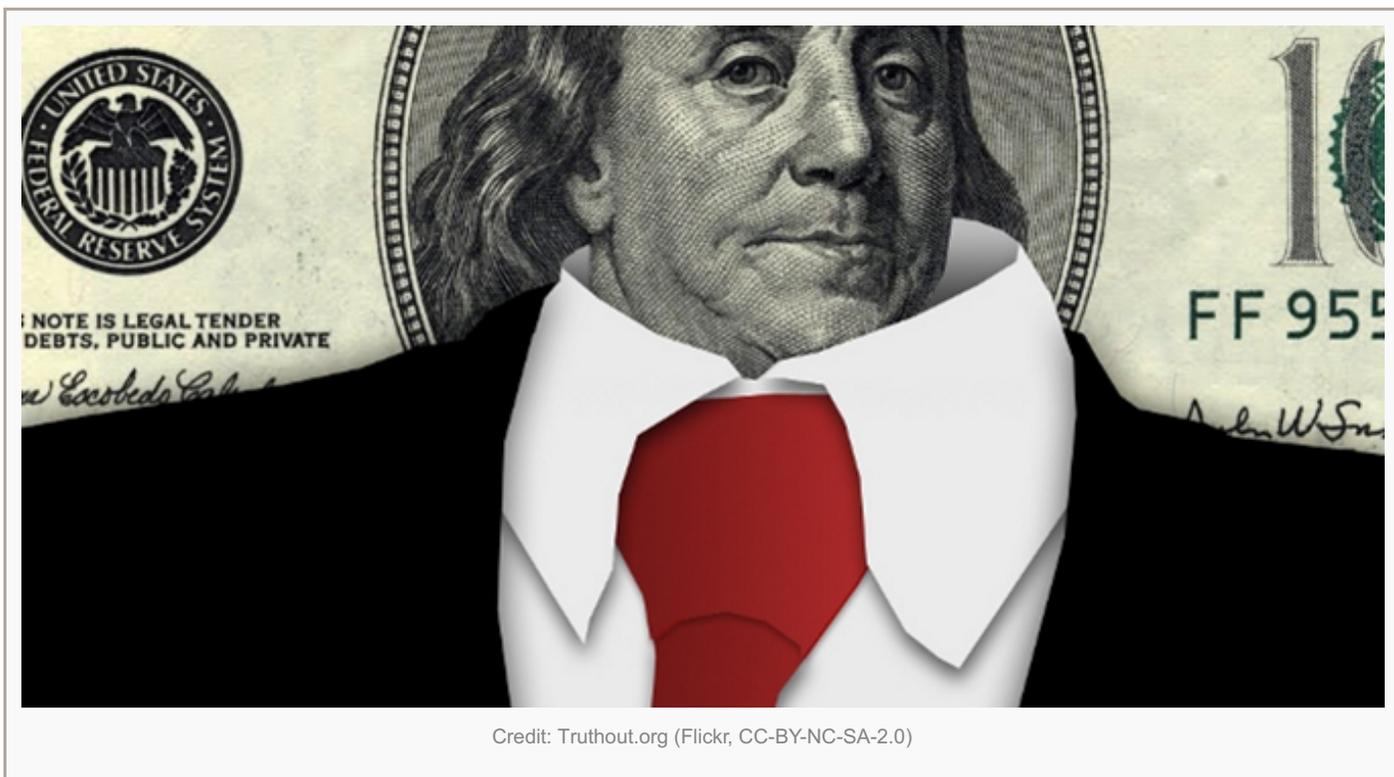


If this year's US presidential election is a reality TV show, then the Republican-leaning Super Political Action Committees (PACs) are competing to be the Biggest Losers of the race.

As of April 2016, PACs and Super PACs had given more than \$421 million to Republican candidates — most of whom were not named Donald Trump. In fact, according to The Washington Post, at that point Trump had only received about \$860,000 from Super PACs and other independent groups. When you compare that to the \$78.9 million raised by former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, who left the race in February, and the \$146.5 million raised by Texas Senator Ted Cruz, who left the race earlier this month, it's easy to see that GOP-leaning independent groups are once again feeling the sting of being on the losing side of the voters.

What happened this election year — which has been unpredictable and often surrealistic — is difficult to explain. It's not as if the GOP was lacking for candidates. At one point, there were 17 Republicans running for president. There were so many that they wouldn't even all fit on stage for a debate, so a so-called "kiddie table" was created for those whose polling fell below a certain threshold. By most measures, it was a very experienced group of candidates and seen as one of the strongest fields of GOP hopefuls in recent memory.

And there was plenty of money to go around.



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In the 2016 contest, there has been a shift away from large Super PACs collecting money from big donors and then doling it out candidates, as has been the case since Super PACs debuted in 2010. Instead, wealthy individuals formed their own Super PACs and searched for candidates who would be the standard bearers for their issues. Outside groups salivated over particular candidates and even held “auditions” to seek out the best candidates for their causes, often handing out checks before individuals even declared they were running.

But this influx of money hasn’t propelled any of these candidates to success. In fact, the last Republican candidate standing is the one who has received the least amount of support from wealthy outside groups. As of April 2016, Trump has received only 2.1 percent of his funding from outside groups. He had no contributions of more than \$100,000. He loaned himself \$6.8 million in February, but the amount he has brought into his campaign pales compared to others in the race. Yet, he is the presumptive nominee.

Those who have been critical of unregulated spending by independent groups have been somewhat silent as this has unfolded. After all, this is the second presidential election in a row when big donors have (so far at least) been stymied in their attempts to get a favored Republican candidate into the White House. In 2012, the largest Republican-leaning Super PAC, American Crossroads, spent more than \$100 million supporting Mitt Romney and other Republican Congressional candidates, but won only three of the ten races in which it spent money. One of the group’s most vocal critics was Donald Trump, who tweeted to congratulate Karl Rove, a founder of the group, on “blowing \$400 million this cycle.”

While there were 1,310 Super PACs active in the 2012 (according to OpenSecrets.org), that number has increased to 2,293 this year. The total raised by Super PACs in this race — more than \$600 million — is on track to obliterate the \$828 million raised by these groups during the 2012 presidential election, and the nominating conventions are still two months away.

With candidates awash in outside money, what happened to catapult Trump into the lead? That question is hard to answer, but these big donors may partially be to blame for their situation. How can so many candidates remain in a presidential race for so long when many of them can’t poll higher than 2.2 percent? The answer is money. If you are a candidate and you have a steady flow of money, you continue to scrap and fight and debate and work to increase your support. If you don’t have money, you bow out gracefully and throw your support to another candidate.

This year many candidates continued their campaigns despite a lack of voter support because they had wealthy donors providing injections of cash to keep them going. It turned into a situation in which the candidates who remained in the race despite their shallow support dragged down those who had more support. For instance, Ben Carson left the race in March, but until then he was dividing the Conservative vote between himself and Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz and Kasich. How would things have been different if there had been five serious Republican candidates, rather than 10? Would one of the others have emerged as a threat to Trump earlier? And, if that had happened, would that have changed the trajectory of the race?

Although it's impossible to look back at the past and say with certainty that it would have changed the ultimate nominee, it's likely that it would have made it more difficult for Trump to gain the traction he has enjoyed during the past few months. Super PACs might be pushing for their own favored issues and causes, but they need to understand that it sometimes makes sense to cut your losses early and throw support to candidates with greater chances of success.

But now the GOP-leaning outside groups find themselves in a strange situation. There is a self-proclaimed outside candidate who has amassed more primary votes than any Republican candidate before. The electorate seems to be settled on a Washington outsider, but he's not the outsider that any of the wealthy donors supported. So, where do they go from here?

Many predict that big money will eventually line up behind Trump. However, some groups are not likely to help finance his campaign because he doesn't support the issues that are important to them.

So far Trump has not spent a great deal of campaign money because he has gotten enough free media coverage that he hasn't had to spend much on advertising. He is, after all, a veteran of reality television. He understands how to speak in sound bites and make statements that generate publicity. But he can't count on that to continue indefinitely. The American media can be fickle — just ask Howard Dean or Gary Hart — and the general election promises to be quite loud and rancorous. Trump will need larger amounts of money, and he hasn't been pulling in donations from individual voters in the way that Bernie Sanders — the other popular outside candidate — has done this spring. The total amount donated to Trump's campaign by April was only \$49.7 million.

Trump will need to make peace with some of the wealthy donors if he hopes to keep pace with Hillary Clinton, who has been raking in money from outside groups. She is the top campaign fundraiser and the candidate with the most support from independent groups. Trump will need to use his negotiation skills to convince outside donors to give to his campaign, rather than Congressional candidates whose seats might be in jeopardy because of Trump's position at the top of the ticket.

We'll see if the Super PACs get behind him or if they take their money and put it into Congressional races instead, with the hope of not being the Biggest Losers of the election, after all.

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