

Big Money Takes Over

Campaign finance data released this month mark a turning point in presidential politics, the moment when unrestricted super PACs and other outside groups replaced candidates as the power center in American elections.

Such groups have collectively pulled in almost four times more than the candidates themselves so far, at least in the Republican column. The calculus is different for the Democratic hopefuls, who are still raising the bulk of their money for their own campaigns while super PACs play a supporting role.

But super PACs are dramatically rewriting the rules of politics, thrusting candidates, strategists and donors onto unfamiliar terrain and throwing several wild cards into the 2016 White House race. These include a potentially nasty and prolonged GOP primary; heavy campaign spending and advertising up front; and myriad legal land mines as candidates test the limits of the rules.

“Super PACs are tossing politics as we know it on its head, in ways that aren’t healthy,” says Ari Fleischer, former press secretary to President George W. Bush. “The rules have changed. Everything is different. One wealthy donor can keep a struggling campaign alive.”

Republicans are on the vanguard of — and may well bear the brunt of — the super PAC boom. Such groups can



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raise unlimited donations from any source as long as they don’t coordinate with candidates. In 2012, super PACs enabled some marginal GOP candidates to hang on despite tepid fundraising, arguably weakening ex-Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, the eventual nominee.

“The rise of the super PACs may be undermining the reforms that the Republican Party had tried to put in place to gain a quick nominee,” says Tony Corrado, a professor of government at Colby College, setting up what he predicts could be “a much more contested and divisive primary campaign.”

The 16 major GOP candidates in the field have collectively netted just under \$65 million in campaign money, according to recent Federal Election Commission reports that cover the

period April 1 to June 30. But even more revealing than the latest FEC filings were the press releases put out by the super PACs backing the GOP candidates, which announced a haul of just more than \$253 million.

The \$103 million raised by Right to Rise, a super PAC backing Jeb Bush, eclipsed by almost 10-to-1 the \$11.4 million that the former Florida governor raised for his campaign. Two groups backing GOP Sen. Marco Rubio — a super PAC and a tax-exempt organization — have netted close to \$32 million, or more than three times Rubio’s \$8.9 million in campaign receipts.

By contrast, former secretary of State and New York Democratic Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton has collected \$47.5 million in campaign money, while her Priorities USA Action super PAC netted less than half that — \$15.6 million. Independent Vermont Sen. Bernard Sanders, who is seeking the Democratic nomination, has disavowed super PACs but managed to raise \$15.2 million anyway, mostly in low-dollar contributions.

Candidates from both parties have outsourced large swaths of their campaign activities to supposedly independent super PACs. Super PACs, in addition to running TV ads as they did in 2012, are opening campaign offices, conducting polls, doing opposition research, developing voter lists and even fielding calls from reporters.

This can get tricky. Bush announced in June that he would stop talking for the remainder

of the campaign with his top political adviser, media strategist Mike Murphy, who is running the Right to Rise super PAC. But by and large FEC rules that restrict super PAC fundraising and coordination are fuzzy and ill-enforced, meaning the wall between such groups and the candidates is crumbling.

Small-donor fundraising is down, as candidates seek out private meetings and confabs with billionaire donors. Campaigns and their allies are spending at a rapid clip; election costs could rise well beyond the \$6 billion spent in 2012.

Some of the contest’s biggest surprises so far have nothing to do with super PACs, such as the popularity of Sanders and of self-funded businessman Donald Trump. And some Republicans say super PACs could broaden the donor pool or enable a frontrunner to pull way ahead. Says Republican strategist Ron Bonjean: “It could end up being a huge blessing.”

But clearly, super PACs are transforming the race in ways no one yet fully understands.

“I think we’re in the wild west of super PACs,” says Bonjean, a partner at the consulting firm Rokk Solutions. “When they say there’s an app for that, now there’s a super PAC for that. And we have yet to see how this is all going to shake out.”

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