



LEFT IN THE DARK

Local Election Coverage in the Age of Big-Money Politics

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Executive Summary

With more than \$3.3 billion in political ad spending projected by Election Day, Free Press has turned its attention to the local television stations airing these ads. *Left in the Dark* explores whether stations barraging viewers with political ads are balancing this out with coverage of the role money is playing in this year's elections.

We focus on stations in five cities where ad spending has skyrocketed this year: Charlotte, Cleveland, Las Vegas, Milwaukee and Tampa. *Left in the Dark* asks the following questions:

- Are these stations reporting on the Super PACs and other “nonaligned” groups behind so many of the political ads airing in these cities?
- Are these stations reporting on the role television stations and their parent companies play as recipients of political ad money?
- Are these stations fact-checking political ads airing in their markets?

First, *Left in the Dark* analyzes coverage on Milwaukee's ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC affiliates in the two weeks prior to Wisconsin's June 5 recall election. This period saw an increase in ad spending similar to what stations in other battleground markets will expect before November's general election.

Free Press sent volunteers into Milwaukee stations, where they inspected and photocopied broadcasters' political files to identify the groups most actively buying political ads before the recall. We checked for mentions of these groups and their political ads in local news coverage.

We then compared these findings to the local coverage aired in August on affiliate stations in Charlotte, Cleveland, Las Vegas and Tampa, as well as Milwaukee. On Aug. 2, affiliate stations in these and other large cities began posting their political files to a newly created online Federal Communications Commission database, which also houses other important station information.¹

In August, the most prominent political advertisers increased their buying in the five markets we studied. Indeed, viewers in all of these markets experienced a constant stream of political ads. (The four Tampa affiliates, for example, aired an average of more than 200 political ads a day in August.) What Free Press found in the local news coverage was disturbing:

- The hundreds of hours of local news that aired in the two weeks prior to Wisconsin's June 5 recall included no stories on the 17 groups most actively buying time on Milwaukee's ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC affiliates. And while these stations were ignoring the impact of political ads, they found time to air 53 local news segments on Justin Bieber.
- Our August survey of the ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC affiliates in Charlotte, Cleveland, Las Vegas, Milwaukee and Tampa found a similar imbalance between political ads and news coverage. With one noteworthy exception (see sidebar, page 11), affiliates in Charlotte, Cleveland, Las Vegas, Milwaukee and Tampa did not fact-check any of the claims made in political ads placed locally by the four Super PACs and independent groups spending the most in those markets.
- Cleveland's four affiliate stations provided no coverage of the Koch brothers-funded group Americans for Prosperity, despite airing the group's anti-Obama attack ads more than 500 times. Americans for Prosperity has reportedly spent more than \$1.5 million to place ads on Cleveland television stations.
- Charlotte's four affiliate stations provided no local reporting on the three top-spending political groups, the anti-Obama American Crossroads, Americans for Prosperity and Restore Our Future. From Jan. 1–Aug. 31, 2012, these three groups cumulatively spent more than \$4 million to place ads on Charlotte stations.

¹ The FCC's station database went live on Aug. 2, 2012. Yet currently only the ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC affiliates in the nation's top 50 broadcast markets are required to post their political files to this site. Data from stations located in the remaining 160 U.S. markets won't be available via the FCC's service until after July 1, 2014. Free Press is collaborating with the Sunlight Foundation and other allies to organize in-person inspections of political files at certain smaller-market stations experiencing high levels of political advertising.

- In August, only one Las Vegas affiliate ran a news segment on political advertising. During its 6 p.m. newscast on Aug. 13, KLAS aired an entire ad produced by the Super PAC Restore Our Future. The station noted that the ad “criticizes President Obama’s handling of the economy” and would air in Las Vegas. There was no additional commentary or analysis.

What happened in Milwaukee in advance of the recall is now playing out on television screens in battleground states across the country. The lack of reporting on political ad spending is egregious given just how many political ads these stations air — ads that are producing record revenues for station owners.

This profiteering may explain broadcasters’ reluctance to investigate the relationship between political ad spending and local media. In exchange for this massive influx of cash, broadcasters must take their public interest obligations seriously. They must cover the money that’s poisoning our politics, expose the groups and individuals funding political ads in their markets, and address the falsehoods presented in most of these spots.

Introduction: The Biggest Loser

Perhaps the most important story of the 2012 presidential election is the toxic mix of money, politics and media that is shaping so much of the discourse in the months before the general election. Yet that's not a story you'll find on the local news.

While many TV stations are covering local and national races, they are ignoring the ever-expanding role money and the media are playing in these contests.

By the end of August, shadowy special interest groups and Super PACs had joined with the official campaigns to spend more than half a billion dollars on televised political ads. Media analysts project this sum will hit \$3.3 billion by Election Day.²

It's clear that the election's biggest winners are the conglomerates that own local TV stations in battleground states. And the biggest loser? Our democracy.

The rising tide of ad spending has polluted the nation's airwaves with political messages that often skew the facts and undermine the electoral process. It's a media mudfest that was triggered by the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, the most prominent in a series of recent rulings that demolished election spending limits and opened the floodgates to a new era of big-money politics.

Changes in the rules that govern political spending have given the wealthiest of the wealthiest unprecedented power to pick and choose our nation's leaders. Many are doing so via contributions to Super PACs and "social welfare" groups classified as 501(c)(4)s. To make matters worse, lax rules enable these third-party groups to bombard viewers with misleading ads without identifying their funding sources.

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It wasn't supposed to be this way. In his majority opinion in *Citizens United*, Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote that the decision *didn't mean* that this new political spending should be secret: "Prompt disclosures of expenditures can provide shareholders and citizens with the information needed to hold corporations and elected officials accountable," he wrote. "This transparency enables the electorate to make informed decisions and give proper weight to different speakers and messages."³

What Justice Kennedy apparently didn't foresee was the degree to which third-party groups would manipulate the new standards to hide their funders' identities. He also didn't anticipate that local television broadcasters would be so resistant to disclosing the financial forces behind political ads.

This lack of transparency is reflected in broadcasters' opposition to a new Federal Communications Commission rule requiring stations to post political files online. The FCC passed the rule in April to give the public easy access to information about who is buying ads on local stations and how much they're paying for airtime. Until this change went into effect, anyone interested in gathering this data faced the challenge of taking time off from work to visit local stations during business hours and navigating often-resistant station staff to find the files and copy relevant information.

On every step of the way, TV broadcasters have fought the FCC rule to make this process easier. Industry lobbyists swarmed the FCC to discredit the rule before it even passed, and the National Association of Broadcasters is now suing the federal agency, claiming that it's too burdensome for local stations to digitize their files.⁴ The industry has protested the agency's action so vigorously that former FCC advisor Steven Waldman asked whether broadcasters "believe that they even have 'public interest obligations.'"⁵

² Both Kantar Media's Campaign Media Analysis Group and Wells Fargo project political ad spending will exceed \$3.3 billion in 2012.

³ Opinion of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy, re: *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, Jan. 21, 2010.

⁴ Keenan Steiner, "Broadcasters Sue to Keep Political Ad Files Offline," Sunlight Foundation, May 22, 2012: <http://reporting.sunlightfoundation.com/2012/nab-files-lawsuit-block-transparency-political-ads/>.

⁵ Steven Waldman, "Local TV Stations Rally to Oppose Media Transparency," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jan. 26, 2012: http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/local_tv_stations_rally_to_opp_1.php. Industry pushback waned slightly in September 2012 when the National Association of Broadcasters proposed delaying until after the election one of the court cases it had brought against the FCC.

This resistance to disclosure doesn't end there. It's also reflected in local newscasters' failure to report on the role money and the media are playing in the 2012 elections.

Left in the Dark takes a thorough look at the impact political ad spending has had on news produced by the stations airing these ads. Our findings should concern anyone who cares about the integrity of our nation's democratic process.

In the hundreds of hours of local news that aired in the two weeks prior to Wisconsin's June 5 recall election, we found no stories on the 17 groups most actively buying time on Milwaukee's four most prominent stations: WDJT (CBS), WISN (ABC), WITI (Fox) and WTMJ (NBC).⁶

In other words, Milwaukee stations provided no local stories explaining who sponsored the thousands of ads they aired, no local stories about the special interests the ads represented, and no local stories about whether the ads told viewers the truth.

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In an ideal world, these stations would provide the kind of news and information that serve as an antidote to the misleading political messages most political ads spread. But broadcasters have gone AWOL in Milwaukee.

Is the experience in Milwaukee an isolated blip? Or is it representative of a national trend? To find out, we compared Milwaukee newscasts to newscasts in the cities that were most inundated with political ads through August: Cleveland, Charlotte, Las Vegas and Tampa.⁷

We found a similar pattern of neglect: Viewers in these broadcast markets were subject to an endless number of political ads, with no local news coverage identifying the money behind the messages.

Democracy requires an informed public. But Americans aren't getting the news they need. Instead, we have a political system whose players are constantly chasing dollars — a system gamed to a point of dysfunction by wealthy, undisclosed donors and media corporations that are all too content to just cash their checks.

No News Is Good News For Local Stations

Lax disclosure rules may explain the clogging of Milwaukee's airwaves with political ads from benign-sounding front groups like the American Federation for Children, Americans United for Change and the Coalition of American Values. But they don't explain stations' reluctance to shed light on these groups or the often shadowy individuals and organizations that fund them.

Local broadcasters are federally mandated to "fully and fairly disclose the true identity of the person or persons, or corporation, committee, association or other unincorporated group" paying for political ads.⁸ Stations are also required to maintain publicly available "political files" that contain information on candidate requests for airtime, rates charged and airtime given away for free.⁹

⁶ These 17 groups were identified after Free Press and our allies inspected the political files at the four stations in question. These files pinpoint the groups that bought political ads in the run-up to the recall election and also list the amount of money spent on ads and the primary officers representing each group. We also often found that stations' political files were either incomplete or contained forms that had been filled out incorrectly. For more information on the challenging process of collecting political files in Milwaukee and beyond, see: "Public and Political File Inspections," Free Press, August 2012: <http://www.freepress.net/public-file-inspections>.

⁷ To determine which broadcast markets were seeing the most political ad spending, we relied on data from Kantar Media's Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG).

⁸ 47 C.F.R. § 73.1212(e); **see also:** FCC, "Statutes and Rules on Candidate Appearances and Advertising." <http://transition.fcc.gov/mb/policy/political/candrule.htm>

⁹ 47 C.F.R. § 73.1943 (requirement as applied to broadcasting); 47 C.F.R. § 76.1701 (requirement as applied to cablecasting)

They must also maintain lists of the chief executive officers or members of the executive committee of any entity that pays for “political matter or matter involving the discussion of a controversial issue of public importance.”¹⁰

Broadcasters rarely provide more information than this, and often provide much less. In our ongoing inspection of TV stations’ political files, Free Press has encountered numerous roadblocks, including incomplete files and staff who resist our efforts to collect data.¹¹

Free Press contacted the news directors at Milwaukee’s four largest stations, but they either didn’t return our calls or declined to comment.

Broadcasters’ reluctance is easy to understand. Much of the money in contemporary American politics ends up lining the pockets of the same broadcast giants that control local television markets around the country.

According to SNL Kagan’s media analysts, political ad revenues for broadcast TV station owners jumped 50 percent for the first half of 2012 compared to the first half of 2010, with much of the same growth expected for the third quarter of this year.¹² The broadcast conglomerates receiving this cash influx include Belo Corp., E.W. Scripps Company, Gannett Co., Inc., Gray Television, Inc., Media General, Inc., and Sinclair Broadcast Group, among others.¹³

Stations in battleground states like Colorado, Florida, Ohio and Virginia are the gold standard for conglomerates hoping to pad their profits with political money.

Federal law requires local stations to provide their lowest ad rates to candidates just prior to an election. But Super PACs and other nonaligned groups must pay market rates, which increase in the weeks before elections as demand for advertising time drives up prices.¹⁴

What’s a windfall for stations has become a nuisance for Americans, especially those in battleground states, who face a relentless barrage of misleading political ads.

“The dirtier the system, the better for the bottom line at TV stations,” writes *Rolling Stone* political correspondent Tim Dickinson.¹⁵ It’s no surprise, then, that the same media companies that profit the most from political ad money are not reporting on it.

Broadcasters have historically been loath to write their parent companies into news stories about policy and politics. This is due in part to the broadcast industry’s significant contributions to political campaigns and its powerful presence among lobbyists on K Street and Capitol Hill.¹⁶

Local television stations play a leading role in this multibillion-dollar influence scheme, but you wouldn’t know it from watching their newscasts.

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¹⁰ 47 C.F.R. §73.1212(e) (requirement as applied to broadcasting); 47 C.F.R. § 73.1615(d) (requirement as applied to cablecasting).

¹¹ Candace Clement, “The Top Five Most Ridiculous Things I Have Experienced While Collecting Files from Television Stations,” Free Press, Aug. 17, 2012: <http://www.freepress.net/blog/2012/08/17/top-five-most-ridiculous-things-i-have-experienced-so-far-while-collecting-files>.

¹² “TV Political Ad Revenue Builds Momentum as H1’12 up 50 Percent over H1’10,” SNL Kagan Business Intelligence Services, Aug. 28, 2012.

¹³ For a detailed look at the role the media play in democracy, see Timothy Karr’s *Citizens Inundated: How Big-Money Politics and Broadcast Media Are Poisoning Democratic Discourse and Undermining U.S. Elections ... and What We Can Do About It*, Free Press, January 2012: <http://www.freepress.net/resource/94410/citizens-inundated-report>.

¹⁴ For a good primer on the rules governing political ads, see: David D. Oxenford, “Political Advertising,” Davis Wright Tremaine: [http://www.dwt.com/files/Uploads/Documents/Advisories/12-07_PoliticalBroadcasting\(Guide\).pdf](http://www.dwt.com/files/Uploads/Documents/Advisories/12-07_PoliticalBroadcasting(Guide).pdf).

¹⁵ Tim Dickinson, “Guess Who’s Profiting Most from Super PACs?” *Rolling Stone*, Aug. 6, 2012: <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/guess-whos-profiting-most-from-super-pacs-20120806>

¹⁶ Patricia Aufderheide, *Communications Policy and the Public Interest: The Telecommunications Act of 1996*. New York: Guilford Press, 1999, p. 1. **See also:** Eric Klinenberg, *Fighting for Air: The Battle to Control America’s Media*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007, p. 223.

It gets worse. Seventy percent of the ads that aired in the first half of 2012 were negative.¹⁷ Moreover, the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the Center for Responsive Politics found that 85 percent of the money spent on presidential ads by the four top-spending “independent” groups financed ads containing deceptive information.¹⁸

Broadcasters in the markets that we studied devoted little to no airtime to segments that fact-checked the claims made in political ads. They spent no time investigating the organizations that funded the ads.

It’s a longstanding problem that has only worsened in 2012. Wealthy donors, corporations, lobbyists and politicians are aligning with powerful media companies against a public seeking to engage more fully in democracy. The scarcity of honest information about the misleading political ads invading our airwaves has knocked viewers and voters for a loss.

As Goes Milwaukee ...

We began our analysis with the broadcast market in Milwaukee, looking at the two weeks prior to the state’s June 5 recall election. On that day, first-term Republican Gov. Scott Walker survived a union-backed effort to unseat him by defeating Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, his Democratic challenger.

The recall featured many of the same elements that have since come into play in other states. Indeed, the kind of electoral coverage on view in Milwaukee likely offers a preview of what to expect nationwide in the weeks prior to the Nov. 6 general election. These elements include:

- **Divisive and often misleading political rhetoric:** The Wisconsin recall effort was sparked in February 2011 when newly elected Gov. Walker unveiled a state budget proposal that eliminated most public employees’ bargaining rights. Both sides described the June 5 vote as a “bellwether” for November’s vote. As with most ideologically driven political battles, political discourse around the recall was riddled with falsehoods and innuendo.
- **A massive influx of money from shielded special interests:** Each side committed considerable money to winning the recall for their respective candidates and causes. According to the nonpartisan Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, candidates and outside groups spent in excess of \$80 million on the state’s recall election — an enormous figure that easily broke the previous record of \$37.4 million spent during the 2010 gubernatorial contest. Walker and his Republican allies spent more than \$58 million to defeat the recall, while his political opponents spent \$22 million.¹⁹ Millions more

Justin Bieber Vs. The Super PAC

To provide some perspective on the dynamic in Milwaukee, Free Press looked at local newscasts’ coverage of topics other than political ad spending. We scoured closed-captioned transcripts of Milwaukee’s four primary stations for segments mentioning prominent celebrities, politicians and news items. For example, Justin Bieber was mentioned in 53 segments that aired on local newscasts in the two weeks prior to the June recall.

Bieber was popular with the Milwaukee ABC affiliate WISN, which accounted for 11 of the news segments mentioning the teen idol. During a June 1 broadcast of *WISN 12 News This Morning*, the anchor teased a news story about Bieber passing out while on tour before cutting away to a 30-second political ad attacking Gov. Scott Walker.

After the ad, the anchor returned to inform viewers that the singer had walked into a glass door while in Paris. Our investigation found no WISN reporting about political ads from the groups dominating local airwaves during this same period.

¹⁷ The Wesleyan Media Project found that 70 percent of campaign ads aired so far this election cycle have been negative, compared with 9 percent over the same time period in the 2008 presidential campaign. See “Presidential Ads 70 Percent Negative in 2012, Up from 9 Percent in 2008,” Wesleyan Media Project, May 2, 2012: <http://mediaproject.wesleyan.edu/2012/05/02/jump-in-negativity/>.

¹⁸ The Annenberg Public Policy Center and the Center for Responsive Politics looked at ad spending for the period from Dec. 1, 2011–June 1, 2012. The four top-spending third-party groups known as 501(c)(4)s were the American Energy Alliance, Americans for Prosperity, the American Future Fund and Crossroads GPS. Ads were considered misleading if they contained at least one claim ruled deceptive by FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.com, the fact checkers at the *Washington Post* or the Associated Press. For more, see: <http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/NewsDetails.aspx?myId=491>.

¹⁹ “Recall Race for Governor Cost \$81 Million,” Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, July 25, 2012: <http://www.wisdc.org/pr072512.php#tbl1>.

were spent in Wisconsin on recall efforts against statehouse representatives who voted with the governor. Most of the spending in the race came from ideologically driven groups based outside the state. The conservative group Americans for Prosperity told CBS News that it alone spent more than \$10 million in Wisconsin on ads and other messaging touting the “positive” impact of Walker’s budget reform.²⁰

- **A flood of political ads on local television:** The spike in spending meant Wisconsin viewers had to endure a steady barrage of political ads. These aired across the state but focused intensively on the Milwaukee broadcast area with its more than 900,000 “TV homes.”²¹ As might be expected, the ads aired more frequently in the two weeks prior to the June 5 vote and became more strident in tone. After being bombarded by political ads, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* columnist Jim Stingl imagined a world in which the ads about recall candidates Scott Walker and Tom Barrett were actually true: “They’re both terrible, terrible men,” Stingl wrote, “who are not to be trusted.”²²
- **Increased electoral coverage on local stations:** With intense local and national interest in the recall, the four main Milwaukee stations devoted a considerable amount of airtime to recall-related political reporting. Free Press’ survey of recall coverage in Milwaukee found more than 500 mentions of Gov. Scott Walker in both local and national programming in the period from May 22 through June 5.²³ Walker’s challenger, Tom Barrett, was mentioned more than 400 times during the same period. The phrase “recall election” was mentioned in more than 500 segments. Yet while election coverage may have increased, coverage of political ads and their funders did not.

Milwaukee’s ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC affiliates plastered the airwaves with thousands of political ads. By inspecting these stations’ political files, Free Press has identified the 17 groups most active in placing ads (see Table 1). We searched the closed-captioned news transcripts of each of these stations for specific mention of these groups and their local ads in the two weeks prior to the June 5 recall election. While one of these groups — the left-leaning Greater Wisconsin Political Fund — did pop up in local coverage, the story did not mention the group’s role in purchasing political ads.

²⁰ Brian Montopoli, “Scott Walker Wins Wisconsin Recall Election,” CBS News, June 5, 2012: http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-57447954-503544/scott-walker-wins-wisconsin-recall-election/.

²¹ As tallied by Nielsen Media Research

²² Jim Stingl, “Imagine a World Where Political Ads Are True ... ” *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 2, 2012: <http://www.jsonline.com/news/statepolitics/imagine-a-world-where-political-ads-were-true----ps5kjm9-156817815.html>.

²³ Walker’s name appeared more frequently in political ads than on newscasts in the two-week period we surveyed these stations. The same was true for his challenger, Tom Barrett.

Table 1. Money, Media and Political Coverage in Milwaukee

Groups Placing Ads Prior to the Recall ²⁴	Background	Station Ad Placements	Mentions in News
American Federation for Children	The American Federation for Children is a right-of-center interest group focused on education issues, including supporting voucher initiatives. PolitiFact Wisconsin analyzed two of the group’s local ads, giving one a rating of “Pants On Fire” (or entirely false) and the other a rating of “Mostly False.” AFC reportedly spent more than \$1 million to buy political influence during the recall.	WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0
Americans for Prosperity	Americans for Prosperity is a conservative group representing the interests of its founder, oil billionaire David Koch, who provided much of its start-up investment and continues to underwrite its political activity in 2012. AFP was very active during Wisconsin’s recall, telling CNN that it had spent more than \$10 million on its statewide campaign.	WTMJ (NBC) WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0
Americans United for Change	Americans United for Change is a left-leaning group registered under the IRS code as a 501(c)(4) — meaning it does not have to disclose its donors. However, MoveOn.org reported that it has contributed nearly \$1 million to the group. Other donors include PACs for the Teamsters and other labor interests.	WTMJ (NBC) WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0
Center for Union Facts	The Center for Union Facts is a group for individuals and industries opposed to union activities. It is one of several advocacy and public relations groups created by Richard Berman of the Washington, D.C. public affairs firm Berman and Company. It reportedly spent \$1 million on political ads prior to Wisconsin’s recall.	WTMJ (NBC) WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0
Coalition of American Values	The Coalition of American Values describes itself as a “grassroots advocacy organization created by leaders from a wide array of issue interests.” There exists little information about who’s really behind the group; station political files list a Brent Downs as treasurer but offer little more.	WTMJ (NBC) WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0
Concerned Women for America	Concerned Women for America is a socially conservative group that focuses on bringing “biblical principles into all levels of public policy.” The group poured more than \$1 million into Wisconsin’s TV markets to run an ad attacking “Obamacare.” The group placed similar ads in Iowa, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Mexico and Virginia.	WISN (ABC)	0
Ending Spending Action Fund	The Ending Spending Action Fund is a Super PAC founded in conjunction with the 501(c)(4) nonprofit Ending Spending, Inc. Both groups are fiscally conservative and often align their position with the GOP. According to stations’ political files, the group spent \$245,000 in May to air a 30-second television ad supporting Gov. Walker.	WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0

²⁴ These 17 groups were identified after Free Press staff and volunteers accessed the political files at Milwaukee’s ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC affiliate stations, and copied and uploaded the content to a publicly accessible database.

Friends of Scott Walker	Friends of Scott Walker supported the governor in the recall vote. It collected donations from 13 out-of-state billionaires, including casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, Amway founder Rich DeVos and Wal-Mart heiress Christy Walton, to run ads statewide. FactCheck.org found some of their ads to be deceptive.	WDJT (CBS)	0
Greater Wisconsin Political Fund	The Greater Wisconsin Political Fund is a Democratic-leaning group that describes itself as engaging in “grassroots lobbying on critical Wisconsin issues to promote a progressive public policy agenda.” According to the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, it spent nearly \$6.7 million in the 2012 recall races, “much of it on negative television ads to smear Scott Walker’s efforts.”	WTMJ (NBC) WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	18 ²⁵
National Republican Senatorial Committee	The National Republican Senatorial Committee is dedicated to electing Republicans to the U.S. Senate. In Wisconsin, it purchased airtime to support former Gov. Tommy Thompson’s Senate campaign.	WTMJ (NBC) WDJT (CBS)	0
Obama for America	President Obama’s official campaign stayed out of Wisconsin’s recall fight for the most part but did purchase local airtime in May to support the president in the national election.	WTMJ (NBC)	0
Planned Parenthood Advocates of Wisconsin	Planned Parenthood’s advocacy arm spent more than \$600,000 on ads that attack Republican State Sen. Van Wanggaard for voting against state-level funding for women’s health care.	WTMJ (NBC) WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0
Restore Our Future	As with Obama for America, the pro-Romney Super PAC Restore Our Future didn’t engage with the recall election in May. But it was active in Milwaukee, purchasing ads that attacked President Obama.	WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0
Right Direction	Right Direction is the Republican Governors Association’s local political action committee. It has spent millions of dollars nationwide in support of Republican gubernatorial candidates. Prior to the Wisconsin recall, it reportedly spent more than \$9 million in Milwaukee to air political ads, including ads that attacked Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett.	WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0
Tea Party Express	The Tea Party Express considers itself “the most effective and aggressive national Tea Party organization” and has purchased airtime nationwide in support of conservative candidates. It has run ads in Wisconsin supporting Justice David Prosser in the state’s Supreme Court race.	WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0
U.S. Chamber of Commerce	The U.S. Chamber supported Gov. Walker, coordinating its efforts through the Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, Inc., which reportedly spent \$4 million statewide (see below).	WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0
Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce	Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce is the local chapter of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. It reportedly spent \$4 million on local issue ads in Wisconsin. In the past it has supported right-wing politicians and causes. The organization does not disclose its donors.	WITI (Fox) WISN (ABC) WDJT (CBS)	0

²⁵ All 18 of these reports aired on June 4 and 5 with regard to a questionable campaign mailer this group sent to Wisconsin residents. The mailer listed the names and addresses of each recipient’s neighbors and included information on whether or not they voted in 2008 and 2010. None of the reports mentioned the Greater Wisconsin Political Fund’s role in placing political ads on local stations.

... So Go Charlotte, Cleveland, Las Vegas And Tampa

To test whether Milwaukee was representative of what to expect in the rest of the country, Free Press looked at four broadcast markets that were among those receiving the most political ad money through August 2012: Charlotte, Cleveland, Las Vegas and Tampa.²⁶ For comparative analysis, we held up these results not only to Milwaukee TV broadcasts in the weeks before the June recall but also to Milwaukee broadcasting during the same period in August.

In each market, we surveyed local news coverage of the four largest spenders among Super PACs and independent groups: American Crossroads/Crossroads GPS, Americans for Prosperity, Priorities USA and Restore Our Future.²⁷ By the end of August, these groups had spent more than \$115 million on political ads nationwide, focusing their efforts on purchases in the four contested markets. Kantar Media projects that by the end of the year, the nationwide spending from these groups alone will exceed half a billion dollars.

As in Milwaukee, we found a dearth of local coverage on political ads in these four markets despite the record levels of spending by outside groups in August (see Tables 2–6).

For example, Cleveland’s four affiliate stations — WEWS (ABC), WJW (Fox), WKYC (NBC) and WOIO (CBS) — had no August coverage on the Koch brothers-funded group Americans for Prosperity, despite airing the group’s anti-Obama attack ad more than 500 times.²⁸ By the end of August, Americans for Prosperity had reportedly spent \$1.5 million to place ads on Cleveland television stations.

In Charlotte, the four affiliate stations — WBTV (CBS), WCCB (Fox), WCNC (NBC) and WSOC (ABC) — provided no local reporting in August on the three top-spending political groups, the anti-Obama American Crossroads, Americans for Prosperity and Restore Our Future. These three groups had cumulatively spent more than \$4 million on ads in Charlotte by the end of the month.

Two Charlotte stations — WBTV (CBS) and WCCB (Fox) — did air a news segment on the Romney campaign’s claim that an ad from the pro-Obama group Priorities USA was inaccurate. Newscasters at both stations failed to examine this charge.

Only one Las Vegas station, KLAS (CBS), reported on political ad spending, though only in passing. The KLAS segment, which ran on Aug. 13, rebroadcast a Restore Our Future ad in its entirety. The spot criticizes President Obama’s handling of the economy. At the end of the segment, KLAS anchor Paula Francis said, “the spot will air for more than a week across 11 battleground states, including right here in Nevada.” She offered no further analysis — this at a time when Americans for Prosperity, American Crossroads and Restore Our Future were

Truth-Squadding In Tampa

On Aug. 21, Tampa’s CBS affiliate, WTSP, featured a segment that thoroughly fact-checked an Americans for Prosperity ad that had aired locally. The WTSP segment featured PolitiFact Florida’s Katie Sanders, who found that the ad made false claims about President Obama and the national debt.

“On the Truth-o-Meter this got a false,” Sanders told WTSP co-anchor Heather Van Nest. The fact-checking segment aired during WTSP’s 5:30 p.m. newscast. During the segment, Van Nest noted that four political ads had already aired during this particular newscast. She reported that WTSP News would air a future segment vetting political claims made in an online video produced by a group of special services veterans.

Despite finding that Americans for Prosperity was spreading falsehoods, WTSP aired the group’s anti-Obama ads more than 150 times in August, according to the station’s political file.

²⁶ Top ad spending markets were identified using data from Kantar Media’s Campaign Media Analysis Group: <http://www.kantarmedia.com/en/our-expertise/cmaga>.

²⁷ These four groups were prioritized according to the size of their ad spending through Aug. 31, 2012. This spending was tracked by Kantar Media’s Campaign Media Analysis Group, Wells Fargo and the Center for Responsive Politics, which drew on data provided by the Federal Elections Commission and other primary sources.

²⁸ Americans for Prosperity was mentioned only once in national news coverage aired on these stations, during an Aug. 7 *CBS This Morning* segment announcing the group’s latest political advertising push.

airing hundreds of spots on local stations. To her credit, Francis did at least tell viewers about a group buying political ad time — which is more than one can say of her cross-town competitors at KTNV (ABC), KVVU (Fox) and KSNV (NBC).

The newscasts on Tampa’s Fox and NBC stations (WTVT and WFLA, respectively) offered no mention of the four top-spending groups, despite subjecting their viewers to an unrelenting torrent of attack ads. Tampa’s ABC affiliate WFTS featured one national news segment on American Crossroads: an Aug. 21 story that quoted the group’s co-founder, Karl Rove, regarding the controversy surrounding Missouri Rep. Todd Akin. But the segment offered no information about the organization’s escalating ad buys in Tampa, which had amounted to nearly \$3 million in purchases by mid-August. Through the first three weeks of August, Tampa viewers saw an average of 232 political ads per day, according to Kantar Media’s CMAG.²⁹

By the end of the month, the story from Tampa was the same as in Charlotte, Cleveland, Las Vegas and Milwaukee: With just one noteworthy exception (see sidebar), coverage of the content and accuracy of political ads was nonexistent on local news. We compared these markets to Milwaukee coverage during August and found a consistent pattern of neglect.

What happened in Milwaukee prior to the recall election is playing out on television screens in key battleground states across the country.

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American voters are rapidly approaching a crucial vote mired in an atmosphere of misinformation and negativity, with no remedy in local news.

Conclusion

The *Citizens United* decision deepened the dependency between those who control political power (and need access to money and media to keep it) and those who control the media (and need access to money and political power to keep it). The political ad money flowing to TV broadcasters in 2012 has had a corrupting influence — discouraging broadcasters from assuming their traditional role as watchdogs over the electoral process. Indeed, TV station owners are loath to bite the hand that feeds them.³⁰

Broadcast television remains our most influential communications medium. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 78 percent of American viewers report getting their news from local TV on a typical day — more than the number who rely on newspapers, radio or the Internet.³¹ Yet local TV’s failure to cover the groups behind political ads — just as they accept record-breaking amounts of money from these same groups — is a symptom of a larger problem.

For better or worse, local news plays a leading role in shaping democratic discourse. Broadcasters must take their public interest obligations seriously. They need to cover the money that’s poisoning our politics, expose the groups and individuals funding political ads and address the falsehoods presented in most of these spots.

With little time remaining before the general election, the time to do this reporting is now.

²⁹ Gregory Giroux, “Bloomberg by the Numbers: 6,975,” Bloomberg News, Aug. 27, 2012: <http://go.bloomberg.com/political-capital/2012-08-27/bloomberg-by-the-numbers-6975/>.

³⁰ For more on this dependency, see Timothy Karr’s *Citizens Inundated: How Big-Money Politics and Broadcast Media Are Poisoning Democratic Discourse and Undermining U.S. Elections ... and What We Can Do About It*, Free Press, January 2012. <http://www.freepress.net/resource/94410/citizens-inundated-report>.

³¹ Katie Purcell, “Understanding the Participatory News Consumer,” Project on Excellence in Journalism, at 3 (2010): <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Online-News.aspx>.

Table 2. Local Coverage of Local Ads in Charlotte³²

Charlotte
August 2012

	WSOC (ABC)	WCCB (Fox)	WCNC (NBC)	WBTV (CBS)	National Story	Local Story	Mention of Local Ads
American Crossroads/GPS ³³	1	0	0	1	2	0	0
Americans for Prosperity ³⁴	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Priorities USA ³⁵	0	1	0	3	1	3	0
Restore Our Future ³⁶	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

³² Tables 2–6 represent a survey of station coverage in five broadcast markets that were among those experiencing the heaviest influx of political ad spending by third-party groups in August. We looked at the four groups behind the lion’s share of this spending by tallying the number of segments in which the groups’ names were mentioned on air. We then determined whether that segment was either a national or a local story. We also checked to see if the story mentioned the group’s role in placing political ads on air locally.

³³ Both mentions occurred during national new stories. In each, American Crossroads co-founder Karl Rove was quoted regarding the scandal surrounding Missouri Rep. Todd Akin’s comments on rape. The four primary Charlotte affiliates did not mention American Crossroads once.

³⁴ An Aug. 7 *CBS This Morning* national news segment mentioned Americans for Prosperity. There was no mention of the group on the four main local newscasts even though they aired Americans for Prosperity’s anti-Obama ad more than 120 times in August.

³⁵ WBTV’s two local mentions of Priorities USA occurred on Aug. 9, when a local news anchor twice presented a short national news item on the Romney campaign’s claim that a Priorities USA ad was inaccurate. The WCCB segment was a national Fox News report on the same topic inserted into the local newscast.

³⁶ While Charlotte newscasts made no mention of Restore Our Future in August, the group had purchased nearly \$2 million in political ads in the broadcast region.

Table 3. Local Coverage of Local Ads in Cleveland

Cleveland
August 2012

	WEWS (ABC)	WJW (Fox)	WKYC (NBC)	WOIO (CBS)	National Story	Local Story	Mention of Local Ads
American Crossroads/GPS ³⁷	2	0	0	1	2	1	0
Americans for Prosperity ³⁸	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Priorities USA ³⁹	1	0	0	1	1	1	0
Restore Our Future ⁴⁰	2	0	0	0	0	2	0

³⁷ The only local news segment was a Scripps News Service story carried on WEWS. The piece profiled several groups purchasing political ads. It aired during the 11 p.m. newscast on Aug. 28 and during the noon newscast on Aug. 29. The report failed to mention that American Crossroads was actively buying airtime from WEWS. The other two mentions occurred on national news programs.

³⁸ WOIO's mention of Americans for Prosperity occurred during a national story aired Aug. 7 on *CBS This Morning*. Meanwhile, Americans for Prosperity's ads aired more than 500 times in Cleveland, frequently during local newscasts.

³⁹ WEWS' mention of Priorities USA occurred during the same Scripps News Service report (see above.) WOIO's mention occurred during the same *CBS This Morning* segment mentioned above. Aside from the syndicated WEWS report, Priorities USA received little attention from Cleveland's four main broadcast news stations even though they aired its anti-Romney ads more than 200 times in August.

⁴⁰ Both mentions were from the same Scripps News Service report featured in the Aug. 28 WEWS news segment. The report, which offered no local angle, mentioned American Crossroads and Priorities USA and aired first at 11 p.m. on Aug. 28 and during a noon newscast on Aug. 29. The report failed to mention that Restore Our Future was purchasing airtime in August on WEWS.

Table 4. Local Coverage of Local Ads in Las Vegas

Las Vegas
August 2012

	KTNV (ABC)	KVVU (Fox)	KSNV (NBC)	KLAS (CBS)	National Story	Local Story	Mention of Local Ads
American Crossroads/GPS ⁴¹	2	0	0	0	1	1	0
Americans for Prosperity ⁴²	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Priorities USA ⁴³	0	1	0	1	2	0	0
Restore Our Future ⁴⁴	0	0	0	1	0	1	1

⁴¹ Both segments were produced by national news organizations with a focus on Missouri Rep. Todd Akin's comments on rape. American Crossroads co-founder Karl Rove was quoted saying he planned to pull \$2 million in ads supporting Rep. Akin. Neither segment mentioned American Crossroads' ad purchases in Las Vegas.

⁴² The only mention of Americans for Prosperity occurred during an Aug. 7 national news segment on *CBS This Morning*. The report mentioned the organization's plans to purchase \$25 million in political ads. It did not indicate whether these ads would air in Las Vegas. (They did.)

⁴³ Priorities USA was mentioned in two segments during the month of August. Both were part of national news programming: There was an Aug. 12 feature on *Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace* and an Aug. 10 segment on *CBS This Morning*.

⁴⁴ The KLAS segment, which ran on Aug. 13, rebroadcast in its entirety a Restore Our Future ad that criticizes President Obama's handling of the economy. At the end of the segment, KLAS anchor Paula Francis said, "The spot will air for more than a week across 11 battleground states, including right here in Nevada." She offered no further commentary.

Table 5. Local Coverage of Local Ads in Milwaukee

Milwaukee
August 2012

	WISN (ABC)	WITI (Fox)	WTMJ (NBC)	WDJT (CBS)	National Story	Local Story	Mention of Local Ads
American Crossroads/GPS ⁴⁵	2	0	0	1	3	0	0
Americans for Prosperity ⁴⁶	7	1	0	1	1	8	0
Priorities USA ⁴⁷	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Restore Our Future ⁴⁸	2	0	0	0	0	2	0

⁴⁵ All segments were produced by national news organizations with a focus on Missouri Rep. Todd Akin's comments on rape. American Crossroads co-founder Karl Rove was quoted saying he planned to pull \$2 million in ads supporting Rep. Akin.

⁴⁶ All seven WISN stories were the exact same segment, a profile of vice-presidential candidate Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin that aired after Romney announced his running mate. The WITI item mentioned an Americans for Prosperity award honoring Gov. Scott Walker. None of the stories mentioned that Americans for Prosperity had already spent more than \$10 million in Wisconsin prior to the recall election and was investing more throughout August.

⁴⁷ The only segment mentioning Priorities USA was a national news segment that aired Aug. 10 on *CBS This Morning*. The story reported on Mitt Romney's claim that one of the group's ads made false claims about his record at Bain Capital.

⁴⁸ The WISN segments were identical stories on a Restore Our Future ad touting Romney's role during the Salt Lake City Olympics. They aired on Aug. 4 and 5 but failed to mention that Restore Our Future was actively purchasing political ads in Milwaukee at that time, including on WISN.

Table 6. Local Coverage of Local Ads in Tampa

Tampa
August 2012

	WFTS (ABC)	WTVT (Fox)	WFLA (NBC)	WTSP (CBS)	National Story	Local Story	Mention of Local Ads
American Crossroads/GPS ⁴⁹	3	0	0	1	4	0	0
Americans for Prosperity ⁵⁰	0	0	0	2	1	1	1
Priorities USA ⁵¹	1	0	0	1	1	1	0
Restore Our Future ⁵²	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

⁴⁹ All segments were produced by national news organizations with a focus on Missouri Rep. Todd Akin's comments on rape. American Crossroads co-founder Karl Rove was quoted saying he planned to pull \$2 million in ads supporting Rep. Akin. No segment mentioned American Crossroads' ad purchases in Tampa.

⁵⁰ On Aug. 21, WTSP featured a segment that thoroughly fact-checked an Americans for Prosperity ad that had aired locally. The segment featured PolitiFact Florida's Katie Sanders, who found that the ad made false claims about President Obama and the national debt. "On the Truth-o-Meter this got a false," Sanders told WTSP co-anchor Heather Van Nest. The fact-checking segment aired during WTSP's 5:30 p.m. newscast. Despite finding that Americans for Prosperity was spreading falsehoods, WTSP aired the group's anti-Obama ads more than 150 times in August, according to the station's political file.

⁵¹ The only segment mentioning Priorities USA was a national news segment that aired Aug. 10 on *CBS This Morning*. The story reported on Mitt Romney's claim that one of the group's ads made false claims about his record at Bain Capital.

⁵² Tampa stations offered no mention in August of the pro-Romney Super PAC Restore Our Future, even though the group had purchased more than \$2 million in local ad placements.

Notes On Sources And Methodology

Left in the Dark draws from a variety of sources, including the Federal Communications Commission’s online political file database, which went live in August following an FCC ruling. Other sources include:

TV Stations’ Political Files: A station’s political file provides basic information about who has purchased political ads and how much they paid for airtime. These files document purchases made by candidates’ campaigns, Super PACs and third-party groups. They also provide detail on purchases by state and local candidates and issues of public importance.⁵³

Specific items found in a political file usually include a station inventory of political ads aired during a given time period, the rate charged and the name (if applicable) of the candidate referenced. The file should also contain detailed information about who purchased the advertisement (e.g., a campaign, a Super PAC or a third-party organization).⁵⁴ The new FCC database, which went live on Aug. 2, contains information on ads purchased from that date forward. The agency’s online-posting rule applies only to stations affiliated with ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC in the top 50 broadcast markets (audience size determines placement in the top 50).⁵⁵

From Milwaukee stations’ political files, we compiled the names of the Super PACs, independent groups, party committees and campaigns that bought time on the four local television affiliates during the month prior to the recall election.

- **Federal Election Commission and Center for Responsive Politics:** The FEC requires political advertisers advocating in a federal election to disclose in any ad the name of the group responsible for the ad’s content. Political advertisers are not required to reveal much more.⁵⁶ In addition, candidates’ campaigns, political party committees and Super PACs are required to disclose contributions from individuals if the amount received totals more than \$200 in one year. Campaign party committees and PACs must also provide the FEC with reports on their regular operating expenses. The (c)(4) groups — named after the IRS code’s 501(c)(4) provision, which grants such groups tax-exempt status — are nonprofit “social welfare” organizations. They can spend money on political activity as long as politics isn’t the groups’ “primary purpose.” Because 501(c)(4) groups are not legally required to disclose their donors’ identities, these groups have become a popular vehicle through which to funnel contributions from those who want to remain private. As best as it can under these circumstances, the Center for Responsive Politics, via its public website OpenSecrets.org, provides analysis of spending by these nonaligned groups.
- **Local Television Programming:** The research service TV Eyes, Inc., provides a closed-captioned searchable archive of all programming aired on local stations. Free Press used this tool to scour local newscasts for any mention of groups that purchased political ads on local stations. We pulled the transcripts of each such reference to determine the content of the reporting, whether it aired on local or national programming and whether the coverage focused on political ad buys in that market or another aspect of the organization’s work.⁵⁷
- **Fact-Checking the Ads:** For analysis of the ads themselves, we relied on a number of services and news organizations that have devoted considerable resources and expertise to “truth-squadding” ads. This included but was not limited to the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.com, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, the *New York Times* and the Associated Press. We double-checked their findings with our own investigation of the disputed claims.

⁵³ With “Inspect the Broadcasters’ Public Files,” Free Press created a how-to guide for station file inspections: <http://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/fp-legacy/publicfiles-howto.pdf>.

⁵⁴ In April, the FCC ruled that stations affiliated with ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC in the nation’s 50 largest broadcast markets must post online their political files, including some data about the organizations that purchase political ads. Stations began posting their data to the FCC’s database on Aug. 2. The National Association of Broadcasters continues to protest the rule and has challenged it in court. One of the rule’s shortcomings is the exclusion of online data from broadcasters located in smaller markets. Many of these markets are located in battleground states where the bulk of political ad spending occurs. The public can access the FCC website here: <https://stations.fcc.gov/>.

⁵⁵ To gather political files from the four primary Milwaukee stations — WDJT (CBS), WISN (ABC), WITI (Fox) and WTMJ (ABC) — Free Press mobilized its local volunteers and worked in partnership with the Sunlight Foundation and the New America Foundation.

⁵⁶ The Federal Election Commission, “Special Notices on Political Ads and Solicitations,” October 2006: <http://www.fec.gov/pages/brochures/notices.shtml>.

⁵⁷ More information on TV Eyes, Inc., can be found at www.tveyes.com.