



Mile High Money: Special Interest Spending in Denver's 2015 City Elections

Denver's campaign finance rules for municipal elections are overall more lax than state or federal elections. **Denver's municipal ordinances governing political spending and disclosure to voters were enacted before the 2010 *Citizens United* decision and have not been updated to address increased political activity by corporations and Super PACs that seek to influence voters with unlimited spending.** Unlike in state elections where direct contribution of corporate funds to candidates is banned, Denver municipal candidates may receive contributions from PACs, unions, corporations, and businesses subject to the same limits as contributions from individuals. Denver's contribution limits (per election cycle) are \$3,000 for Mayor, \$2,000 for Auditor, Clerk and Councilmembers at-large, and \$1,000 for District Councilmembers, much higher than state candidate limits. Also, PACs which contribute money to municipal candidates are not subject to any contribution limits – unlike their state and federal counterparts. Finally, the disclosure requirements under the Denver ordinance do not provide very much information to voters about who is trying to influence their vote in municipal elections. This report seeks to distill information for Denver citizens from the 2015 election.

1. Contributions to Candidates

- The total amount of all contributions to all candidates running in the 2015 Denver municipal elections was **\$4,626,951.65**.
- The total amount of all **non-individual contributions** (from corporations or PACs) was **\$1,189,815.35**. This represents **26%** of all money raised by all candidates in the 2015 elections.

Corporate Contributions

- **77%** of all money received by candidates from non-individual sources was **corporate or business** contributions for a total of **\$916,726.23**.
 - This includes both direct contributions of money to candidates and “in-kind” contributions of free food or office space for candidate functions.
 - The candidate with the overall highest amount of **corporate or business** contributions was Mayor Michael Hancock with **\$372,659.51**. The highest district candidate total was Councilman Albus Brooks with **\$80,956.34**.
 - **Top industries represented** by these corporate and business contributions were real estate development, lawyers, consultants and lobbyists.

PAC Contributions

- The other **\$273,089.12** (or **23%**) of non-individual contributions to all Denver candidates came from PACs.
 - The candidate with the overall highest amount of **PAC** contributions was Auditor candidate Chris Nevitt with **\$83,821.87**. The highest district candidate total was candidate Halisi Vinson with **\$9,950**.
- **Union PACs** comprise the majority of this category with **\$120,750.00** of total PAC contributions. This is equal to **10%** of the overall amount of non-individual contributions to all candidates.

- The candidate with the overall highest amount of **Union PAC** contributions was Auditor candidate Chris Nevitt with **\$29,500**. The highest district candidate total was candidate Halisi Vinson with **\$9,250**.
- **Business PACs** contributed a total of **\$90,750** to candidates, or **8%** of the total non-individual contributions to all candidates.
 - The candidate with the overall highest amount of **Business PAC** contributions was Mayor Michael Hancock with **\$32,800**. The highest district candidate total was Councilman Chris Herndon with **\$4,750**.
 - **Top industries** represented by these business PACs are realtors, house and apartment owners, restaurants and auto dealers.
- **Other PACs** contributed the remaining **\$61,589.12** to candidates (**5%** of the total non-individual contributions to all candidates)
 - These are mostly other candidate committees, leadership PACs of state officials, or general political affiliation PACs that support candidates.

2. Outside Spending in Support of Candidates

- Outside PACs spent **\$178,250.55** on direct political activity to support specific candidates, usually mailers, phone calls to voters and paid canvassing. All this reported spending was in support of district councilmember candidates.
- The largest amount of this spending was done by **2 single-candidate PACs** set up by outside funders to specifically support district councilmember candidates Halisi Vinson and Liz Adams. **\$83,484.44** or **47%** of all outside spending was spent in support of these two candidates – and they both lost.
- **Business PACs** spent **\$65,396.95** to support various candidates directly (**37%** of outside spending). The largest player was the **National Realtors PAC** which spent most of that money to support three district councilmember candidates: Liz Adams, Jolon Clark, and Kendra Black. **2 out of the 3 supported candidates won**.
- **Union PACs** spent **\$29,369.16** in outside support for endorsed candidates, about **16%** of the total outside spending. This money was spent to support district councilmember candidates Aaron Greco (who lost) and Stacie Gilmore (who won).

Colorado Ethics Watch reviewed information from the Denver Clerk’s campaign finance reports for the 2015 municipal elections to create this picture of political spending for Denver voters. First, we downloaded the spreadsheets of all contributions and expenditures from 2012 through the 2015 post-runoff reporting deadline from the Clerk’s office. After removing all incumbent candidates that were not running for re-election, we manually categorized and separated spending and contributions by candidates, corporations, PACs, individuals and unions because this information is not required as part of the campaign finance reporting system in Denver. Where possible, we cross-checked names of entities with the state TRACER system for PAC reporting in order to determine if a contribution came from a corporate entity itself or from an affiliated PAC. While direct contributions to candidates reported in Denver’s system name specific candidates, political spending by PACs in support of candidates is not required to identify the candidate supported by that spending. To find that information, we cross-checking TRACER filings and other organizational documents filed by PACs with the Denver Clerk (which are not included in the general data file).