

# Texans are heaviest givers to new Republican super PACs

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[By TRISH CHOATE and WAQAS NAEEM, Scripps Howard News Service](#)

WASHINGTON - Texans are the heaviest givers to new big-money groups seeking to influence elections through unlimited spending intended to help Republicans.

And Lone Star State donors are betting far more on the presidential race -- not the primaries.

They are anteing up wads of cash to back the candidate who rises to the top of the GOP ticket -- whoever that turns out to be -- to face off with President Barack Obama.

With \$28.3 million in donations, Texas leads the way among states in early giving to super political action committees from January 2011 through January 2012, according to the latest Federal Election Commission filings obtained through the watchdog group Sunlight Foundation.

Texas donors are focusing on American Crossroads, giving \$16.9 million to make up 72 percent of the anti-Obama super PAC's kitty.

"They're not in love with any of the current candidates," Paul Fabrizio, a political science professor at McMurry University in Abilene, Texas, said. "But they still want to achieve a goal, and that goal is to get rid of President Obama."

The super PACs offering a new, controversial avenue for Texas campaign cash were born after a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2010 lifted limits on political spending by corporations and wealthy individuals.

Super PACs can't legally coordinate their activities with candidates or their campaigns. But they can raise unlimited sums from individuals, corporations, unions and other groups and then spend it to support or attack a particular candidate.

This election cycle is the first in which super PACs have played a role in the presidential race, and they're bombarding the airwaves with ads propping up or tearing down candidates.

To carry out their mission, super PACs have raised \$126 million and spent nearly \$59 million, according to the Sunlight Foundation, a nonpartisan advocate for openness and transparency in government.

No super PAC devoted primarily to Democrats ranks in the Texas top 10 by contributions. But at the national level, Democrat-leaning PACs are clearly waiting just offstage to spend millions of their own targeting the Republican who will oppose Obama.

The Obama campaign recently reversed its stance of shunning super PACs to support giving to Priorities USA Action to speed up sluggish contributions. That PAC had raised \$4.5 million by the end of January, and, on the heels of the Obama campaign reversal, comedian Bill Maher announced last week his own donation of \$1 million to the organization.

The Republican PAC heavyweight American Crossroads, advised by political mover-and-shaker Karl Rove, organized in 2010 and was one of the first super PACS. The group is planning to pummel Obama with negative ads during the presidential campaign, political observers say.

"The primary focus for American Crossroads in 2012 is the presidential election," spokesman Jonathan Collegio said. "We'll also invest heavily in Senate and House races."

A Texan played heavily in building up the American Crossroads war chest, highlighting what some see as an imbalance in contributions. Over the course of about a year, nearly 63.5 percent of all donations from Texans to all super PACs were less than \$1,000 each. But a single businessman anted up millions.

Dallas businessman Harold Simmons and his holding company, Contran Corp., shoveled \$14.2 million into super PACS. Most of it -- \$12 million - went to American Crossroads.

He gave smaller amounts to the campaigns of Texas Gov. Rick Perry, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney -- all Republicans.

Simmons is the top super PAC donor in Texas and nationally, but other rich Texans such as homebuilder Bob Perry -- \$3.6 million given at least -- and Omni Hotels magnet Robert Rowling -- \$1.1 million at least -- have done their share to boost the state's political profile.

Attempts to seek comment from Perry and Rowling were unsuccessful, and a Contran Corp. employee declined comment Friday.

The names showing up on super PAC donation lists aren't new in Texas Republican politics, said Craig McDonald, director of government watchdog group Texans for Public Justice.

They've been donating all along to state races, McDonald said.

"One thing that the super PACs do is they kind of mirror the Texas political culture in that Texas has never had any limits on campaign contributions," he said.

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