

Money in Politics: How to Track Money's Influence on Elections and Public Policy

The amount of money raised and spent by political campaigns, political parties and political action committees (PACs) to influence elections and the shaping of public policy has been breaking records with each presidential election. In 2020, the battle for the White House and Congress resulted in \$14.4 billion in federal spending.

(<https://www.opensecrets.org/resources/learn/timeline>). Who is raising and spending this money is often hidden from the public.

There are sources that can help voters understand how much money is being donated to politicians and who is donating that money.

The Federal Election Commission (FEC) is the independent regulatory agency charged with administering and enforcing the federal campaign finance law. The FEC has jurisdiction over the financing of campaigns

for the U.S. House, Senate, Presidency and the Vice Presidency. <https://www.fec.gov/>. House, Senate and presidential campaigns must report finances to the FEC quarterly. PACs, parties and presidential campaign committees must report on a monthly basis. The FEC website offers access to campaign finance data to the public. You can search by election, or look up contributions from specific individuals.

Another accessible source for political campaign spending is

OpenSecrets.org. (<https://www.opensecrets.org/about>) According to their website, OpenSecrets is a nonpartisan, independent and nonprofit organization that claims to be the nation's premier research group tracking

money in U.S. politics and its effect on elections and public policy. They track the donations and spending of state and national candidates and officeholders, referendums and ballot measures, Political Action Committees (PACs) and dark money interests, domestic and foreign lobbyists and more. Follow Ohio Congressional Senate and House races here:

<https://www.opensecrets.org/races/election?id=OH>

OpenSecrets recently announced a new research tool that tracks spending on state and federal lobbying. Did you know that lobbyists reported over \$46 billion in combined federal and state lobbying spending since 2015? The top-spending lobbyist: Pharmaceuticals/Health Products. Unfortunately, state level data is not available for all states, including Ohio. But the aggregate national numbers do demonstrate alarming trends in lobbyists' efforts to influence public policy.

Other similar trackers to explore:

- The Campaign Finance page of the Ohio Secretary of State <https://www.ohiosos.gov/campaign-finance/> for Ohio-based information on campaign finance law and reporting
- TransparencyUSA.org <https://www.transparencyusa.org/about-us> focuses on money in state politics, including Ohio
- VoteSmart.org <https://justfacts.votesmart.org/about/> focuses on campaign financing of individual candidates
- Accountable.US <https://accountable.us/projects/corporate-donations-tracker/> focuses on corporate donations

~Mary Robertson