

# **All money is “dark money”**

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Ever since the U.S. Supreme Court decided in the 2010 Citizens United case that states could not restrict the amount of money given to political campaigns by corporations, unions and other organizations, we’ve heard a lot about “dark money” – funds whose source can’t be traced that are contributed to candidates or ballot measures.

The decision gave rise to the creation of a large number of groups that could raise funds for candidates and causes without having to disclose the names of individual contributors. In theory, candidates could not work directly with those groups, but in practice it occurs all too frequently.

Most of the questionable campaign finance activity occurs at the state and federal level, but localities like Alameda are not immune to it.

While we don’t seem to have a problem – yet – with deep-pocketed, opaque organizations trying to influence Alameda elections, we do have money from business interests, unions and political funds flowing into Alameda in an effort to influence the outcome of our local elections.

This is not, technically, “dark money” because California requires candidates to regularly report the source of all campaign funds on the California Form 460 periodically during a campaign. We are fortunate in Alameda to have a city government that makes these reports readily accessible on its website. That makes it easy to see who the financial backers of candidates and ballot measures are.

But all money is “dark money” if nobody shines a light on it. That’s why the League of Women Voters of Alameda (LWVA) is working hard to make it easy for the average voter to quickly see who is giving money to whom.

LWVA knows the average voter is unlikely to wade through all the 460 reports, so we decided to make them more accessible and easier to see the larger patterns. We have created graphs and tables that indicate what cities the contributions are coming from; whether they are coming from individuals, businesses, unions or political groups; and how much money is raised with small

vs. large donations. We also list the sources of contributions of \$1,000 or more. Additionally, after the vote has been counted we show how much money was raised for each vote cast in favor of the candidate or measure.

On our website ([www.lwvalameda.org](http://www.lwvalameda.org)) now are charts and tables for the November 6, 2018 general election and the special City of Alameda election on April 9, 2019. We will repeat the process for the November 2020 local election when the first reports are filed.

While shining a light on the sources of campaign money helps educate the electorate, it's not enough to address some of the issues that emerge when you take a closer look at the financing. The next phase of the League's work in this area will be to create a menu of campaign finance reform initiatives that have been successful in other localities. We want to get this done by the end of this year so the City Council has a chance to consider them prior to the November 2020 election cycle.

Campaign financing is a double-edge sword: on the one hand, it's a way of measuring which candidates have generated sufficient support among the populace to raise money for their campaigns. On the other hand, special interests can leverage their deep pockets to influence the outcome...and even the decisions made by the candidates they have helped elect. The League of Women Voters doesn't want to staunch the flow of money; we just want to know where it's coming from and to find ways of assuring that it doesn't have a negative impact on good government in Alameda.