

## We must shine a light on the shadowy dark money groups trying to influence your vote | Opinion

**JEFF BRINDLE** | October 13, 2021, 10:10 am

Recent video advertisements targeting three New Jersey congressmen highlight the danger to democracy and transparency presented by “Dark Money” groups that have penetrated New Jersey’s elections.

Three incumbent Democratic congressmen — Andy Kim (3<sup>rd</sup> District), Frank Pallone (5<sup>th</sup> District) and Tom Malinowski (7<sup>th</sup> District) — are [targets of the same ad](#) except with each of their images superimposed over it.

It warns they will be “cutting off access to lifesaving medicines,” “foregoing future cures” to diseases like cancer, Alzheimer’s and diabetes, and may jeopardize future pandemic vaccines if they vote for a \$3.5 trillion Democratic spending package.

“Tell Congressman... to oppose cutting Medicare. Lives depend on it.”

The ad conveniently fails to mention that the bill actually would expand services available under Medicare.

The ads were created by a shadowy group called [A Healthy Future LLC](#) of Stafford, Va. It does not file disclosure reports with either the Federal Election Commission or the Internal Revenue Service.

A recent Star-Ledger editorial spotlighted the “fearmongering ads” and suggests they probably were underwritten by drug companies or their trade association.

“Probably” is a key term because the public can never be sure who is behind these often deceptive ads.

Candidates from both parties often are targets of advertising by special interest groups that hide their true identities, refuse to disclose how much they are spending, and conceal where they got the money. These “Dark Money” groups refuse to disclose their contributions and

expenses like candidates, parties and traditional political action committees have done for decades.

Part of the solution would be broader disclosure under campaign finance laws.

State, county and local candidates also are vulnerable to these types of ads just like federal candidates.

In either case, the voters of New Jersey are behind the eight ball when it comes to holding candidates accountable for misleading ads produced by “Dark Money” groups that either support them or attack their opponent.

How many times have we heard denials by a candidate who claims “that’s an independent group that has nothing to do with my campaign.”

“Dark Money” groups blur the link between them and the candidate they support.

Under current law, most of these groups are required to disclose only their expenses to ELEC. And then only if they directly urge voters to support or defeat a candidate.

Fortunately, most of the largest groups that take part in state elections voluntarily disclose their contributions. Without stronger disclosure laws, most disclosure could disappear if these groups decide to pursue a stealthier political strategy.

This seems to be happening at the federal level. More than \$1 billion spent on the 2020 federal elections — a new high — came from untraceable sources, according to <http://www.opensecrets.org/>.

In New Jersey, the influence of these groups has soared during the past 15 years. Independent spending in state elections grew 12,495% between 2005 and 2017, according to an analysis by the New Jersey Law Enforcement Commission (ELEC).

At the same time that “Dark Money” groups have grown in influence in New Jersey, spending by regulated, accountable state and county political parties fell about 29% between 2005 and 2017.

Since 2010, ELEC has called for and proposed legislative change that would require “Dark Money” groups engaged in independent spending to disclose their donors to enable voters to

know who is behind these efforts to influence elections. It includes electioneering ads that tie candidates to issues in an election year.

About 25 states require far more disclosure by independent spending committees than New Jersey. Bills are pending in the legislature that should pass constitutional muster while ensuring that voters are better aware of who is calling the shots in elections.

The recent congressional ads are the latest example of why renewed focus is needed in the Legislature on ELEC's recommendations to require disclosure by "Dark Money" groups and to strengthen political parties.

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*The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the commission.*