News

Hundreds of people gather at the Nebraska Capitol to protest against a proposed abortion ban, in Lincoln, on May 16, 2023. Millions of dollars in last-minute money is pouring into the battle over a pair of abortion-related ballot measures in Nebraska. One seeks to block abortion rights; the other would enshrine abortion rights within the state constitution. (AP/Margery Beck, file)

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Millions of dollars in last-minute money is pouring into the battle over a pair of abortion-related ballot measures in Nebraska, and it is coming through an unusual and circuitous route.

Much of that cash is being spent by a new group called Common Sense Nebraska, which has shelled out a remarkable $4.9 million in the three weeks since it was formed, largely on ads opposing an initiative that would enshrine abortion rights in the state constitution and supporting a separate initiative that would ban abortion.

As of the most recent campaign finance filings, the organization still had another $500,000 in the bank.

Nebraska is one of 10 states with abortion-related measures on the ballot. Last week, the National Catholic Reporter and Mother Jones reported that Catholic organizations around the country had contributed more than $1.9 million to the fight, with millions more flowing in from wealthy individuals with close ties to the church.

But what's especially notable about the Common Sense Nebraska spending is the labyrinthine path that the money has taken. Most of the funds appear to have originated with the conservative, billionaire Ricketts family and with the conservative group CatholicVote, both of which have made the bulk of their donations since mid-October, according to state campaign finance records.

Common Sense Nebraska then routed the Ricketts and CatholicVote money to the campaigns of three local political candidates, including two incumbents running for reelection to the University of Nebraska's board of regents.

These local candidates, in turn, purchased massive amounts of television air time, which they then donated to the anti-abortion-rights PAC Protect Women & Children for ads about the ballot initiatives.

Elements of this arrangement were first reported last week by local news outlets, including the Lincoln Journal Star. Gavin Geis, the executive director of Common Cause Nebraska — a watchdog group unrelated to Common Sense Nebraska — told the Journal Star that shuffling money this way is not illegal but obscures the true source of donations and provides significant benefits for the political committees involved.

"By contributing airtime to ballot initiatives, candidates can shield donors from disclosing their support for the proposal and give them a financial advantage over their opponents due to federal rules that give candidates discounted airtime," Geis said.

None of the candidates participating in this funding arrangement — University of Nebraska Regents Jim Scheer and Robert Schafer, and state legislative candidate Tanya Storer — responded to requests for comment for this story.

The sudden spending by Common Sense Nebraska has greatly increased the amount of money available to abortion rights opponents in the state. Through early October, Protect Women & Children, the PAC leading the anti-abortion ballot push, had raised and spent just over $4 million on the two initiatives. Almost all that money came from the Ricketts and another wealthy family, the Peeds; both families are well-known donors to Nebraska's Catholic dioceses. But since Common Sense Nebraska was established on Oct. 14, it has raised an additional $5.4 million, almost all of which ended up going to Protect Women & Children in one form or another.

Of that $5.4 million, Common Sense Nebraska has donated $3.2 million to Scheer. Scheer, in turn, purchased $3.2 million worth of commercial airtime, which he then donated to Protect Women & Children for anti-abortion ads.

Another $687,000 of Common Sense Nebraska funds went to Schafer, who donated $667,000 worth of advertising time to Protect Women & Children. And Common Sense Nebraska contributed $283,000 to Storer's campaign, which has made $231,000 worth of in-kind advertising donations to the Protect Women & Children.

Common Sense Nebraska has also donated $781,000 directly to Protect Women & Children, including donations as recently as Nov. 1. More donations may have occurred that have yet to be filed with the state campaign finance system.

The majority of the money moving through Common Sense Nebraska's coffers — $3.9 million — was donated by Marlene Ricketts, the wife of TD Ameritrade founder Joe Ricketts. Another $830,000 was donated by the group CatholicVote on Oct. 21 and 23.

The Ricketts family are prominent Catholics, and Joe Ricketts has given millions to the Catholic Church in Nebraska, including an estimated $34 million on the creation of a Catholic religious retreat center.The Ricketts family is also well known for their ownership of the Chicago Cubs baseball team and their involvement in Nebraska state politics. Joe Ricketts' eldest son, Pete Ricketts, a Republican, previously served as the governor and is currently Nebraska’s junior senator.

Under the leadership of its president, Brian Burch, CatholicVote has become a major player in conservative Catholic political circles. Like much of the MAGA-aligned right, the Wisconsin-based organization was initially reluctant to embrace Donald Trump. In 2016, it refused to endorse him, saying he was "problematic in too many ways."

More recently, CatholicVote has touted Trump's praise for the organization. In 2020, the group drew national media attention for using geofencing to capture Catholics' cell phone data while they were attending Mass. The $10 million project then sent targeted political ads to Catholics in battleground states. In this cycle's Republican primary, CatholicVote hosted a rally for Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis but eventually endorsed Trump.

Initially a project of the Catholic branch of the Christian Coalition, CatholicVote later became part of the Fidelis Center for Law and Policy, founded by Burch in 2005. Fidelis' most recent tax documents, from 2022, indicate revenue of $9.4 million — up from $4.8 million the previous year.

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.