

# An unprecedented amount of special-interest money has flowed into Green Bay's city election. It won't let up soon.

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GREEN BAY - Nearly \$200,000 from out-of-state organizations has poured into Green Bay's City Council elections, an unusual inflow of outside money that spells worry about the future of local elections, experts say.

And that money is backing candidates on both sides of the political aisle.

Open Democracy PAC, a liberal group based in Washington, D.C., reported spending over \$100,000 in digital ads related to five City Council candidates.

A conservative group based in Downers Grove, Illinois, called Restoration PAC spent over \$23,500 on mailed brochures related to six City Council candidates, plus another \$54,769 for a TV ad against Mayor Eric Genrich's administration.

"This is crazy. It's an unprecedented amount of money coming from outside groups," said Matt Rothschild, executive director of Wisconsin Democracy Campaign. "They aren't even in Wisconsin. What does a group from Downers Grove, Illinois, or Washington, D.C., care about who sits on the city council in Green Bay?"

Between the campaign literature and digital ads coming out of political action committees — commonly referred to as PACs — outside political organizations are banking on getting candidates into local seats who share their political values, despite the city council positions being nonpartisan. Many see what's happening in the spring general election as a dress rehearsal for the November

election, which, between gubernatorial and U.S. Senate races, will garner far more interest.

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It's all about influencing special-interest votes, said George Penn of Wisconsin United to Amend, a grassroots cross-partisan organization working to upend corporate money in elections.

"Politicians are being bought legally. Some people say this is corrupt and fixed, but it's not. It's working the way it was designed," Penn said. "It's been going on for 40 to 50 years, and it's getting much worse."

The oft-cited culprit goes back over a decade to the federal Citizens United case, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of a conservative nonprofit group that challenged the Federal Election Commission's century-old restrictions on independent election-related spending by corporations. The result was a flood of independent spending in state and national elections that now is also flowing into local government races.

"We need to put a cap on how much the super-rich can throw around in our elections," Rothschild said. "Fundamentally, we need to overturn the Citizens United decision."

## **How much money have outside PACs spent in Green Bay City Council races?**

Political action committees spend money either to endorse a candidate, smear a candidate or advocate for issues. The PACs do not need to contact the candidates to discuss the ads or get their permission on how the money is spent.

Open Democracy spent \$30,000 in a digital ad campaign that endorses Aron Obrecht, a candidate for District 6. Obrecht said he was "flabbergasted" when he learned how much was spent by the PAC.

William "Bill" Morgan, a candidate for District 3, made a point to state on his campaign Facebook page that he did not authorize the roughly \$2,500 spent on brochures by Restoration PAC.

Jim Hutchison, a candidate for District 2, said Open Democracy's digital ad may have adverse effects on his campaign.

Since expenditures within a certain timeframe of an election have to be reported every 72 hours, certain ad expenditures have yet to be disclosed. But Facebook Ad Library confirms that Open Democracy PAC has funded digital ads supporting incumbents in Districts 1 and 3 — Barbara Dorff and Lynn Gerlach.

According to Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, independent expenditures from outside Wisconsin have been made in support of these candidates:

- Jennifer Grant, Green Bay City Council District 1, \$5,341 on brochures from Restoration PAC.
- Barbara Dorff, Green Bay City Council District 1, an amount to be determined on digital ads from Open Democracy PAC.
- Jim Hutchinson, Green Bay City Council District 2, \$30,000 on digital ads from Open Democracy PAC.
- Andy Nicholson, \$5,944 on brochures from Restoration PAC. Nicholson is running for Green Bay City Council District 2 and the Brown County Board District 3.
- Bill Morgan, Green Bay City Council District 3, \$2,464 on brochures from Restoration PAC.
- Lynn Gerlach, Green Bay City Council District 3, an amount to be determined on digital ads from Open Democracy PAC.

- Robert Maccaux Jr., Green Bay City Council District 5, \$3,439 on brochures from Restoration PAC.
- Steven Campbell, \$2,190 on brochures from Restoration PAC. Campbell is running for Green Bay City Council District 6 and the Brown County Board District 6.
- Aron Obrecht, Green Bay City Council District 6, \$30,000 on digital ads from Open Democracy PAC.
- Melinda Eck, Green Bay City Council District 11, \$4,301 on brochures from Restoration PAC.
- Michael Poradek, Green Bay City Council District 11, \$30,000 on digital ads from Open Democracy PAC.

Poradek and Obrecht wrote a pledge against accepting outside money in campaigns, which they read outside City Hall on Tuesday. Seven candidates for City Council — Poradek, Obrecht, Hutchison, Tarl Knight, Bill Galvin, Craig Stevens, Brian Johnson and Mark Steuer — signed the nonpartisan pledge.

"It's time for us to keep our elections local, and for alders to commit to serving as nonpartisan public servants," Poradek wrote on Facebook. The post concluded by stating that outside PACs "do not speak for us."

While nonpartisan pledges can set the stage for more official resolutions by Green Bay's City Council, resolutions can only go so far. The city passed a ballot referendum on Nov. 4, 2014, resolved to stand with Wisconsin United to Amend, the citizens group dedicated to overturning Citizens United. But resolutions carry no legal weight to stop the flow of outside money.

"Candidates are mad at these corporations coming in because it means they don't have control of their own campaigns," Penn, of United to Amend, said. "Another problem is, the money comes in because corporations want something done and they want people in office to do it."

Rothschild said outside influence suppresses the voices of constituents.

"The more fundamental point is, are the citizens of Green Bay having their voices drowned out by all this outside money?" Rothschild said. "To what extent do we have self-governance if the people who are elected are being determined from outside of Wisconsin, much less outside of Green Bay?"

## **Why is all this outside money coming in now?**

Rothschild said big money in small elections is a national trend that's symptomatic of the country's hyper-partisan political culture. It's not just a Green Bay problem.

According to Open Secrets, a nonpartisan nonprofit group that tracks U.S. election finances, Open Democracy PAC has spent a total of \$592,757 across the country since the start of 2022. Restoration PAC spent a total of \$7.4 million across the country in the same period.

The Press-Gazette reached out to Open Democracy PAC and Restoration PAC. Neither responded to the newspaper's inquiries.

Record-breaking campaign finance reports keep coming with each election cycle, and there's no reason to expect that to change as long as the Citizens United ruling stands.

"I expect that, in November, we'll have record amount of outside spending in the governor's race, maybe record spending in the Ron Johnson race for Senate," Rothschild said. "And then, in 2024, we are likely to be a huge battleground state again with outside money coming in, some of it from dark money groups where we can't even see who's funding those."

Overturing Citizens United would require an amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which would need the approval of three-fourths of the states.

So far, 22 states have approved resolutions to do just that. Those resolutions address Citizens United by stating only human beings are endowed with

constitutional rights, money is not speech and caps corporate election spending.

Wisconsin United to Amend has attempted five times since 2013 to add an advisory referendum to the ballot asking the Wisconsin Legislature to support amending the Constitution. The group has gotten 166 Wisconsin communities — including Green Bay — on board.

It has failed every time.

Part of Penn's frustration is that a majority of Wisconsin lawmakers see no need to move on an amendment when so many have enjoyed the extra funding as a result of the Citizens United case, Penn said.

"It was 72 years for the suffrage movement. Since 1848 they tried, and women couldn't vote until 1920. They had bills introduced every year," Penn said.

"That's part of the strategy. You have to keep introducing them."

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