



# Policy in Practice

## How Super PACs Supplement—and Sometimes Surpass—Parties

**M**embers of the school board in Elizabeth, New Jersey, made a political enemy, and they paid the price. Several of them backed someone who ran against state Senator Raymond Lesniak, and in 2013 he repaid the favor. Lesniak worked with a super PAC called the Committee for Economic Growth and Social Justice, run by his former campaign consultant. It spent more than \$150,000 to unseat members of the school board.

Lots of politicians and wealthy donors have set up super PACs, which are able to spend unlimited funds on political campaigns. Donors to Lesniak's group included his allies in the bail bond and online gambling industries, which would seem to have no natural interest in education policy in a 25,000-student school district in suburban New Jersey. But they were happy to help out Lesniak, who chairs a powerful economic development committee.

The super PAC tied to Lesniak was not alone. In 2013, when New Jersey held local- and state-level elections, outside groups spent a record \$41 million on campaigns and ballot initiatives. That was 3 times what independent political groups had spent 4 years earlier, and nearly 3 times as much as the Republican and Democratic parties spent.<sup>a</sup>

With super PACs and so-called social welfare organizations far outweighing party and candidate spending in many races, from the presidency to the school board, many people are wondering whether parties are losing their influence on American politics. "The overriding theme was that the state and local parties are just not the important players that they used to be in federal

elections," said Daniel Tokaji, coauthor of *The New Soft Money*, referring to his interviews with political consultants. "On some occasions, we got laughs or chuckles when we even mentioned state or local parties."<sup>b</sup>

Wealthy donors have always carried a lot of sway in politics. That they can now spend so freely—and cut out the middlemen by setting up their own political organizations—has some Americans worried that the rich are having an unhealthy amount of influence. Super PACs spent more than \$1 billion on elections in 2012, while spending on ballot measures topped \$1 billion for the first time in 2014—largely from corporations eager to push or block measures that circumvented the legislative process.

"There are five or six people in this room tonight that could simply make a decision—this will be the next president—and probably at least get a nomination, if ultimately the person didn't win," President Obama said at a 2012 fundraiser attended by executives from Microsoft and Costco. He argued that his advantages of incumbency and extensive online fundraising network might not be available to future candidates operating in the changed campaign finance landscape. "You now have the potential of 200 people deciding who ends up being elected president every single time," Obama said.<sup>c</sup>

The Center for Public Integrity estimated that fewer than 600 people in 2012 had bumped up against federal spending limits that restricted the total amount an individual could give to candidates and party committees. (The total at the time was \$123,200 per election cycle.)