Everything is Relative: Are Political Parties Playing a Meaningful Campaign Finance Role in U.S. Federal Elections?

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Abstract

Is big spending by super PACs and other nonparty groups eclipsing political party spending in contemporary U.S. federal elections? Indeed, these nonparty groups operate under a different set of rules that allow them to more easily raise money than the parties, and there has been significant growth in the number of and spending by nonparty groups in recent elections. Moreover, how are the parties doing relative to their own past performance? Has party fundraising and spending kept pace with the competitive environment and the strategic needs of their candidates?

I evaluate the various changes to the rules governing federal campaign finance activities as independent variables to discover how these changes have impacted the fund raising and spending activities of the national party committees over time as well as relative to the performance of other campaign finance actors. I find that the national parties have adapted tangibly and often effectively to these changes. Yet, relative to other spenders, the formal parties' role in the overall campaign finance system has diminished significantly.

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The Changing Campaign Finance Role of Political Parties in the U.S.

How U.S. political parties, as well as other campaign finance actors, raise and spend campaign money today has been shaped by statutory, legal and regulatory decisions, as well as by other developments, such as new technologies, and the increasing use of big data, email and social media to raise money, recruit volunteers and get out the vote (Issenberg 2013). Of course, campaign finance activities also are influenced by the electoral calendar (e.g., presidential year or not) and by national political tides that may favor one party over the other. Recent changes to the rules and regulations governing campaign finance have generally restricted the formal party organizations' ability to play a major role in modern federal elections (Herrnson 2009), even as other developments, such as the widespread use of social media for campaign communications, make it easier for the parties (as well as nonparty entities) to engage in campaign activities to help their candidates win. In particular, contributions to and most spending by party committees are more limited than other non-party organizations such as super PACs and 501(c) nonprofit corporations.

I examine the various changes to the rules as independent variables to assess their impact on the parties campaign finance activities relative to the parties' past performance and to other campaign actors to provide insight into whether the parties are currently playing a meaningful campaign finance role in federal elections. Additionally, this evaluation is conducted in the context of an ongoing debate about the nature of contemporary American parties, and I hope that my analysis will shed some light on this theoretical debate as well.

The Changing Campaign Finance Landscape

The Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) and its amendments of the 1970s codified the candidate-centered character of campaign funding by limiting what could be raised and spent by parties, groups and individuals and solidifying restrictions on the sources of campaign money. Then, in 1976, with *Buckley v. Valeo*, 42 U.S. 47 (1976), the Supreme Court redefined the contours of permissible fundraising and spending by various campaign finance actors according to the Court's understanding of corruption and of how First Amendment free speech rights apply to the financing of elections in the U.S. In order to guard against corruption, or even the *appearance* of corruption, the Justices retained the limits on contributions to candidates, parties and PACs. At the same time, in the name of free speech, the Court lifted the limits on candidate spending and individual independent spending, as well as the ability of candidates to spend unlimited amounts of their own money. The parties were not permitted to make independent expenditures until the congressional campaign committees were given that ability in 1996 with *Colorado Republican Federal Campaign Committee v. Federal Election Commission* (518 US 604 1996) and the DNC and RNC through Federal Election Commission (FEC) approval in 2003 (Wilson 2003).

Other recent adjustments to the rules governing how elections are funded in the U.S. have had perceivable impacts on the campaign finance activities of political parties and other campaign finance actors. The most significant changes affecting party campaign finance since the *Buckley* decision in 1976 include the following:

- ***Colorado Republican Federal Campaign Committee v. Federal Election Commission*** in 1996 (518 US 604 1996) – overturned the section of the 1971 FECA prohibiting independent expenditures by parties as a violation of the First Amendment.
- **Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002** (BCRA) – banned party soft money, regulated sham issue ads run close to elections; raised and indexed to inflation the limits on hard money individual contributions to candidates and party committees.
- ***McConnell v. Federal Election Commission*** in 2003 (540 US 93 2003) – upheld most of BCRA.
- ***Federal Election Commission v. Wisconsin Right to Life, Inc.*** in 2007 (551 US 449 2007) – ruled that BCRA restrictions were unconstitutionally applied to what the Court deemed were "issue ads" not "express advocacy" ads.
- ***Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*** in 2010 (558 US_2010) – overruled *Austin v. Michigan Chamber of Commerce* (1990) and parts of *McConnell v. FEC* (2003) that prohibited political spending by corporations, and held that under the First Amendment corporations are permitted to fund independent expenditures for political broadcasts related to candidate elections; upheld disclosure requirements and the ban on direct corporate and union contributions to candidates.

- ***SpeechNow.org v. Federal Election Commission*** in 2010 (599 F.3d 674 2010) – Citing the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision, the D.C. Circuit Court struck down limits on contributions to independent political groups that spend money to support or oppose federal candidates; upheld disclosure requirements.
- **FEC Advisory Opinion 2010-09** in 2010 (Club for Growth) – The FEC confirmed that the *SpeechNow* decision permitted unlimited contributions to independent expenditure only political committees in federal elections.
- **FEC Advisory Opinion 2010-11** in 2010 (Commonsense Ten) – The FEC exceeded the ruling in *SpeechNow.org v. FEC*, deciding that *Citizens United* allows independent expenditure-only committees to accept unlimited contributions from political committees, corporations and unions, not just from individuals. Within weeks, a new type of independent expenditure committee, the super PAC, emerged to take advantage of the new, more flexible rules for independent fundraising and spending.
- ***McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission*** in 2014 (572 US_2014) – the Supreme Court ruled that the two-year aggregate campaign contribution limit for individuals was an unconstitutional violation of free speech.

How have these changes to the rules and regulations that govern federal election campaign finance activities impacted the role of political parties, particularly the role of parties relative to other campaign finance actors? I focus here mostly on campaign finance activities and developments since passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act in 2002, for BCRA is a logical turning point in the move to a more deregulated campaign finance system that has enhanced the fundraising and spending capabilities of *non-party* campaign finance actors. Have these deregulatory changes diminished the role and influence of parties? Is it a zero-sum game whereby rules that increase the fund raising and/or spending capabilities of non-party actors decrease the fund raising and/or spending capabilities of parties? I argue that it is not that simple, because both the formal party organizations and non-party actors react and adapt to changes in the regulatory environment, and their reactions and adaptations alter the role that parties and other organizations play. For instance, parties have adapted to the restrictions on their ability to directly support their candidates with contributions and coordinated expenditures by taking advantage of their ability (since 1996) to make unlimited independent expenditures. Another adaptation is the development of robust party ally groups that enhance the parties' reach and influence as partners in the extended party network.

Indeed, how we evaluate the role of parties depends on our understanding of parties. Contemporary scholars disagree about how we should define and conceptualize political parties today, and one's view of parties is likely to shape one's evaluation of the role of parties in the financing of modern campaigns. Thus, there also is disagreement about the effects of campaign finance changes on parties and non-party actors (see, for example, Stratmann 2005; Samples 2006; La Raja 2008; Cain 2015). I first discuss the group theory of parties, a fairly recent development in our theoretical understanding of modern American political parties, and I examine two broad approaches to the group theory that offer different hypotheses about the role and health of contemporary political parties. I then analyze the campaign finance activities of the national parties, as well as non-party political actors, in the wake of recent legal and regulatory changes. With this broad analysis of the role of parties in the federal campaign finance system, I aim to discover how the parties' role has changed relative to their own past performance, as well as to other campaign finance actors, and to consider whether the parties are playing a meaningful role in the contemporary federal campaign finance system.

What Is A Party?

Efforts to curb the influence of political parties in the U.S. are as old as the nation itself. In *Federalist No. 10,* James Madison warned about the "mischief of faction," especially majority factions—parties. In his 1976 book, *Curing the Mischiefs of Faction*, Austin Raney documented the history of efforts to curtail what have been seen as the negative impacts of parties in the U.S. (Ranney 1976). More recently, La Raja documented how various reforms, from those enacted by the 19th Century Mugwumps to the reforms accomplished by the 21st Century McCains and Feingolds, have diminished the parties' involvement in campaign finance in ways that have negatively impacted the health of representative democracy in the U.S. by weakening the role and influence of parties in elections, campaign finance and governing (R. J. La Raja 2008; R. J.

La Raja and Schaffner 2015). Yet, one's view of the relevance and influence of parties in the modern U.S. campaign finance system depends to some extent on how one defines contemporary political parties.

Recent political science research on American political parties has featured a new *group theory* of parties as broad organizations that include allied partisan groups and activists in an *extended party network*. This group theory approach contrasts sharply with the characterization of American parties as organizations populated and controlled by party elites such as office holders, candidates and party leaders, what Aldrich called the "ambitious office holders and seekers" who are focused on winning as the proximate goal to achieving policy or other goals (Aldrich 1995). The group theory also differs from the more traditional view of parties as composed of a tripod of the party-in-the-electorate, party organizations, party-in-government (Key 1942).

Scholars characterize the group theory of parties differently. One school of thought views parties as "networked" with interest group and activist "policy demanders" outside of the traditional party organizations (Bawn et al. 2012). Bawn et al. argue that "policy demanders rather than office holders determine the broad agendas of political conflict" (Ibid., 589). Most scholars agree that contemporary American parties are surrounded by intense policy demanders with narrow policy goals, but some see the consequences of their activities as more detrimental to American representative democracy than others. Bawn et al. suggest possible negative consequences *because of* the nature of contemporary political parties as a collection of organized policy demanders who work, especially in nomination contests, to elect lawmakers in service to *their* policy agenda rather than the parties' interest in majority status through the election of moderate lawmakers who can appeal to the median voter (Ibid.).

Other scholars view the party organizations themselves as more central to the party network. For instance, Herrnson views contemporary American parties as "enduring multilayered coalitions" with the parties as the central node in a wider network of allied outside groups and activists (Herrnson 2009, 1207). In the campaign finance world, certain party-allied organizations, such as some traditional PACs, 527 organizations, super PACs and 501(c) groups, are viewed as *part of* a party's "extended party network" (Bedlington and Malbin 2003; Dwyre and Kolodny 2014a; Herrnson 2009; Koger, Masket, and Noel 2009; Kolodny and Dwyre 1998, 2017; Skinner 2005; Skinner, Masket, and Dulio 2013). These party-allied organizations are thought to often *compliment* rather than contradict the parties' pursuit of majority status.

Yet, other scholars argue that the goals of some non-party organizations are not necessarily congruent with those of the party organizations, and that, as the campaign finance landscape has changed, the influence of parties has diminished relative to non-party organizations and resulted in negative consequences for the health of representative democracy itself. For instance, La Raja and Schaffner contend that limits on state party campaign finance activities have contributed to polarization and thus to governmental dysfunction (La Raja and Schaffner 2015). They find that limits on party fundraising alter the flow of campaign money away from the parties and toward nonparty groups, which they argue are more ideologically extreme than pragmatic party leaders. These groups, they assert, help elect more extreme candidates who then contribute to heightened partisan polarization and decreased representation in state legislatures.

Yet, Hamm et al. examine party and non-party spenders in states with and without limits on party fundraising, and they find that these campaign finance rules have little clear impact on party and non-party spending before and after the 2010 *Citizens United* decision (Hamm et al. 2014). Comparing party and what they call "party-affiliated" (e.g., the Republican Governors Association) and "party-allied" (e.g., Crossroads) group spending in 2006 and 2010 (before and after *Citizens United*), Hamm et al. find that the partisan groups most removed from the parties, the "party-allied" groups, spent little in states with limits on party fundraising in both years, and there was more spending by both types of non-party groups in both years in states with *no* party limits (Ibid., 313). They argue that this finding "throws a monkey wrench into the notion that limits on political party contributions are the key mechanism driving money away from the formal party organizations” (Ibid.).

Indeed, Mann and Corrado note that the *national* parties have actually done quite well financially after the BCRA ban on soft money and other changes, such as *Citizens United* in 2010, that have led to big independent spending by non-party groups (Mann and Corrado 2014). They make the case that some “party-affiliated” super PACs, such as Majority PAC and House Majority PAC (which they call “essentially parallel campaign organs of the Democratic congressional campaign committees”), are part of the party network and these groups pursue the party’s objectives by targeting many of the same races that the formal party committees target (Mann and Corrado 2014, 12). Mann and Corrado assert that the national parties “have never been as effective in financing of election campaigns as they are today” (Mann and Corrado 2014, 13). They do not see diminished parties in the wake of BCRA, *Citizens United* and other campaign finance changes: “To contend that parties have been marginalized or that their role in contemporary elections is diminishing as a result of the rise of Super PACs and other non-party organizations is to view ‘the party’ simply as the formal party committees, rather than as a networked amalgamation of diverse organizations with common electoral goals and shared ideological predispositions” (Ibid.).

So, what do we know about the relationship between parties and these allied groups? Skinner et al. used network analysis to examine how closely linked partisan 527 groups were to the formal party organizations by analyzing personnel connections between the parties and 527s after BCRA, and they found that “the formal parties are highly central to the network of 527s. The best-connected 527s tend to have a high percentage of employees who have also worked for formal party organizations and top presidential campaigns” (Skinner, Masket, and Dulio 2013, 141). They view these close personnel connections between the parties and party-allied non-party groups as an effective adaptation to a regulatory environment that has made it more difficult for parties to raise money.

While some of the groups in the extended party network may follow the formal parties' strategies (see Mann and Corrado above), Herrnson found that, like the parties, party-allied outside groups targeted resources to competitive races, but they also invest in safe incumbents to insure access to lawmakers (Herrnson 2009, 1220). Grossman and Dominguez also report that interest groups act in concert with parties to pursue electoral goals, but that they enter into more bipartisan coalitions to pursue their legislative goals (Grossman and Dominguez 2009). Kolodny and Dwyre used network analysis to examine the spending of party and non-party groups in the 2012 congressional elections and discovered that partisan groups most closely ideologically allied with a party (e.g., the Chamber of Commerce with the GOP) spent most of their money on the same races that their allied party targeted, while anti-establishment groups (e.g., the Tea Party group FreedomWorks) did not generally spend in the same races as the party (Kolodny and Dwyre 2017). This congruence between party and party-allied group spending offers some support for the idea that the parties may be "orchestrating" the flow of funds spent by outside groups toward races that help the parties maintain or pursue majority status (Ibid.). Dwyre and Braz also found high levels of congruence between the parties' congressional campaign committee spending and super PAC spending in the 2012 congressional elections (Dwyre and Braz 2015). Indeed, the national parties make it quite easy for their interest group and donor allies to know who the parties would like them to support, without actually talking to one another, which would likely be considered illegal coordination (Dwyre and Kolodny 2014a; Jacobson 2013, 80; Kolodny and Dwyre 2017). So, if party allies want to help the parties pursue winning, they can easily do so.

Similarly, Malbin argues that party and non-party organizations are not in a zero-sum game: "Increased activity by these groups in a polarized environment did not come at the *expense* of the parties. The organizations often acted together with party surrogates through independent-spending coalitions in a manner that has been more helpful to the parties than the groups' direct contributions to candidates has ever been" (Malbin 2014b, 101–2). Malbin also showed what the national parties' share of spending was in 2014 and 2016 when the "four major Super PACs clearly associated with congressional party leaders" are included (Malbin 2017). He includes the Congressional Leadership Fund and Senate Leadership Fund, which are associated closely with the House and Senate Republican Party leaders, and the Senate Majority PAC and House Majority PAC, which are strongly associated with the Democratic leaders (Ibid.). Malbin calls these "leadership Super PACs" and argues that "these four committees were massively important in 2016, spending $232 million in general elections for the House and Senate," and that this amount is more than double what these organizations spent in 2014 (Ibid.).

For those who view the extended party network as a positive development or at least a useful adaptation to a changing campaign finance landscape, the party organizations are the central players in the extended party network. For instance, Dwyre and Kolodny contend while the parties may not do the lion's share of campaign spending, they influence, or "orchestrate" the spending strategies of their allied partners in the network (Dwyre and Kolodny 2014a; Kolodny and Dwyre 1998, 2017; see also Malbin 2017). Yet, do the party organizations need to maintain some minimal level of campaign finance activity in order to play this orchestration role? As non-party groups have benefitted from recent legal and regulatory changes that allow them to raise and spend more than the parties with fewer restrictions than the parties face, have the parties continued to play a meaningful role in the financing of federal elections?

The Changing Campaign Finance Role of National Party Organizations

The role of the formal national political party organizations[1] relative to other campaign finance actors has continued to change in recent years. For example, the national parties' loss of soft money with passage of the BCRA in 2002 changed how parties raise and spend money, and we saw increased campaign finance activity by some non-party groups. After 2002, the parties could raise only hard money, which must be collected in small increments from many donors,

[1] The Democratic National Committee (DNC), Republican National Committee (RNC), Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC), National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC), Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC)

instead of soft money in big chunks from a few big givers, including corporations and labor unions. So, how has the changing campaign finance regulatory landscape affected the role of the national party organizations?

National Party Fundraising

Changes to the rules have influenced how the parties raise their money. However, most scholars note that the loss of soft money after passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, the biggest blow to the parties' bottom line in recent years, did not completely undermine the national party committees' ability to raise money (Dwyre and Kolodny 2014b; Malbin 2014b; Mann and Corrado 2014). Figure 1 shows national party committees' receipts of both hard and soft money between 1992 and 2002, and then hard money only after BCRA from 2004 to 2016 (note: all dollar amounts adjusted for inflation). The impact of soft money is clear, as especially the Hill Committees (DSCC, NRSC, DCCC and NRCC) took advantage of their last chance to raise and spend soft money in 2002, inspiring Magleby and Monson to title their book about soft money *The Last Hurrah? Soft Money and Issue Advocacy in the 2002 Congressional Elections* (Magleby and Monson 2004). For instance, the NRCC in particular raised more in 2002 than the five cycles before then and six cycles after, with one-third of the $277.2 million it raised in 2002 from soft money receipts (Brookings Institution 2017, Table 3-13). However, the DNC raised more money *after* BCRA, reaching a fundraising peak in 2004, with a sharp decline in receipts in 2006 and only a slight recovery after that. The DCCC actually *exceeded* its pre-BCRA fundraising totals from 2006 to 2016. So, perhaps the end of soft money was not, as some had predicted, a major blow to party strength (R. La Raja 2003, 69–96; McConnell 2003, 143), especially Democratic Party strength (Gitell 2003).

[Figure 1 about here]

Yet, Republican Party national committee hard money receipts (RNC, NRSC and NRCC combined) have declined since 2004 (Dwyre and Kolodny 2014b, 177–78; Mann and Corrado 2014, 10). The Republican Party's reduced receipts are somewhat surprising given that BCRA raised and indexed to inflation the limits on hard money individual contributions to party committees. However, as Malbin (2014, 97-99) and Mann and Corrado (2014, 11) note, before BCRA, the Republican Governors Association (RGA) and the Republican State Leadership Committee (RSLC) were part of the RNC, and they were spun off into independent 527 organizations after BCRA. Thus the RGA and RSLC fundraising totals were no longer included in national party reported receipts after 2002. If this money is added back in to the RNC's totals, as Malbin did in a 2014 article, the RNC's 2004, 2006 and 2012 fundraising actually exceeded the committee's receipts before BCRA (Malbin 2014b, 98). Malbin notes, however, that the Republican national committees (the RNC, NRSC and NRCC) *did* raise less during midterms after BCRA, particularly between 2006 and 2010, primarily due to a decline in receipts from small donors who give less than $200 (Malbin 2014b, 99). Malbin also contends that the receipts and spending of the "leadership Super PACs" should be included in parties' totals as well (the Republican Party affiliates Congressional Leadership Fund and Senate Leadership Fund, and the Democratic Party allies Senate Majority PAC and House Majority PAC (Malbin 2017), and doing so would surely increase the party committees' receipts in recent years.

Sources of Party Funds

The parties get their money from a variety of sources. Figures 2a and 2b show the sources of receipts for the national Democratic and Republican Party committees from 1992 to 2016. Soft money was an important source of funds for both parties from 1996 until it was banned with the passage of BCRA in 2002. While both parties have always relied heavily on contributions from individuals, after BCRA individuals became the primary source of funding for the national parties. BCRA also increased individual contribution limits and indexed them to inflation, which accounts for some of the increase in the amount parties have raised from individual donors. Transfers show up in 2010 because that is when the Federal Election Commission began to report these receipts (presumably transfers were included in the "Other Committees" category before that), and the "Transfers from State/Local" party committees that appear beginning in 2010 include some Levin Fund transfers.[2] Figures 2a and 2b show that prior to BCRA in 2002, the GOP had a fundraising edge over the Democrats. By 2008, Democratic Party committees had caught up to the Republican committees, and in 2014 and 2016 Democratic Party receipts exceeded GOP receipts. As before, we see a clear impact of policy change, in this case BCRA (2002), on campaign finance activity as the types of sources on which the parties rely for funds shift from soft money to mostly hard money contributions from individuals and to PACs and other committees (note that some of the other changes in sources, such as the increase in transfers, are due more to FEC reporting changes than to policy or strategic changes).

[Figures 2a and 2b about here]

Contributions from Individuals

Since 2004, all six national party committees (the DNC, DSCC, DCCC, RNC, NRSC and NRCC) have raised more of their funds from individual donors than from any other source, such as from their own incumbents and candidates, PACs and other party committees (Dwyre and Kolodny 2014b, 180–83). Donors generally prefer to give contributions directly to candidates for access reasons, ideological reasons, or for the social benefits associated with attending fundraisers and meeting candidates and lawmakers. Francia et al. call contributors motivated by these different interests *investors, ideologues and intimates* (Francia, Green, et al. 2003). Yet, many contributors also will give to the parties. Some reform-minded activists and some jurists view parties as "corrupt conduits" through which donors who want to influence lawmakers can direct contributions (Persily 2006, 213–40). This view helps explain why, for example, FECA limited direct contributions to parties, parties' contributions to candidates and the coordinated expenditures that parties can make on behalf of their candidates, and why BCRA ended party soft

[2] The Federal Election Commission describes Levin Funds, which are raised by state and local parties, as "a category of funds used to finance certain types of Federal Election Activity. Levin funds may include donations from some sources ordinarily prohibited by federal law (e.g. corporations, unions and federal contractors) but permitted by state law; thus, national parties are not permitted to raise Levin funds. Levin donations are limited to $10,000 per calendar year from any source or to the limits set by state law, whichever limit is lower)" (Federal Election Commission 2015a).

money. From this perspective, a small donation from an individual is seen as the most acceptable type of contribution because it is least likely to raise corruption concerns.

Figures 3a through 3c show each party committee's individual contributions by the size of donors' aggregate contributions as a percentage of total receipts from 2000 to 2016. These figures clearly indicate since BCRA in 2002, both parties' committees, and especially the DNC and RNC, have raised a good deal of their money from individuals making *large* contributions, with many of them giving over $20,000 to the party committee in a two-year election cycle. One possible explanation for the decrease in small donor fundraising is that BCRA raised the contribution limits to candidates and parties and indexed them to inflation, which may have motivated party leaders to focus on pursuing more of these larger donations. Yet, the parties have clearly shifted their fundraising strategies toward these large donors, a development that may be related to their increasing use of joint fundraising committees (see below).

[Figures 3a, 3b and 3c about here]

New Party Accounts: CRomnibus

The national party committees also are now permitted to raise additional money for other specific purposes. In April 2014, Congress passed and President Obama signed the Gabriella Miller Kids Frist Research Act (P.L. 113-94), which eliminated public funding for the party's presidential nominating conventions that had been in place since 1976 and directed the funds to the "10-Year Pediatric Research Initiative Fund" for research on pediatric cancer, autism, fragile X syndrome and other childhood diseases (Overby 2014).[3] Indeed, public support for the public funding system had plummeted, and the convention grants had failed to keep pace with the cost of the conventions. Then, in December 2014, Congress passed and President Obama signed the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2015 (P.L. 113-235), what became

[3] Note Congress did, however, keep the separate appropriation for convention security costs, which totaled $100 million for the major parties' nominating conventions in 2016.

known as the controversial “CRomnibus” act, a combination continuing resolution (CR) and omnibus spending bill.

A bipartisan but mostly Republican group of lawmakers replaced the public convention funding with a new source of funding: each party’s national committee may establish a separate nominating convention account with higher contribution limits than the standard limits for individual and PAC contributions to the parties. CRomnibus also provided for two additional new party accounts, one for legal proceedings and election recounts, and another for the national party headquarters, also with higher contribution limits. So, for the 2016 election, an individual could give $33,400 to each national party committee per year (indexed to inflation)—this is the standard traditional contribution. Plus, because of the CRomnibus changes, that same donor could give additional contributions of $100,200 per year to a party’s national committee for its presidential nominating convention, as well as $100,200 per year to a party’s three national committees (their national committee, House campaign committee and Senate campaign committee) for legal proceedings and election recounts, and another $100,200 to each committee for its national party headquarters (all indexed for inflation). So, as Table 1 shows, in 2016, a single donor could theoretically have given $334,000 to a party’s national committee, the DNC or RNC ($33,400 standard contribution + $100,200 for the presidential convention + $100,200 for recount/legal costs + $100,200 for party headquarters), and $233,800 to each of the party’s congressional campaign committees ($33,400 standard contribution + $100,200 for recount/legal costs + $100,200 for party headquarters), for a grand total of $801,600 to the three committees of one national political party per year, and a total of $1,603,200 for the two-year election cycle (Federal Election Commission 2015b; Garrett 2015, 3).

[Table 1 about here]

Contributions from Traditional PACs

Political action committees can give limited contributions to candidates and parties, and they can also make independent expenditures. A multi-candidate PAC (the most common type of

PAC) may give $15,000 per year to a national party committee. The CRomnibus bill also enhanced PAC giving to parties, so that in addition to the standard $15,000 contribution, a PAC can give $45,000 per year to a party's national committee (DNC and RNC) for its presidential nominating convention account, as well as $45,000 per year to each party's three national committees (their national committees, House campaign committee and Senate campaign committee) for their legal/recount accounts, and another $45,000 per year to each for the national party headquarters. Yet, unlike individual donations, multi-candidate PAC contributions are not indexed to inflation. Non-multicandidate PACs can give even more to these new party accounts, and their donations are indexed to inflation. Table 1 shows how much each type of PAC could contribute to the national party committees during the 2015-2016 election cycle. The 2016 election was the first election cycle since these new party accounts were established, and Table 2 shows the Republican Party committees generally raised more than their Democratic counterparts, and almost twice as much overall in all three of the new accounts.

[Table 2 about here]

The national parties collect tens of millions of dollars from PACs, but, as Figures 2a and 2b above show, PAC contributions constitute a small portion of their overall receipts (PAC contributions are included in the "Other Committees" category of receipts) (see also Dwyre and Kolodny 2014b, 180–83). Indeed, many PACs, particularly those tied to interest groups and industries that also lobby, are more inclined to follow an access-oriented strategy by making contributions directly to candidates, and quite often to safe incumbents of the majority party (rather than the marginal incumbents and challengers the parties target), and sometimes to both parties' candidates. Perhaps we will see more PAC money going to the new party accounts for conventions, headquarters, and legal and recount issues, which would increase the parties' reliance on PAC funds. Interestingly, a single PAC could give the maximum amount ($360,000 for multicandidate PACs and $801,600 for non-multicandidate PACs – see Table 1 above) to *both* parties, which would not be terribly surprising since many PACs, especially corporate PACs, already contribute to both parties in an effort to insure access to a broad base of lawmakers.

Figure 4 shows that the Hill Committees (DSCC, DCCC, NRSC and NRCC) have generally raised more from PACs (“other committees” on Figure 4) than the national committees (DNC and RNC), except in 2004, when the DNC had a spike in PAC contributions. It is not surprising that PACs give more to the DCCC and NRCC, and more to the party that controls the House, since, on average, House candidates receive about one-third of their funds from PACs and because PACs seek to insure access to incumbents, who are most likely to be reelected, and to the majority party given the greater power of the majority in the House than in the Senate (where the minority party has more influence through the use of the filibuster and other tools).

[Figure 4 about here]

Joint Fundraising Committees

Another source of party funds is joint fundraising committees (JFCs), which are created by one or more candidates, party committees and/or PACs who share the costs of fundraising and distribute the receipts according to a prearranged formula. Each donor can write one large check to give the maximum contribution to each candidate and then the remainder to the party committee(s) and/or PAC(s) up to the allowable limit for each. These joint fundraising arrangements can help parties raise quite a lot. In fact, in 2012, the DNC was allocated more from joint fundraising committees ($128 million) than it raised from individual donations directly to the party committee ($119 million) (Dwyre and Kolodny 2014b, 194). Joint fundraising committees can help streamline fundraising for the parties by holding events featuring high-profile guests such as presidential candidates, and then multiple candidates and various party committees can reap proceeds from an event that is sure to attract donors who have the means to write one big check to max out their allowable contributions (Corrado 2011, 138). Joint fundraising committees may also raise funds for the new party accounts for presidential conventions, party headquarters and legal and recount costs, so, in 2016, a single donor could write a check for over $801,600 for a party's three national committees if a JFC was set up to allocate the maximum amount to each party account, and even more if the JFC also included candidates (see Table 1 above).

The Supreme Court's 2014 *McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission* decision is expected to have a significant impact on party fundraising, particularly through joint fundraising committees. The *McCutcheon* decision eliminated the aggregate limit on individual donations in a two-year election cycle, meaning that a wealthy contributor who may have rationed his or her donations to candidates, parties and groups in the past because of the overall limit, may now spread the wealth around to as many of these as he or she wishes, within the limits for each, of course. So, we might see parties benefit from the *McCutcheon* decision, because donors can now give the maximum amount allowed to as many party committees as they like without worrying about bumping up against an aggregate limit. And since party committees are allowed unlimited transfers between one another, the money could then be concentrated to target it where it is most needed, or perhaps it will mean party money will become more concentrated at the national party level. Indeed, the plaintiffs in the case argued that removing the aggregate spending limit "would help parties and candidates raise more money from limited contributions" (Mann and Corrado 2014, 4). Not surprisingly, the number of multiple party committee and candidate-party joint fundraising committees rose soon after the Court's *McCutcheon* decision in 2014, just as Justice Breyer predicted in his dissenting opinion (Carney 2014; Mann and Corrado 2014, 4).

Some welcome this new avenue that may direct more money toward the parties and away from super PACs (R. La Raja 2013, 2014). Others assert that the *McCutcheon* decision might open up a wider avenue for undue influence, and that the Court's narrow view of what constitutes corruption (i.e., only *quid pro* quo corruption warrants concern) will encourage such behavior. With the ability to raise so much money from a single donor, party leaders and office holders are likely to leverage what they can to attract wealthy donors seeking access and policy results. A big contributor may be motivated to attend a joint fundraising committee event to get face time with a president, a presidential candidate, or a powerful House or Senate leader, or perhaps something more, such as a private meeting with the President or Speaker of the House, or a ride on Air Force One. Malbin suggests that "[p]arty leaders (or their agents) may pressure donors to extract higher contributions, the donors will gain agenda-setting access and influence, and the leaders will turn around to pressure the members on policy," something "the *McCutcheon* Court's plurality opinion seems to present as a constitutionally protected interplay" (Malbin 2014b, 103).

Figure 5 shows the national party committees' receipts from joint fundraising committees from 2008 to 2016. As you can see, both parties' national committees, but especially the DNC, are taking advantage of this vehicle for raising funds, with the DNC raising more each successive presidential election cycle since 2008. In 2016, the DNC raised 40% ($148.7 million) of its total receipts ($372.2 million) from JFCs, while the RNC raised 32% ($109.7 million) of its total receipts ($343.4 million) from JFCs (Center for Responsive Politics 2017a, 2017b).

[Figure 5 about here]

The parties raised much of this FJC money in partnerships with the presidential nominees. For instance, in 2016, the Hillary Victory Fund raised $158.2 million for Clinton's campaign, $107.5 million for the DNC, and $112.4 million was distributed to 38 state party committees (Center for Responsive Politics 2017a). The Trump Victory JFC raised a total of $108.4 million and distributed $13.6 million to Trump's campaign, $62.8 million to the RNC, and $29.7 million to 21 state party committees (Ibid.). Yet, JFCs are not just for presidential candidates and their national party committees. The top joint fundraising committee in 2014 was the Boehner for Speaker Committee, which raised $35.4 million, and in that midterm year, the joint fundraising committee for the National Republican Congressional Committee raised $19.1 million, and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee joint fundraising committee raised almost $8 million. For the 2016 elections, the NRCC in particular upped its JFC game, raising 20% ($34.5 million) of its funds ($170.6 million) from JFCs (Center for Responsive Politics 2017a, 2017b).

The amounts in Figure 5 reflect only what each party was allocated directly from JFCs according to the prearranged allocation formulas. Yet, since party committees may transfer unlimited amounts of federal (hard) money to other party committees, the funds allocated to state parties from JFCs are often later transferred to the national party committees, significantly enhancing the national party committees' take from the JFC arrangement. For instance, in 2016 the Hillary Victory Fund raised $529.9 million, with $158.2 million allocated to the Clinton campaign and $107.5 million to the DNC. Yet, much of the $112.4 million that was allocated to the 38 state parties was then transferred to the DNC, permitting "a small number of elite Democratic donors to give hundreds of thousands of dollars to the DNC for the purpose of affecting the presidential campaign (Biersack 2016). For example, the Hillary Victory Fund allocated $3,013,100 to the Democratic Party of Oklahoma, and exactly that amount was then transferred from the Democratic Party of Oklahoma to the DNC. Thus, a single donor could, in effect, direct far more via a JFC to a single federal party committee than the $33,400 per year allowed by giving up to $10,000 per year to any (or many) state party committees that then forward those funds to the party's national committee, in effect circumventing the limits on how much a contributor may give to a national party committee.

Member Contributions to Their Parties

Parties also raise money from their own elected officials and candidates. Federal candidates and officeholders may transfer unlimited amounts from their campaign committee and $15,000 per year from their leadership PAC to a national party committee (11 CFR 113.2). In the 1970s and 1980s, federal lawmakers gave little to their parties or to fellow partisans running for Congress (Bedlington and Malbin 2003; Wilcox 1989), and "incumbents actively resisted even suggestions from party leaders that they might share their wealth for the benefit of the team" (Heberlig and Larson 2012, 9; see also Jacobson 1985; Kolodny and Dwyre 1998). This began to change in 1994, when control of Congress was seriously in contention for the first time in decades. Heberlig and Larson argue that this uncertainty allowed the congressional campaign committees to “extend their cartel powers over legislation to fundraising . . . to induce their members to leverage money from their own networks of donors on behalf of the party’s collective electoral fortunes” (Heberlig and Larson 2012, 16). Congressmember transfers to the Hill Committees grew again in 2004, after passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, which prohibited the national parties from raising soft money (Currinder 2009, especially chapter 6; Heberlig and Larson 2012, 5).

Congressional party leaders assess dues and set fundraising quotas for their members (especially committee chairs and other leaders), and party leaders use their control over institutional positions of power such as committee and subcommittee leadership posts and important party positions to encourage member participation. Heberlig and Larson report House members’ became even more party oriented with their contributions as uncertainty about control of the chamber continued into the late 2000s (their analysis ends in 2008).

Figure 6 shows the increase in member giving to their parties since 1998. The competitive political context gave House party leaders the ability to aggressively raise increasing amounts from the party’s incumbents and to successfully encourage members to give directly to the party’s candidates in the closest races that could determine majority control. Heberlig and Larson report that elected party leaders, committee chairs and majority party members are more inclined to give more to their party committees and candidates than other incumbents (Heberlig and Larson 2012, chapter 5; 2014). Indeed, the parties expect these leaders to do more since their positions make it easier to raise money from access-seeking PACs and policy oriented individual donors.

[Figure 6 about here]

Figure 6 shows that the House campaign committees were particularly good at raising money from their House members, and their receipts track with partisan control of the chamber, especially after 2004. The DCCC’s fundraising from federal candidates dropped in 2010 and 2012, but the NRCC raised more from their candidates in those years, as the GOP was riding a congressional electoral tide even as Democrat Obama was reelected president, suggesting that these party fundraising trends are quite sensitive to the partisan political context (Dwyre and Kolodny 2014b; see also Herrnson 2012, 108). Note also that Figure 6 shows the DSCC raised more than it had in the three previous election cycles from Senate Democrats in 2016 as many thought the Democrats could take majority control of the chamber.

In an update to consider the effects of the 2010 *Citizens United* decision on House incumbents' contribution patterns, Heberlig and Larson found that House incumbents reduced the proportion of campaign spending they directed to their party campaign committees and to fellow candidates in 2012 (Heberlig and Larson 2014). They attribute this decline in House incumbent party-connected giving to the post-*Citizens United* political environment in which incumbents are reserving some of their own campaign resources to respond to party and non-party independent spending against them, much as incumbents have always reacted when faced with significant challenger spending or a close election. They expect if independent spenders continue to increase spending in future elections, the congressional campaign committees are likely to raise less from their House incumbents (Heberlig and Larson 2014, 629).

Once again, a change in campaign finance rules seems to have impacted campaign finance practices by changing the level of incumbent financial support for their party's collective electoral interests, as super PACs and other outside spenders, who can raise unlimited amounts from virtually any source, are putting incumbents on the defensive, making them less willing to use some of their own campaign funds for collective party pursuits. Nevertheless, the congressional campaign committees continue to collect large amounts from their incumbents. As competition for majority status remains intense, the CCCs are likely to continue their aggressive efforts to convince their incumbents to share some of their campaign funds with their parties and fellow candidates in close races.

Incumbent fundraising in service of their party's collective interest of majority pursuit has raised concerns about the source of the funds being raised. The need to support their parties' collective interests has likely intensified the money chase for incumbents and increased the amount of time they spend raising money, and the additional money incumbents are raising to pass on to their parties and fellow candidates in competitive races is mostly from access-oriented business PACs and large individual contributors (Heberlig and Larson 2012, 216; Jacobson 2010, 397). On the other hand, money originally donated to gain access to lawmakers is being redistributed by the parties to many non-incumbent candidates, a process that could potentially increase the number of competitive contests. Jacobson notes another possible benefit: "laundering donations through the parties may diffuse and soften whatever effect interested contributions have on the behavior of individual members, reinforcing the parties' character as broad coalitions of economic and social interests" (Jacobson 2010, 397).

We do know that the Hill Committees have become quite efficient in distributing their campaign resources since the 1980s, when they acted more like incumbent reelection clubs (Jacobson 1985, 2010). Similar legislative campaign committees on the state level also have been found to distribute their resources efficiently by targeting the most competitive elections (Francia, Herrnson, et al. 2003, 184; see also Gierzynski 1992; Shea 1995). Thus Jacobson may be correct that channeling money through the parties can cleanse it of some of its rent-seeking taint. La Raja and Schaffner agree that the parties can serve to place some distance between intense policy-demanding contributors and lawmakers as well as to moderate the impact of money given by ideologically extreme donors; that is why they recommend more money be channeled through the party organizations (R. J. La Raja and Schaffner 2015).

National Party Spending

Parties spend money in different ways to help their candidates win, and contemporary party committees distribute their funds efficiently by directing most of it to close races to maintain or pick up seats. As with fundraising, the rules in place and the political environment impact how the parties spend money. For instance, once the national parties could no longer raise soft money after 2002, they spent their money differently by, for example, focusing more on independent expenditures. When the political tide is running against a party, as it was for the GOP in 2008 and the Democrats in 2010, parties do what they can to shore up endangered incumbents and focus less on challengers. Of course, all of the money in the world may not help if the political winds are not blowing one's way.

Direct Contributions to Candidates and Coordinated Party Expenditures

A national party committee may contribute $5,000 per election (primary and general election) to a federal candidate. This is a very small amount of what it takes to run for office, especially for presidential. As Jacobson points out, "parties cannot be a major source of *direct* campaign contributions because the FECA will not allow it" (Jacobson 2013, 78). This low limit on party contributions to candidates stems from the concern that parties could act as "corrupt conduits" for big contributors to influence elected officials (Persily 2006, 213–40).

The 1974 FECA amendments included a provision to allow parties, but not others, to also spend on behalf of their candidates in coordination with them because lawmakers were concerned "that campaign finance regulation might further marginalize institutions once so central to electoral politics" if parties were permitted to give their candidates only as much as a PAC could give (Jacobson 2010, 383). These *coordinated expenditures,* originally limited to $10,000 in 1974, are adjusted for inflation, and by 2016 the party coordinated expenditure limit for House candidates was $48,100 for House nominees in most states ($96,000 for House nominees in states with only one representative) and from $96,100 to $2,886,500 for Senate nominees (depending on the state's population) (Federal Election Commission 2016).

The parties work with their candidates to make coordinated expenditures to pay for a variety of campaign activities, such as polls, voter list development, campaign ads and opposition research (Jacobson 2013, 79). Jacobson reports that the congressional campaign committees have done a good job spending contributions and coordinated expenditures efficiently by targeting this spending on close races (Jacobson 2010, 383). With direct contributions and coordinated expenditures, parties can give significant financial support to a congressional candidate, amounting to $126,000 for a House candidate in 2016—$5,000 in direct contributions for both the primary and general elections from the national, congressional and state party committees, plus twice $48,000 in coordinated expenditures (if the national committee acts as the state party's agent). Yet, this generally amounts to "no more than 20 percent of what it typically costs to mount a competitive [House or Senate] campaign" (Jacobson 2013, 79). Most congressional candidates receive no national party assistance at all, and party contributions and coordinated expenditures amounted to only one percent of the funding for *all* House candidates and only four percent of Senate candidate funding in 2016, with most of their funds coming from individuals (52 percent for House candidates and 71 percent for Senate candidates) and from PACs (34 percent for House candidates and 16 percent for Senate candidates).[4]

Party Independent Expenditures

The parties now spend far more without coordinating with their candidates at all. The Supreme Court's 1996 decision in *Colorado Republican Federal Campaign v. Federal Election Commission* (518 U.S. 604) allowed the national party congressional campaign committees to make unlimited independent expenditures in federal elections, as long as these expenditures are made from publicly disclosed funds raised in limited amounts from permissible sources (i.e., "hard" money), and the spending is not coordinated with the candidate. As Figures 7a and 7b show, independent expenditures are now the primary means of party spending in congressional elections, particularly in races for the House of Representatives (see Figure 7b).

[Figures 7a and 7b about here]

These figures show that as campaign finance rules changed, the parties reacted and adapted to the new regulatory environment by shifting their spending strategies. After the 1996 *Colorado* decision, both parties, but especially the GOP, shifted some of their spending to

[4] Compiled by author using data from Campaign Finance Institute. 2015. "Historical Data Tables: Campaign Funding Sources for House and Senate Candidates, 1984-2014" at http://www.cfinst.org/data.aspx (accessed July 1, 2016); Brookings Institution. 2017. *Vital Statistics on Congress: Data on the U.S. Congress*, Updated January 2017, Table 3-13 at https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/vital-statistics-on-congress/ (accessed March 31, 2017); and Federal Election Commission. 2017. "2015-2016 Election Cycle Data Summaries through 12/31/16: Congressional Candidates" at http://www.fec.gov/press/summaries/2016/ElectionCycle/24m_CongCand.shtml (accessed May 9, 2017).

independent expenditures in Senate races, and by 2004 the vast majority of both parties' spending in House and Senate races was dedicated to independent expenditures. This shift to independent expenditures did not happen sooner because from the 1990s until the 2002 passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, the national parties relied more on soft money to help federal candidates, which they could raise in unlimited amounts from virtually any source, including corporations and unions, and transfer to state party committees to spend in unlimited amounts (Dwyre 1996). So, the parties were spending quite a lot more from 1994 to 2002 than Figures 7a and 7b indicate, because they were transferring so much soft money to state parties that spent it to help the party's targeted federal candidates. Thus, the national congressional campaign committees' shift to independent expenditures was slightly delayed after the 1996 *Colorado* decision that allowed them to engage in such spending, because the national party committees could get more bang for their buck using soft money until it was banned with BCRA in 2002.

The national committees (the DNC and RNC) have been permitted to make independent expenditures since 2003 (Wilson 2003). Yet, as Figure 8 shows, the DNC and RNC have not wholeheartedly shifted to independent expenditures as the Hill Committees have. As expected, the national committees do most of their spending in presidential years, and the DNC in 2004 and the RNC in 2008 and 2012 did make more independent expenditures in these presidential election years than in other years. In 2016 both the DNC and RNC focused on coordinated expenditures on behalf of candidates. Perhaps the national committees have favored coordinated expenditures over independent expenditures because presidential nominees want as much control as possible over how the money is spent, and coordinated expenditures allow them input, while the parties must make independent expenditures without coordinating with the candidate at all.

[Figure 8 about here]

Interestingly, the RNC spent very little on independent expenditures in 2016, and the DNC made no independent expenditures in 2012 and 2016. The parties' nominees own financial situations may help explain the national committees' irregular use of unlimited independent expenditures. For instance, 2008 Democratic nominee Barack Obama needed little assistance from his party since he did not accept the public funding and was able to raise far more than his Republican opponent John McCain, who accepted the public funds and therefore had to limit his spending and rely more on the RNC. In 2012, neither candidate accepted the public funding, but the RNC once again spent quite a lot on independent expenditures in support of GOP nominee Mitt Romney who was challenging the well-financed incumbent president, Barack Obama. In 2016, the RNC made $321,531 in independent expenditures (so little it does not even show up on Figure 8), and the DNC made no independent expenditures. However, the RNC did transfer $42,601,302 and the DNC transferred $116,029,801 to state and local party committees, most likely to party organizations in battleground states, while neither national committee had transferred any funds to state and local parties in the previous four presidential election cycles. These transfers indicate a possible shift in spending strategy for the national committees. It will be interesting to see if the national committees continue this new spending strategy of transfers to state parties in future presidential elections.

Is Everything Relative? Party and Non-Party Campaign Finance

The analyses above show how changes in campaign finance law, court rulings and regulatory decisions have affected the parties and how they have adapted over time. Some of these changes have challenged the parties' ability to raise and spend money, and the most obvious example is the shift in the sources of party receipts after the loss of soft money with passage of BCRA in 2002 (see Figures 2a and 2b). Party campaign finance also is influenced by the competitive landscape. For instance, Figure 4 shows that PACs significantly shifted their donations to the NRCC as the GOP took control of the House in 2010 and have given more to the

NRCC since, just as PACs gave more to the DCCC when the Democrats won control of the House in 2006 and 2008. Overall, through various changes in both the regulatory and political landscapes, party fundraising has remained somewhat stable, with some of the Hill Committees raising more than they had before soft money was banned in 2002 (see Figure 1), and the Democrats have generally fared better than the Republicans (see Figures 2a and 2b). Congressional partisans also have responded to fundraising challenges by creating new party accounts with separate contribution limits to help them pay for ongoing expenses such as recount and legal expenses and party headquarters costs. Moreover, three of the four Hill Committees (all but the NRSC) have successfully institutionalized their efforts to raise campaign funds from their own members (see Figure 6). These changes in party campaign finance indicate that the parties have adapted to the various changes in the rules governing their activities, and relative to their own past performance, the national party committees have generally remained on a steady course.

Yet, how have the parties fared relative to *other* players in the changing campaign finance environment? As Figure 9 shows, outside of the heady soft money years (1992 - 2002), the parties' role (measured as their percentage of overall spending relative to other spenders) is now smaller than the role of non-party spenders, and party spending, as a share of overall spending, has decreased over time. In 2016, party contributions, coordinated expenditures and independent expenditures amounted to only 13.3% of reported spending by the various campaign finance actors, down from a post-BCRA high of 29.7% in 2006 and a high of 64.6% of all spending (57.9% in soft money and 6.7% hard money) in 2000 (see Figure 9). The rise of newer non-party groups in particular, such as 527 and 501(c) organizations, and especially super PACs, has reduced the *relative* amount of formal party committee money in the overall mix. This is a big change from 1996 to 2002, when party hard and soft money spending was over half of all reported spending in federal elections (see Figure 9).

[Figure 9 about here]

Yet, the parties spend their money differently than many non-party organizations and individuals. The parties' expenditures are generally focused on winning and thus concentrated on a few close contests, while much of the non-party spending is dispersed widely across many contests and motivated by a variety of goals. For instance, many super PACs are established to assist a single candidate. Access-oriented PACs give primarily to incumbents, and ideological groups and individuals work to elect only true believers. Scholars who view the parties more broadly as networked with non-party groups might include some of these non-party groups, such as the Democratic Party super PAC ally House Majority PAC and the Republican Party ally Senate Leadership Fund, in calculations of party influence. Indeed, Mann and Corrado argue: "it is a mistake to assume that all or most non-party independent spending committees are separate from the parties" (Mann and Corrado 2014, 12) (see also Bedlington and Malbin 2003; see also Hamm et al. 2014; Herrnson 2009; Kolodny and Dwyre 2017; Malbin 2014b).

Some groups are surely closer to the parties, and act more in harmony with them in pursuit of the parties' goals, than other groups. Indeed, Malbin adds the spending by what he calls "leadership super PACs" to the formal party organizations' spending (e.g., the Congressional Leadership Fund and Senate Leadership Fund with the House and Senate Republican Hill Committees, and the Senate Majority PAC and House Majority PAC with the Democratic Hill Committees) to produce what he argues is a more accurate picture of party participation in contemporary elections. Malbin reports that when party spending is combined with the spending of these close party allies, overall party spending (parties plus leadership super PACs) was actually higher than non-party spending in both 2014 and 2016 (Malbin 2017).

Some of the early research on parties as extended party networks focused on understanding the contours of these party networks (Grossman and Dominguez 2009; Herrnson 2009). Herrnson (2009), Hamm et al. (2014), Magleby (Magleby 2014), Mann and Corrado (2014), and Dwyre and Braz (2015) classify super PACs and other non-party organizations and test, for example, whether they are more or less party-connected based on their spending behavior.

Dwyre and Kolodny attempted to map each House congressional campaign committee's extended party network with case studies of the spending patterns of party and non-party groups using network analysis (Kolodny and Dwyre 2017). They contend that the formal party organizations (the DCCC and NRCC in this case) can and do effectively "orchestrate" the campaign activities of their closely allied groups. The changing nature of these networks (and of the political environment) makes it difficult, however, to get a clear picture of who is inside and outside of a party's network beyond a single election cycle. Moreover, other scholars see the direction of influence reversed. For instance, Bawn et al. see the non-party groups as orchestrating the parties by influencing, in particular, which candidates get nominated to run for office under the party's banner (Bawn et al. 2012).

What is clear is that the relative role of the formal party organizations (the national committees and the congressional campaign committees) has declined over recent years. Yet, a close examination of Figure 9 shows that the parties' role relative to other campaign finance actors is very similar to what it was before the advent of soft money in 1992. Thus the introduction and departure of party soft money may have actually impacted the relative share of party spending more than the entry of new campaign spenders such as 501(c) nonprofits, 527 organizations and super PACs. Moreover, this is not a zero-sum situation, as the overall amount of money in the system can and has changed. Thus, if some non-party groups are indeed following campaign finance strategies more congruent with their party allies than not, then party influence in the campaign finance system may be more significant than these party and non-party spending patterns can reveal.

Conclusion

Political parties have long endured in the United States in part because of their ability to successfully adapt to often-dramatic changes in their environment. This examination of the campaign finance activities of the contemporary national parties offers further evidence of the parties' ability to adapt and adjust. In recent years, the parties have worked to adapt to a number of changes in the rules governing federal campaign finance activities and to the presence of new campaign finance actors (i.e., 501(c) nonprofits, 527s and super PACs) who have fewer restrictions on their campaign finance activities than the parties do. There is some evidence that the parties are adapting to this new environment by guiding or "orchestrating" the activities of some of these non-party actors most closely allied with them in an extended party network, even though the parties are not permitted to actually coordinate with many of their allied groups (Kolodny and Dwyre 2017). The extent to which the parties are able to count on these network allies to pursue the parties' goals will affect how successfully the parties adapt to a campaign finance landscape that has left them with less flexibility than non-party campaign finance actors. To fully comprehend the extent to which non-party groups follow party strategies, however, we need a more thorough understanding of the boundaries of the parties' extended party networks and the activities of those in the network. Thus, the topic deserves further research.

The parties also have acted to expand their own campaign finance capacity with the creation, by party leaders in Congress, of the new party accounts for presidential nominating conventions, headquarters buildings, and legal and recount activities. Moreover, some of the Hill Committees have successfully appealed to the interest their members share in achieving or maintaining majority status and have been able to raise quite a lot from their own members, a task made somewhat easier because the law allows unlimited transfers from a candidate's primary campaign committee to a party committee.

In the future, Congress or perhaps the Supreme Court may act to loosen restrictions on party campaign finance, by, for example, allowing the national party committees to make unlimited coordinated expenditures from money raised in small amounts, an idea floated by scholars at the Campaign Finance Institute, the Brookings Institution and American Enterprise Institute (Malbin 2014a). Indeed, the Supreme Court's very narrow understanding of what constitutes corruption laid out most recently in the *McCutcheon* decision may result in a reexamination of the notion that parties act as "corrupt conduits" through which interested money can influence lawmakers' policy decisions (Malbin 2014b; Persily 2006). Such a shift in opinion would potentially put parties on a more level playing field with non-party groups. Having more party money in the mix would potentially focus even more money on the small number of competitive races, but with more money to spend, the parties might also target their funds on *more* races and thus potentially increase the number of competitive contests, a development many observers of American electoral politics would welcome.

Table 1: Annual Contribution Limits to National Political Parties (as of 2016)

	Previous Limits	New Additional Segregated Accounts and Associated Limits			
Individuals to: [a]	**Traditional Individual Contributions**	**Convention Account**	**Building Account**	**Recount/Legal Account**	**Total Possible Contributions**
National Party Committees (DNC, RNC)	$33,400	$100,200	$100,200	$100,200	$334,000
House Campaign Committees (DCCC, NRCC)	$33,400	N/A	$100,200	$100,200	$233,800
Senate Campaign Committees (DSCC, NRSC)	$33,400	N/A	$100,200	$100,200	$233,800
Totals	**$100,200**	**$100,200**	**$300,600**	**$300,600**	**$801,600**
Multicandidate PACs to:					
National Party Committees (DNC, RNC)	$15,000	$45,000	$45,000	$45,000	$150,000
House Campaign Committees (DCCC, NRCC)	$15,000	N/A	$45,000	$45,000	$105,000
Senate Campaign Committees (DSCC, NRSC)	$15,000	N/A	$45,000	$45,000	$105,000
Totals	**$45,000**	**$45,000**	**$135,000**	**$135,000**	**$360,000**
Non-Multicandidate PACs to: [a]					
National Party Committees (DNC, RNC)	$33,400	$100,200	$100,200	$100,200	$334,000
House Campaign Committees (DCCC, NRCC)	$33,400	N/A	$100,200	$100,200	$233,800
Senate Campaign Committees (DSCC, NRSC)	$33,400	N/A	$100,200	$100,200	$233,800
Totals	**$100,200**	**$100,200**	**$300,600**	**$135,000**	**$801,600**

Source: R. Sam Garrett. 2015. "Increased Campaign Contribution Limits in the FY2015 Omnibus Appropriations Law: Frequently Asked Questions." March 17. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service.

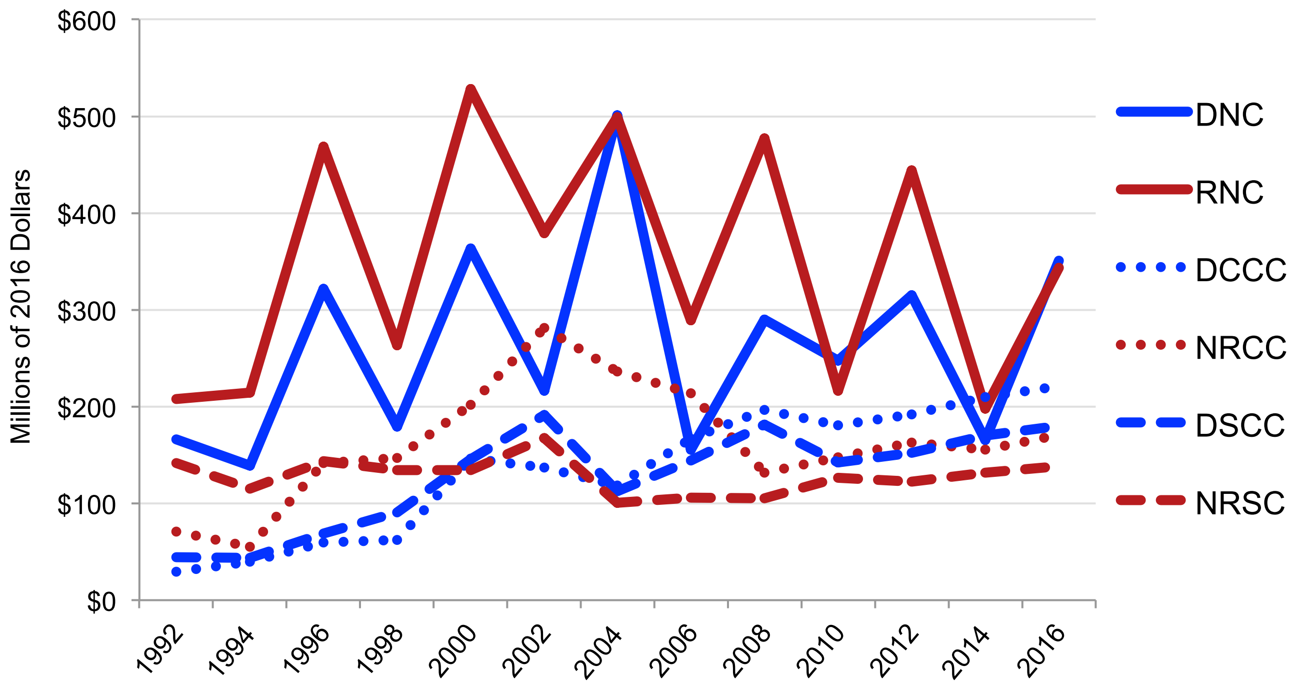
[a] Limits are indexed to inflation each election cycle.

Table 2: Contributions to the New CRomnibus Accounts of the National Party Committees, 2015-2016

	Convention	Headquarters	Recount/Legal	Total
DNC	$16,755,965	$6,953,019	$4,089,189	$27,798,171
DSCC	n/a	$7,068,150	$2,931,767	$9,999,917
DCCC	n/a	$7,321,678	$2,693,120	$10,014,799
Democratic Party Totals	**$16,755,965**	**$21,342,847**	**$9,714,076**	**$47,812,887**
RNC	$23,817,038	$26,367,459	$5,949,515	$56,134,013
NRSC	n/a	$9,408,452	$1,348,478	$10,756,929
NRCC	n/a	$10,080,459	$10,751,747	$20,832,207
Republican Party Totals	**$23,817,038**	**$45,856,371**	**$18,049,740**	**$87,723,149**

Source: Federal Election Commission, "Party Table 10: Contributions to Accounts of National Party Committees, January 1, 2015 through December 31, 2016" at https://transition.fec.gov/press/summaries/2016/tables/party/Prty10_2016_24m.pdf (accessed August 22, 2017).

Figure 1: National Party Committee Receipts, 1992 - 2016
(in millions of 2016 dollars)



Source: Data for 1992-2014 compiled by author from Brookings Institution. 2017. *Vital Statistics on Congress: Data on the U.S. Congress*, Updated January 2017, Table 3-13 at https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/vital-statistics-on-congress/ (accessed March 31, 2017). Data for 2016 from Federal Election Commission, "2015-2016 Election Cycle Data Summaries through 12/31/16" at http://www.fec.gov/press/summaries/2016/ElectionCycle/24m_NatlParty.shtml (accessed May 10, 2017).

Note: Totals include both hard and soft money from 1992 to 2002 and only hard money from 2004 (after the national party committees were prohibited from raising soft money by the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002).

Figure 2a: Democratic Party Committees: Sources of Funds, 1992-2016 (in millions of 2016 dollars)

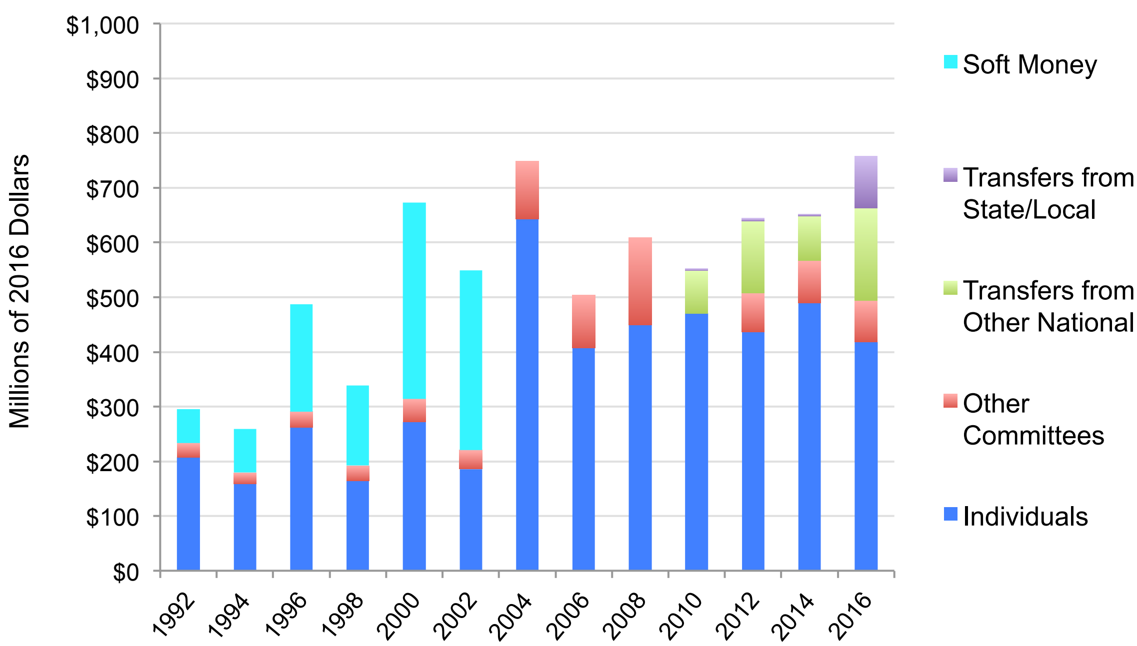
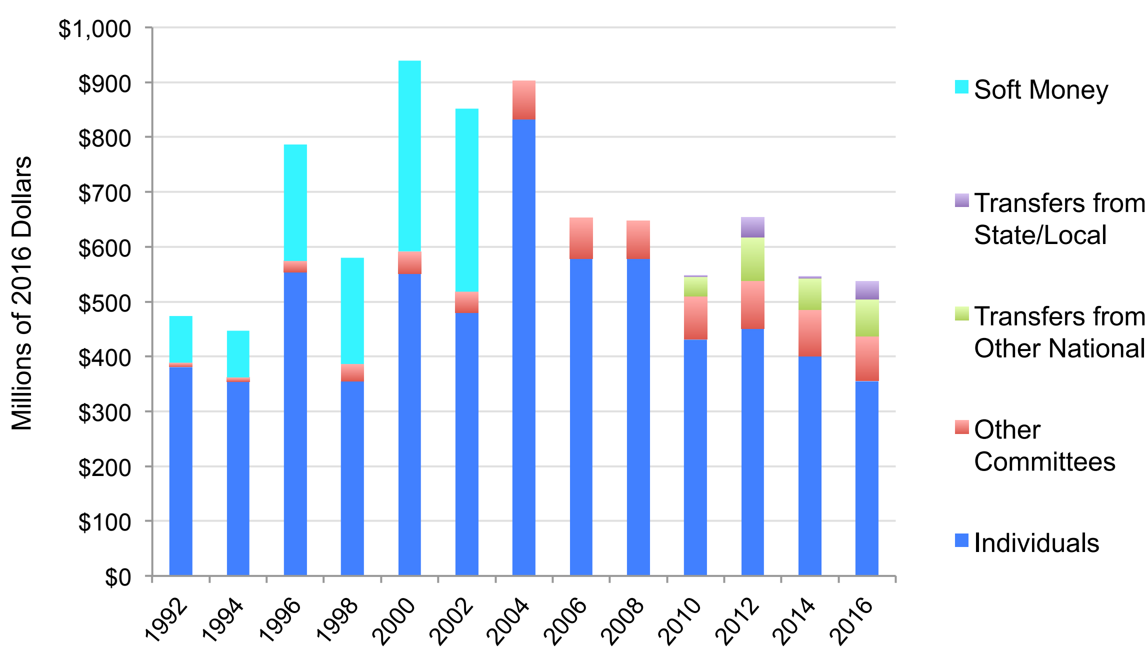


Figure 2b: Republican Party Committees: Sources of Funds, 1992-2016 (in millions of 2016 dollars)



Source: Compiled by author from Federal Election Commission data.

Figure 3a: Individual Contributions to DNC and RNC by Amount, 2000-2016 (percentage)

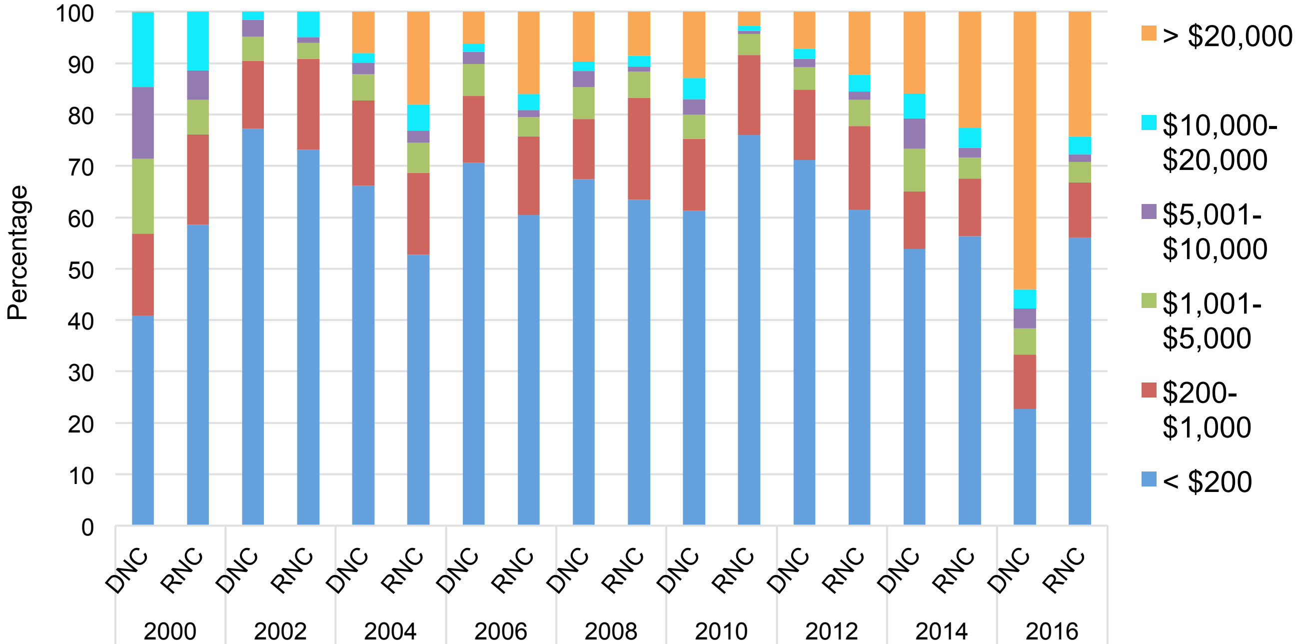


Figure 3b: Individual Contributions to DSCC and NRSC by Amount, 2000-2016 (percentage)

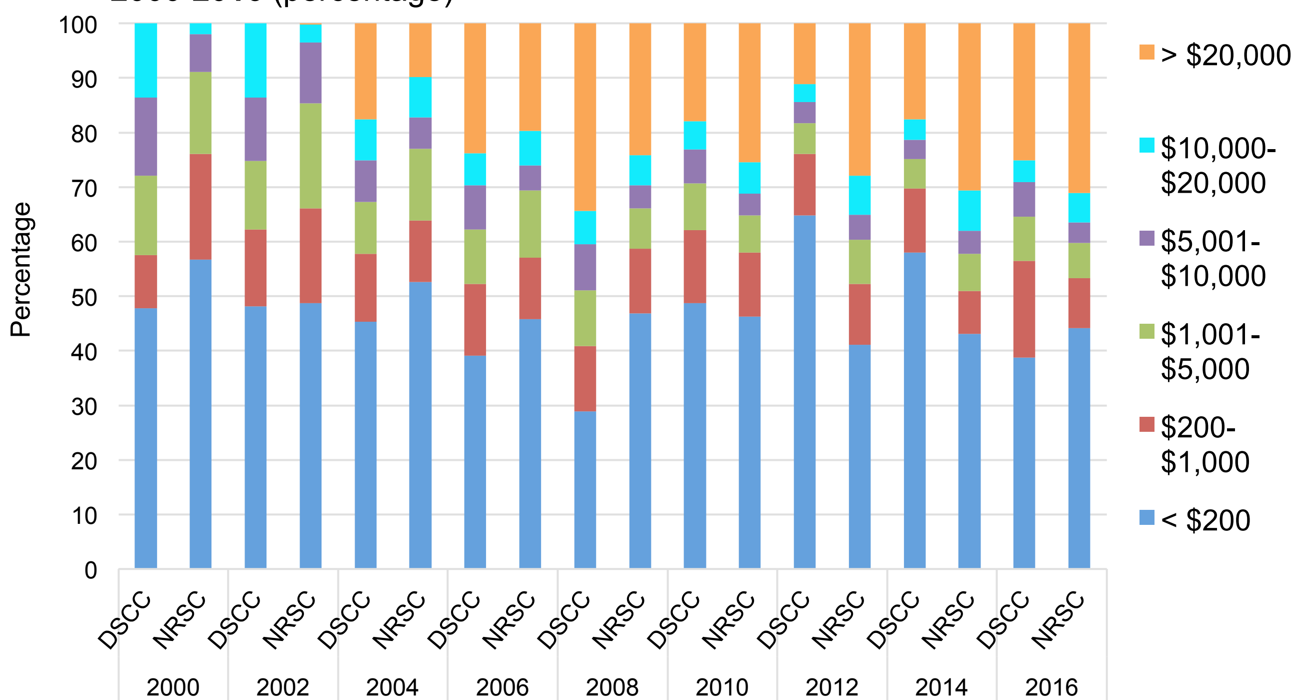
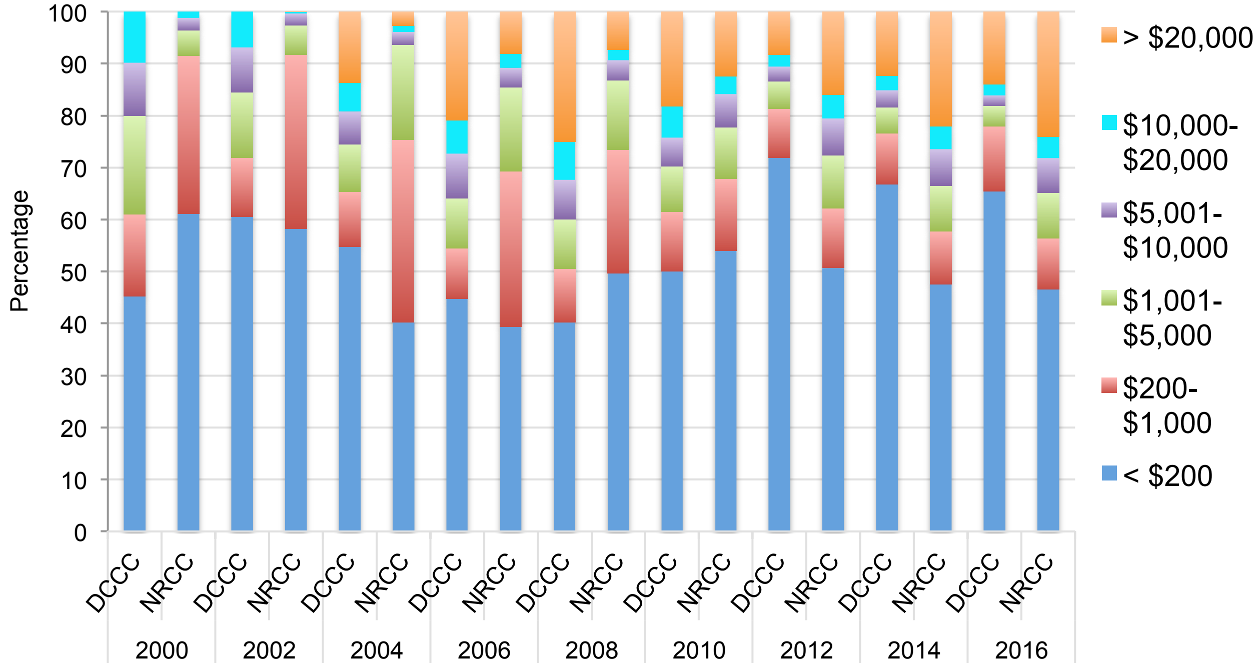
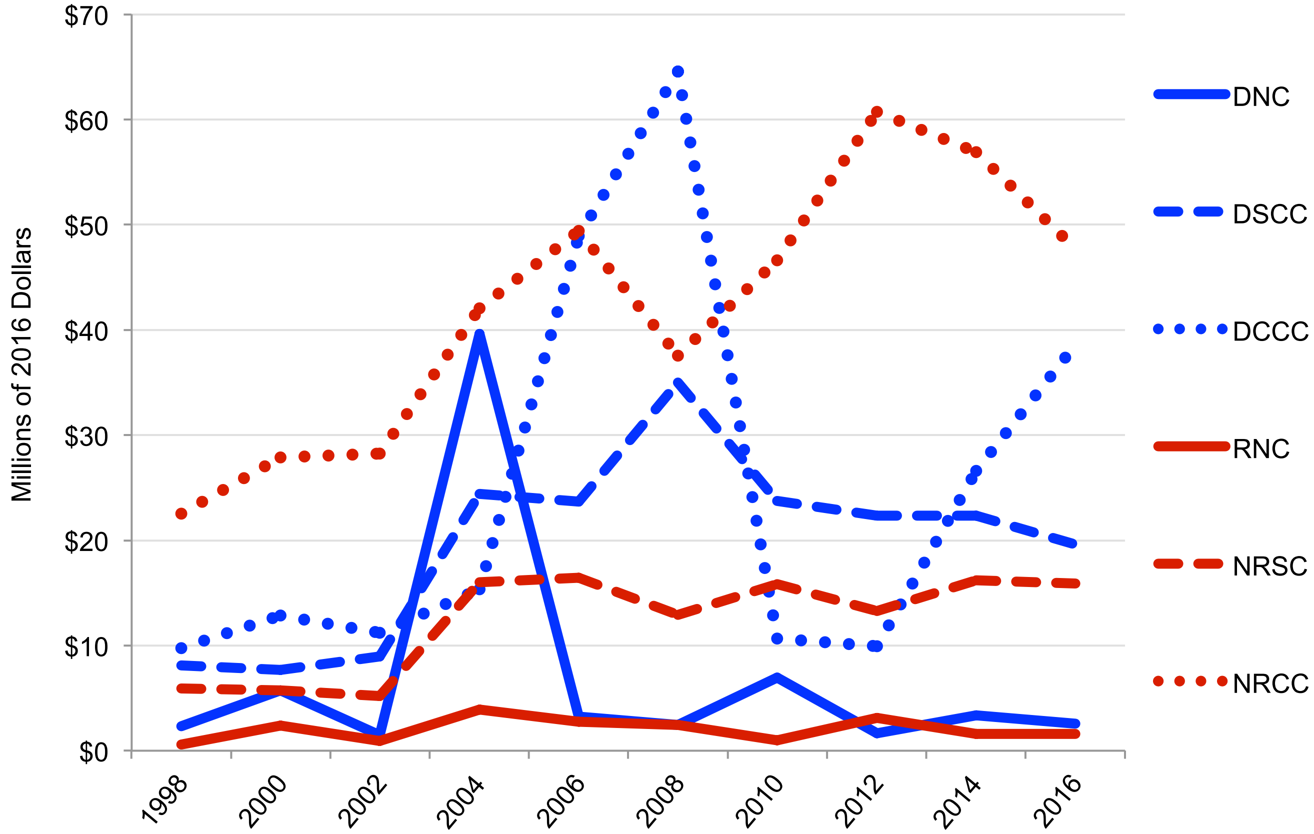


Figure 3c: Individual Contributions to DCCC and NRCC by Amount, 2000-2016 (percentage)



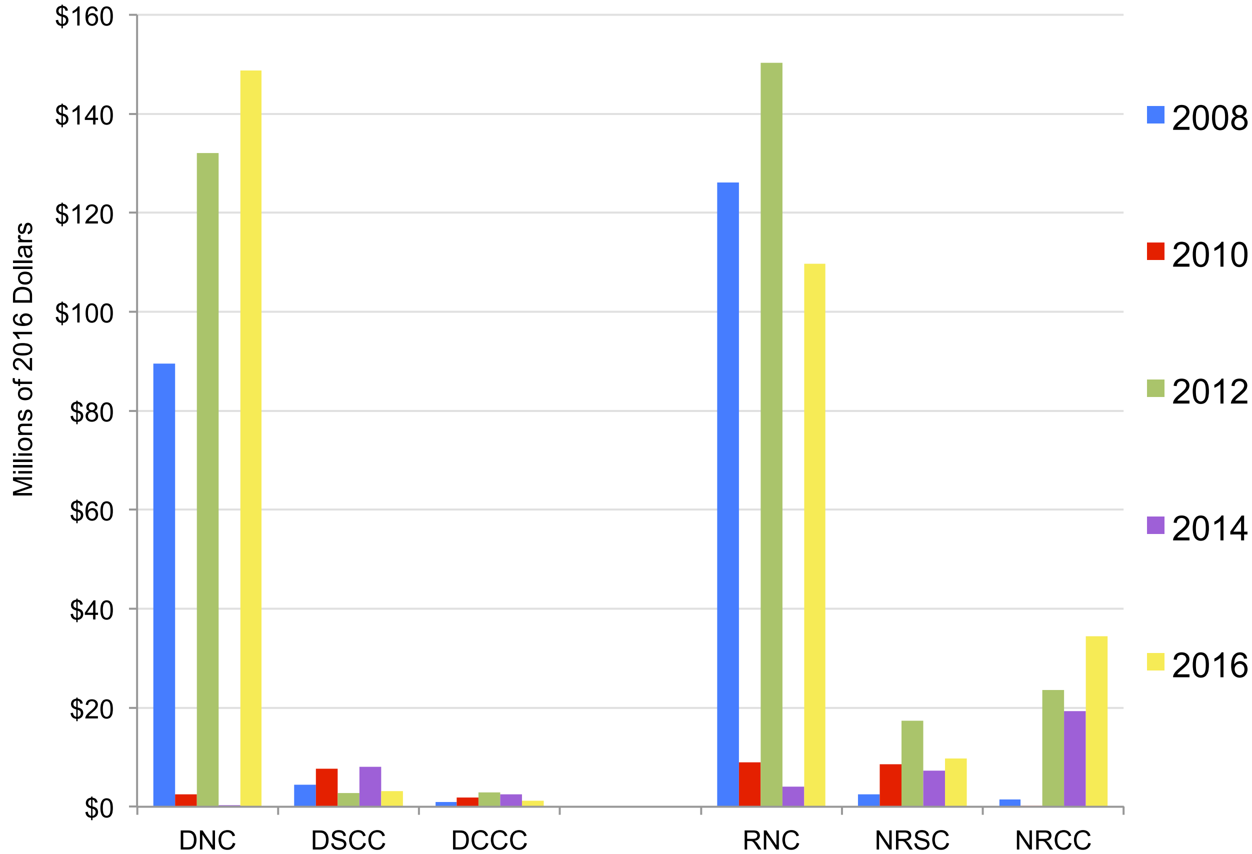
Source: Compiled by author from FEC. 2013. "2011-2012 Election Cycle Data Summaries through 12/31/12: Party Committees" at https://transition.fec.gov/press/summaries/2012/ElectionCycle/24m_NatlParty.shtml; FEC. 2015. "2013-2014 Election Cycle Data Summaries through 12/31/14: Party Committees" at https://transition.fec.gov/press/summaries/2014/ElectionCycle/24m_NatlParty.shtml; FEC. 2017. "2015-2016 Election Cycle Data Summaries through 12/31/16: Party Committees" at https://transition.fec.gov/press/summaries/2016/ElectionCycle/24m_NatlParty.shtml (accessed October 30, 2017).

Figure 4: Party Receipts from "Other Committees," 1998-2016 (in millions of 2016 dollars)



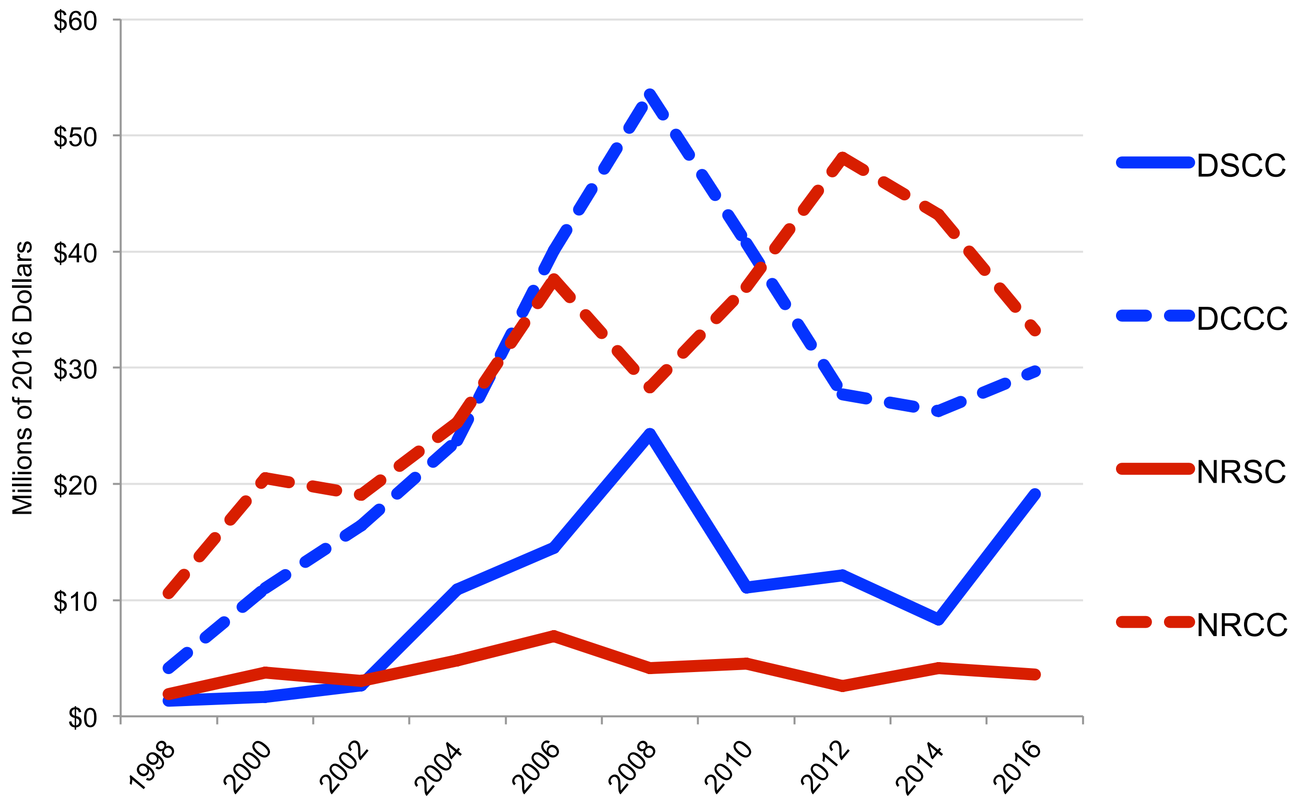
Source: Compiled by author from Federal Election Commission data. “Other Committees” are mostly political action committees.

Figure 5: National Party Receipts from Joint Fundraising Committees, 2008-2016 (in millions of 2016 dollars)



Source: Compiled by author from Center for Responsive Politics data. See Center for Responsive Politics, "Joint Fundraising Committees Recipients" at https://www.opensecrets.org/jfc/top.php?type=R&cycle=2016 (accessed June 20, 2017).

Figure 6: Member Contributions to Their Congressional Party Committees, 1998-2016 (in millions of 2016 dollars)



Source: Compiled by author from Federal Election Commission data.

Figure 7a: Party Spending on Senate Candidates, 2000 - 2016
(in millions of 2016 dollars)

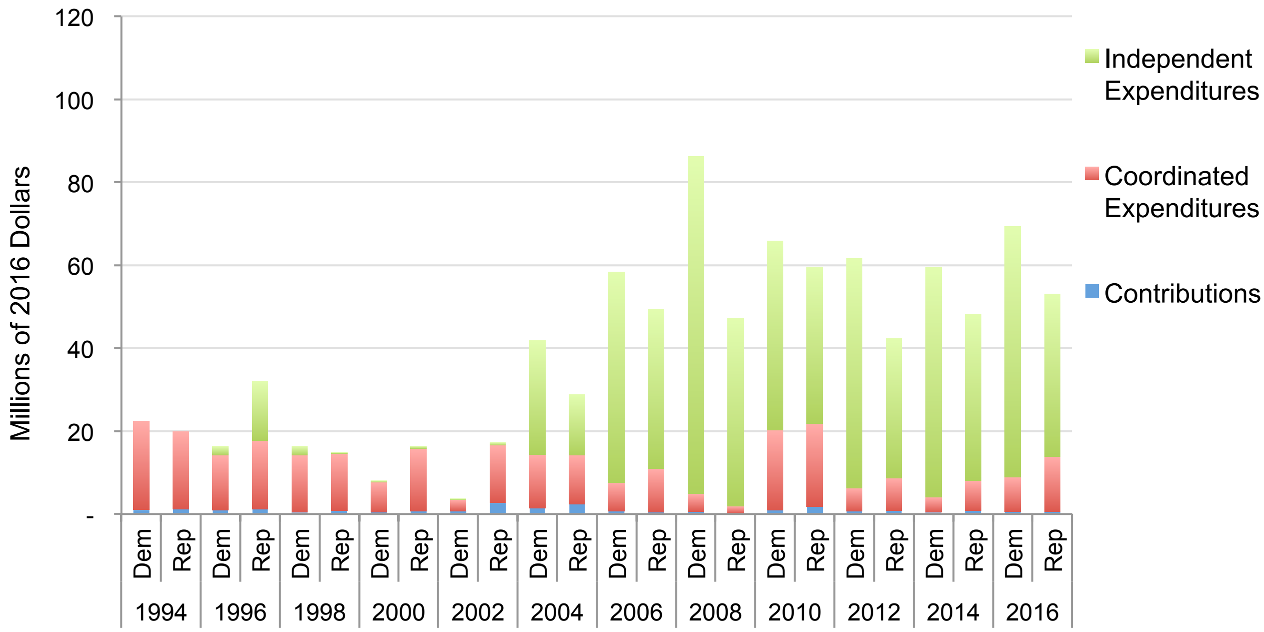
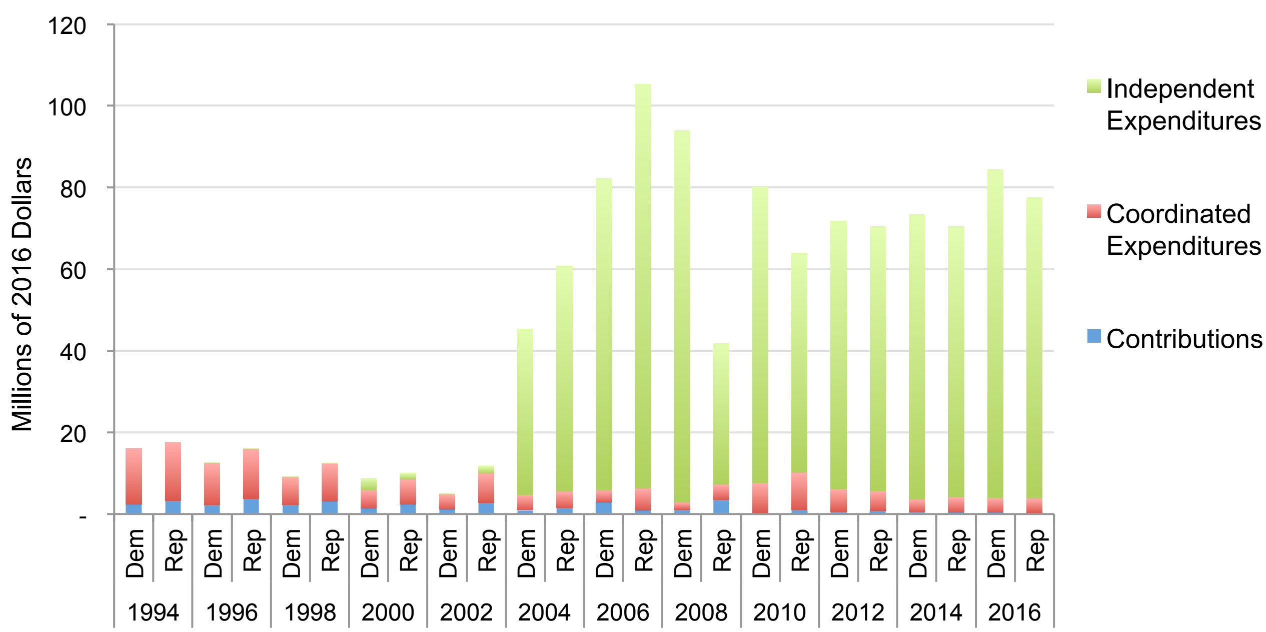
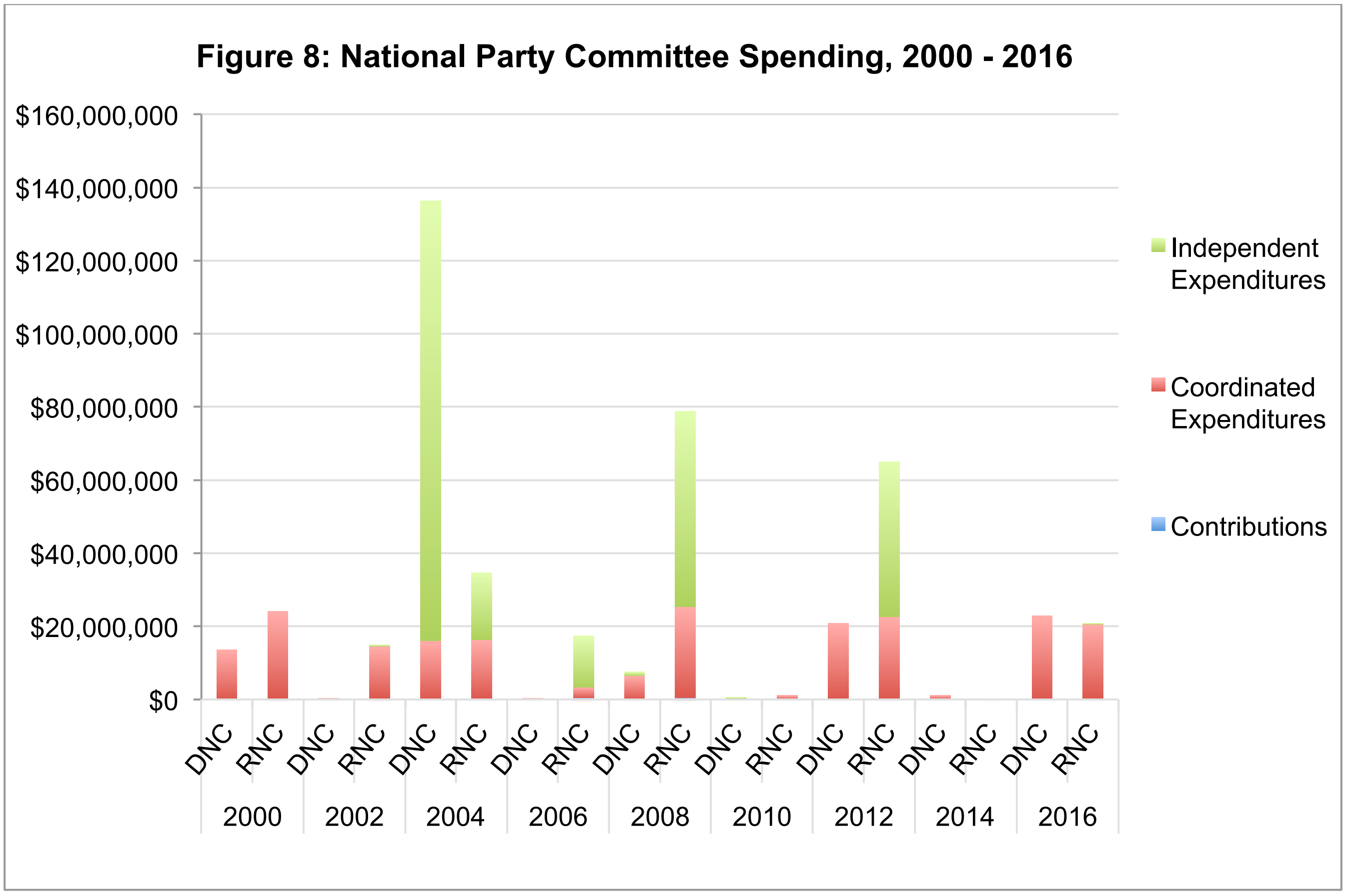


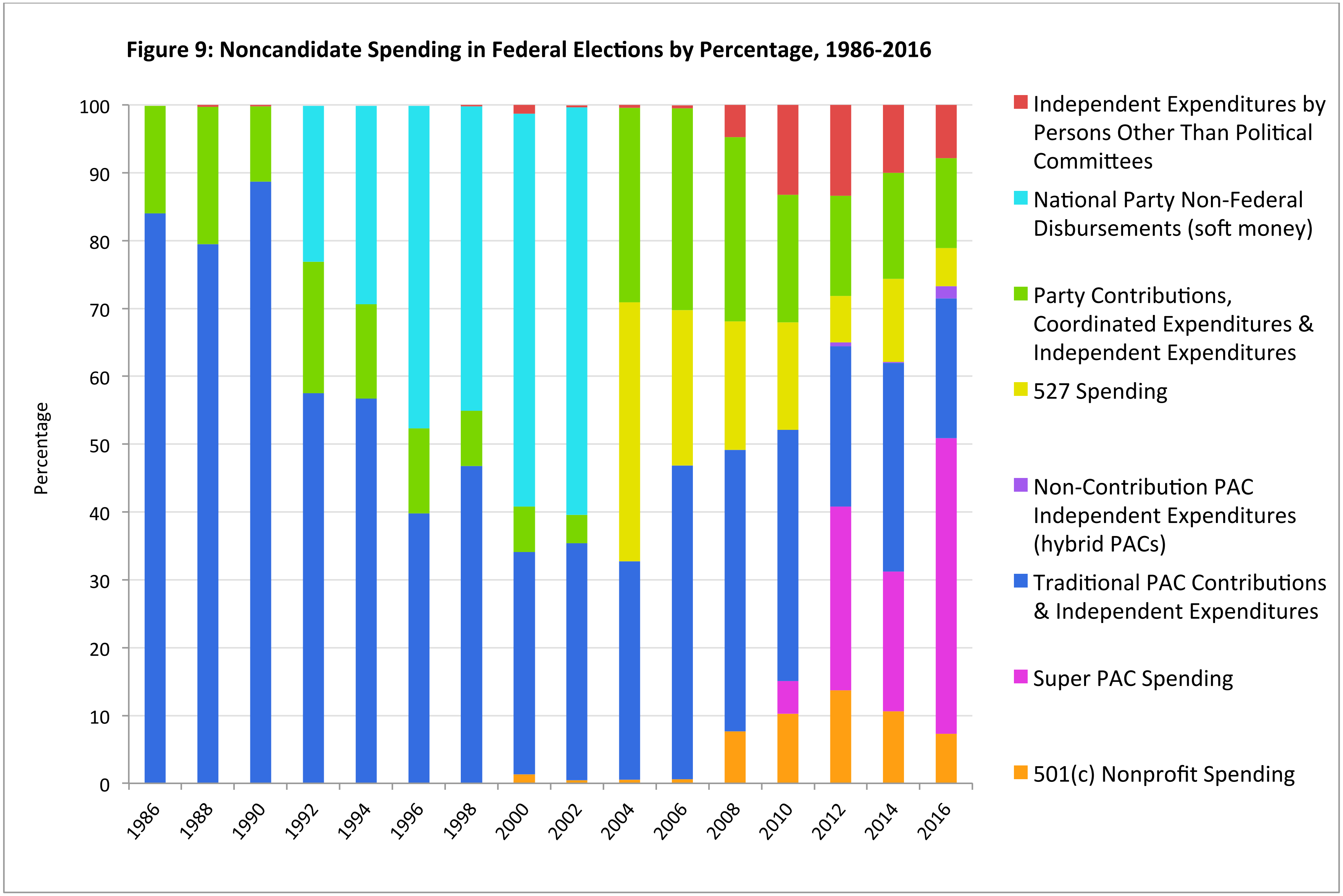
Figure 7b: Party Spending on House Candidates, 2000 - 2016
(in millions of 2016 dollars)



Source: Compiled by authors from: Brookings Institution. 2017. *Vital Statistics on Congress: Data on the U.S. Congress,* updated January 2017, at https://www.brookings.edu/multi-chapter-report/vital-statistics-on-congress/ (accessed March 31, 2017); and Federal Election Commission. 2017. "2015-2016 Election Cycle Data Summaries through 12/31/16: Party Committees" (accessed May 9, 2017).



Source: Federal Election Commission. 2017. "2015-2016 Election Cycle Data Summaries through 12/31/16: Party Committees." https://transition.fec.gov/press/summaries/2016/ElectionCycle/24m_NatlParty.shtml (accessed October 17, 2017).



Source: Compiled by author from Federal Election Commission and Center for Responsive Politics data, various dates.

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