



**Title:** Campaign Finance and Dark Money Activity

**Length:** 45 Minutes

**Age:** 11th and 12th Grade

**In this lesson, students will:**

1. Understand the importance of campaign finance in the way that governments run
2. Reflect on the status quo of disclosure and free speech versus the intention of the lawmakers and judges when designing the system
3. Be better able to identify the effect of dark money and special interests in elections in their environment

**Overview:**

1. **Assign students brief reading** on campaign finance a few days prior to the synchronous activity.
2. Teacher **leads synchronous activity:** Money as a Political Gatekeeper
3. Students **complete synchronous activity:** Dark Money in breakout rooms on Zoom during class time, then reconvene as a class to discuss.
4. **Assign students homework** following the activity

**Homework (15 minutes)**

→ Read the Campaign Finance Four Pager found at this link:

<https://ace-usa.org/campaign-finance/campaign-finance-four-pager>

→ Consider the reflection questions at the end, especially the questions relating to disclosure

**Activity: Money as a Political Gatekeeper (10 minutes)**

→ Brief Lecture on money in politics

- The candidate who spends the most campaigning oftentimes wins the election
- Pros: citizens can donate to support the candidate they believe in, so in some ways the candidate with the most donations is representative of the candidate who appeals to the most people
- Cons: wealthy candidates, or candidates whose policies appeal to wealthy people, have an advantage

→ Send students this link in the Zoom chat to the “Did money win?” calculator from the Center for Responsive Politics

<https://www.opensecrets.org/elections-overview/winning-vs-spending?cycle=2020>

→ Assign students a House district for the most recent election, and ask them to check if the winner outspent their opponent.

→ Ask students to raise their hands if their House district was won by the candidate who spent the most



- Ask students to keep their hands raised if the winner spent twice as much as the runner-up or more
- Ask students to keep their hands raised if the winner spent five times as much as the runner-up or more
- Ask students to keep their hands raised if the winner spent ten times as much as the runner-up or more

### **Activity: Dark Money (35 minutes)**

- Send students this link to students in the Zoom chat to play the Dark Money game <https://ace-usa.org/dark-money-game>
- Go over the instructions as a class:
  - Groups will be given a real-life scenario where a dark money group heavily spent to influence an election.
  - It is their job to look at all the materials available to voters.
  - After reading all of the materials, they should try to figure out the motivation behind the dark money spending.
- Assign Zoom breakout rooms for students (ideally 3-5 students per room).
- Instruct each group to play the Neighborhood Empowerment Coalition scenario and read the multiple choice options under “See Possible Solutions” but NOT check for a correct answer.
- Regroup after 25 minutes and ask the groups to vote on which multiple choice answer they think is correct.
  - A. A conservative group was angry that Ed Sheehy defended the Christmas Day Killer, and was concerned he will abolish the death penalty if he gets onto the Supreme Court
  - B. Private landowners wanted to get rid of the Stream Access Law, and they thought a more conservative judge was more likely to side with them
  - C. Coal and oil companies wanted to limit the public’s access to rivers so that they could increase their energy outputs in those areas
- Reveal the correct answer, option B, read the solution, and lead a discussion about how groups analyzed the information and came to their conclusions.
- Key takeaways:
  - The issues focused on by the ad campaign and listed as the main issues on Montana Growth Network’s website were unrelated to the true reason Montana Growth Network’s funders got involved in the election.
  - The ads were successful, and Ed Sheehy lost the election.
  - In this case players were warned to be on the lookout for dark money influence and were provided with materials to close in on the source. In real life voters don’t necessarily know to be on the lookout, and they are inundated with materials making different arguments which make it much harder.



**Homework (30 minutes):**

- Try the second scenario in Dark Money: Montana Growth Network at <https://ace-usa.org/dark-money-game>. This scenario is longer than the first one.
- Before reading the solution, write a brief paragraph about what conclusion you came to and what evidence you used to support your theory. Note whether or not you read the additional material to get a hint.
- After reading the solution, write a few sentences about whether your theory was correct and which, if any, evidence made more sense to you after you read the solution.
- Email your writing to your teacher before class begins.