

DARK MONEY

Impact Campaign Overview

DARK MONEY, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2018 and which *The Nation* listed as “the most valuable documentary” on its Progressive Honor Roll, examines one of the greatest present threats to American democracy: the influence of untraceable corporate money on our elections and elected officials.

The film takes viewers to Montana — a frontline in the fight to preserve fair elections nationwide — to follow an intrepid local journalist working to expose the real-life impacts of the U.S. Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision.

Through this gripping story, DARK MONEY uncovers the shocking and vital truth of how U.S. elections are bought and sold.

What Was Our Impact Goal?

To develop DARK MONEY’s impact campaign strategy, the impact team spoke to movement leaders, assessed the landscape of organizations working to defeat dark money, read relevant research and polling, and monitored media coverage about the impact of dark money and the efforts to fight it.

It quickly became apparent that there was overwhelming public concern for the issue of money in politics that was matched with a correspondingly overwhelming sense of pessimism that anything could be done about it.

We recognized this as an opportunity to educate audiences about the wide range of policy and practice changes that could be undertaken and were, in fact, being actively pursued by an influential, relatively well-resourced, and bipartisan group of people and organizations, ranging from enforcement and safeguarding of existing disclosure laws to a Constitutional amendment to overturn the Citizens United decision.

In other words, **TO HAVE THE GREATEST IMPACT, WE NEEDED TO USE THE FILM’S POWER TO REACH AND ENGAGE AUDIENCES TO GENERATE SUPPORT — CONTRIBUTIONS AND HUMAN POWER — FOR EXISTING EFFORTS TO DIMINISH THE IMPACT OF MONEY ON OUR COLLECTIVE PROCESS.**

How Did We Intend to Achieve Our Goal?

To counter the pessimism that nothing could be done to get big money out of politics, we determined that we needed to educate audiences and communicate about the work of the national and local efforts underway around the country to improve and sustain disclosure laws, increase public financing of elections, and — through investigative journalism — "follow the money." **WE NEEDED TO DISMANTLE AND DEMYSTIFY THE ISSUE, MAKE IT SMALLER AND SURMOUNTABLE, AND DEMONSTRATE THAT GROUPS LED BY PEOPLE JUST LIKE THEM WERE MAKING SIGNIFICANT CHANGE,** sometimes in their own backyards.

And for those audiences who already recognized their capacity to contribute to policy change — the more politically engaged activists in the theater — **WE NEEDED TO HELP THEM SEE THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN DARK MONEY AND THE ISSUES THAT MATTERED MOST TO THEM.** In other words, they needed to know that they weren't going to achieve their policy goals if they didn't confront the dark money interests that were trying to stop them in their tracks.

What Did We Do?

WE BUILT PARTNERSHIPS.

We built relationships with national campaign finance/democracy reform organizations. We built an understanding of their missions and goals and thoughtfully considered how DARK MONEY could help them to achieve them.

These partners...

- informed our thinking
- generated a steady pipeline of calls to action for our audiences
- participated in Q&As
- promoted screenings
- amplified word of mouth for the national broadcast
- called on their members and networks to host community screenings
- hosted screenings of their own
- and identified opportunities for non-theatrical screenings

WE TOOK ADVANTAGE OF FESTIVAL AND THEATRICAL SCREENING Q&AS.

Beginning with DARK MONEY's festival run, we developed a model for Q&As that included the filmmakers and those who appeared onscreen, as well as local campaign finance/democracy reform advocates, local elected officials, and journalists who could relate what happened on screen (and in Montana) to what was happening locally.

Our intention was both to make the story as relevant as possible and to provide audiences with pertinent calls to action — from supporting local reform initiatives to subscribing to their local paper to support investigative journalism.

For example, at the Nashville Film Festival, we used the Q&A to highlight local investigative news coverage of recent dark money efforts to squash a public transit bill — a favored pastime of dark money behemoth Americans for Prosperity (aka “the Koch brothers”). In Boston, Matt Carroll, a legendary member of *The Boston Globe* “Spotlight” team that uncovered the sexual abuse scandal in the Boston diocese of the Catholic Church, moderated a Q&A at that city’s theatrical premiere of the film. His participation spoke to the ongoing power of investigative journalism to confront vile abuses of power.

We did 34 of these screening Q&As in 2018.

WE ORGANIZED NON-THEATRICAL SCREENINGS.

We organized a series of non-theatrical screenings that targeted journalists, students, and campaign finance/democracy reform advocates, i.e., those who were likely to be more politically engaged or aware of campaign finance issues than our general audiences, but who could still benefit from making connections that would spur them to get even more involved.

While we did outreach, many of these screenings resulted from proactive outreach from the organizations who hosted the screenings and saw DARK MONEY as an opportunity to convene and mobilize their members and constituents.

Nationally known journalists like John Diaz at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, David Bornstein of *The New York Times*, John Dunbar of the Center for Public Integrity, and Lee Fang of *The Intercept* were some of those who participated in these Q&As.

Our screening partners included...

American Promise National Citizen Leadership Conference
Investigative Reporters and Editors Conference
National Institute on Money in Politics annual gathering
Global Climate Action Summit (in partnership with the Hip Hop Caucus)
Council on Governmental Ethics Laws annual conference
Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School of Government
Wellstone Action's Roots Camp
University of Missouri's Center on Documentary Journalism

WE PROMOTED COMMUNITY SCREENINGS.

In 2018, PBS made DARK MONEY available for community screenings through the POV Community Network for two months. In that short time (and the only period for which we have data), we heavily promoted the opportunity, resulting in 68 community screenings around the country — a record for POV.

National and local advocates like Outlaw Dirty Money in Arizona, Arizona Advocacy Network, New Mexico Ethics Watch, American Promise, Clean Missouri, Fair Elections NY, and Take Back Our Republic were able to use these screenings to highlight campaign finance issues on the ballot in 2018, as well as efforts to pass a constitutional amendment to overturn the Citizens United decision.

We also produced a series of clips and [a discussion guide](#) to help groups to facilitate discussions about issues raised by DARK MONEY, from

WE PROMOTED BROADCAST VIEWING PARTIES.

On October 1, DARK MONEY premiered on PBS' POV. To celebrate, we coordinated 200 "viewing parties" around the country, with friends, families, advocates, and activists gathering to watch and discuss the film.

POV supported the effort — and encouraged social media posts and online word of mouth about DARK MONEY — by creating a promotion through which 50 names were randomly drawn and winners received "party packs" with POV swag, a DARK MONEY poster, popcorn, chocolate and other "goodies."

WE SUPPORTED JOURNALISTS TO FOLLOW THE MONEY.

We invested in the development of a plug-in that could be used by journalists, newsrooms and others to allow readers to track political donations in the context of news stories, leveraging National Institute on Money in Politics campaign finance data and eventually turning the project over to the Institute to sustain.

We also made small grants to local and nonprofit journalists to support their investigative efforts to "follow the money." For example, we made a grant to Kelsey Ryan at The Beacon, an independent nonprofit news outlet covering Kansas and Missouri. Ryan, a former investigative reporter for the *Kansas City Star*, said she had been inspired to start *The Beacon* by John Adams, the investigative journalist at the center of DARK MONEY. Adams' own independent nonprofit news outlet, *Montana Free Press*, thrived — building a formidable staff, winning awards, and generating revenue and grants — due to his obvious skills as a leader and reporter but with a contribution from the attention he received through the film.

Finally, we provided funding to support the launch of the Chuck Johnson Capitol Reporting Fund to support reporters to carry on Chuck Johnson's legacy as an investigative political reporter in Helena, Montana's capitol. Chuck, like John Adams, was a participant in the making of DARK MONEY, as well as the impact campaign.

WE BROUGHT THE CONVERSATION TO THE CLASSROOM.

We worked with POV and their vendor, BlueShift Education, to produce [a lesson plan](#) for teachers that used a media literacy lens to help students dissect campaign ads with the goal of helping them understand who is paying for political advertising— and why.

WE KEPT THE CONVERSATION ALIVE ONLINE.

Beginning with the film's premiere at Sundance, we shared regular news updates about the movement to diminish the power of money in politics, as well as calls to action from our partners. The [DARK MONEY website](#) featured a dark money primer — informed by the expertise of our partners and with an emphasis on solutions to addressing the issue of money in politics.

Did We Have an Impact?

While it is difficult to isolate the impact of a single film within a broader context of increased awareness of the need for campaign finance and democracy reform and a more engaged citizenry overall, we believe that DARK MONEY has contributed to increasing the volume of that dialogue and the level of engagement by bringing the issues to more audiences around the country. Through monitoring, we saw a marked increase in media coverage of the issue, letters to the editor, discussion of the issues by local and elected officials, and newly proposed legislation.

And we believe that this clamor for change will persist, fueled by the reality that the problem is just not going away. Most Americans want to see money out of politics, if only those that they elected to do so would represent their wishes.