

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR
DARK MONEY

FOLLOW THE MONEY

**"A POTENT...
HARROWING
PORTRAIT OF
DEMOCRACY
UNDER THREAT."**

VARIETY

**"PINPOINTS HOW
SMEAR
CAMPAIGNS
FUNCTION IN
AN ELECTION."**

THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER



**DARK
MONEY**

PBS DISTRIBUTION PRESENTS A BIG SKY FILM AND MEERKAT MEDIA COLLECTIVE AND BIG MOUTH PRODUCTIONS "DARK MONEY"
IN ASSOCIATION WITH JUSTFILMS/FORD FOUNDATION AND TOPIC STUDIOS EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MICHAEL BLOOM ADAM PINCUS NANCY STEPHENS RICK ROSENTHAL
DAVID J. CORNFELD AND LINDA A. CORNFELD PRODUCED BY KIMBERLY REED, ERIC PHILLIPS-HORST AND JAY ARTHUR STERREBERG
EDITED BY JAY ARTHUR STERREBERG ORIGINAL SCORE BY MIRIAM CUTLER PRODUCED BY KIMBERLY REED AND KATY CHEVIGNY DIRECTED BY KIMBERLY REED **DARKMONEYFILM.COM**



ABOUT *DARK MONEY*

Dark Money is available to screen on major streaming platforms.

Running Time: 1 hour and 38 minutes

This discussion guide is copywritten by Far Star Action Fund, 2023.

Dark Money, a political thriller, examines one of the greatest threats to American democracy: the influence of untraceable corporate money on our elections and elected officials. The film follows an intrepid journalist working to uncover the real-life impacts of the US Supreme Court's Citizens United decision. *Dark Money* exposes the shocking and vital truth of how American elections are bought and sold.

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS

1. Have you heard the term dark money before? If so, how would you define it?
2. Have you followed an election before? If so, which election? What did you learn as you followed that election?
3. How politically engaged would you say you are? If you are not very engaged politically, why do you think that is? What turns you off about politics? What motivates you to get involved?
4. What issues are most important to you as a voter? What do you think you can do to make sure elected officials represent you in terms of these issues?
5. When you turn 18, are you planning to register to vote and vote in local and national elections? If you're already 18, are you registered to vote? Do you have a plan? What motivates you to register?
6. Do you think voting political education and engagement matters? Why? If not, what would change your mind?
7. What do you hope to gain from this screening and/or event?

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

When I heard about the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision on the radio in 2010, I froze in the middle of my apartment. Like many Americans, I found the ideas that corporations are people and money is speech to be ludicrous. But worse than that was the easily foreseeable outcome that political power would be controlled by fewer and fewer, richer and richer people. And I knew that I was not alone. Approximately 80% of Americans have consistently disapproved of this decision (CBS Poll, 2016).

For a few years, I didn't quite know what to do about my frustration with our crippled campaign finance system. As a filmmaker, my first impulse was to make a documentary about it.

When I heard my home state of Montana would be the only state to fight back against Citizens United in the U.S. Supreme Court, everything changed. I knew I could tell a compelling story of campaign finance through the eyes of real people. I grabbed the best camera I could get and started filming.

The only way to really understand how the dark money shell game works is to follow the nonprofit corporations over multiple election cycles as they pop up, disintegrate, reconstitute, and wreak havoc once again. It usually takes journalists years to uncover the damage that dark money causes, and by that time it is too late.

I played this game of Whac-A-Mole over three election cycles in what became the perfect environment to tell the campaign finance story. Montana was not only the first and hardest hit with dark money but also the state that fought back the hardest with grassroots citizen outrage. *Dark Money* puts a human face to that fight.

Told through the lives of real people, our film makes a concerted effort to share stories from both sides of the aisle. It was important to me to remind folks that campaign spending is not just a liberal or conservative issue, and it affects all Americans, not just Montanans, regardless of ideology.

The role money plays in our politics has never been more crucial. Or timely.

- Kimberly Reed (Director/Producer)

LANGUAGE MATTERS - USEFUL TERMS

- Citizens United is a controversial Supreme Court ruling from January 2020 that reversed long-standing campaign finance restrictions and now allows corporations and other outside groups to spend unlimited funds on elections.
- Dark Money is a term used to describe funds raised to influence elections by nonprofit organizations that are not required to disclose the identities of their donors.
- Democracy is defined as a government by the people, or a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections.
- Free Speech is the right to speak, write, and share ideas and opinions without facing punishment from the government. The First Amendment protects this right by prohibiting Congress from making laws that curtail freedom of speech ([Cornell Law School](#)).
- In-Kind Contributions are non-monetary contributions. Goods or services offered free or at less than the usual charge result in an in-kind contribution ([Federal Election Commission](#)).
- Political Action Committee (PAC) in U.S. politics is an organization whose purpose is to raise and distribute campaign funds to candidates seeking political office. PACs are generally formed by corporations, labor unions, trade associations, or other organizations or individuals and channel the voluntary contributions they raise to candidates for elective offices (Britannica). (Learn more about [PACs and Super PACs](#).)

DEMOCRACY AND THE INFLUENCE OF DARK MONEY

Often, there is an assumption that the presence of elections is what is viewed as essential to democracy. However, dark money demonstrates that simply the act of voting in and of itself is not enough to guarantee that there is a fair and open democracy in place.

Dark money can hinder voters' understanding of the true goals and intentions of the candidates they are voting for and the policies these candidates may seek to implement. The growth of dark money over the last decade demonstrates the power of grassroots organizing and of political activism by young people, because those seeking to drown out those voices realize they can only do so if they use these methods (if they pay for votes and/or access to power through these means).

In assessing the political stances of individuals and organizations involved in the use of dark money, their political goals are consistently emotional and divisive issues for voters. These issues include human rights, access to healthcare, and efforts to shift land use and control from public/state entities to private corporations.

Individuals and organizations working to combat dark money believe voters have a right to know who is trying to influence their vote and who is working to influence the government. This type of transparency or openness will also ensure that individuals who are elected represent the people who voted for them rather than outside interests.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What did you think of the ending of *Dark Money*, in which Art Wittich, the elected official who took dark money donations, was fined but not removed from office?
- Individuals and organizations using dark money are very strategic with the names of PACs and Super PACS. How are these names designed to inspire trust so that voters won't question candidate funding?
- Do you think there are gaps between legislator stances and public polls surrounding various issues, such healthcare and land use? If so, what might these gaps demonstrate about dark money?
- What type of legislation is necessary to counter dark money?
- Besides legislation, what else can be done to counter the influence of dark money? What types of organizing techniques and efforts might be effective? What types of social media efforts or journalistic media efforts could counter the power of dark money?
- Why should you, a young person, care about dark money?

THE POWER OF YOUNG VOTERS – WHY YOUR VOICE MATTERS

Leading up to the 2022 election, the media pushed the idea that young voters wouldn't vote. This couldn't have been more wrong: Young voters turned out in historic numbers.

"This new generation of voters sent a message loud and clear:
This is our democracy, and we demand action."

Carolyn DeWitt, President and Executive Director of Rock the Vote

As more members of Gen-Z become old enough to vote, the influence that young people can have over elections will continue to increase. However, there are efforts across the country to keep young people from getting involved.

Midterm elections often determine who controls the House of Representatives and Senate. Key issues are often at stake in midterm elections that affect young voters directly, such as Voter Rights and Redistricting, Healthcare, Student Loans and more. Young voters are critical to these elections – and these elections in return are critical for young people.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is your voting plan for upcoming elections? How can you encourage and support your peers to become actively engaged?
- What are some of the key issues of importance in this upcoming election?
- What can you do to be informed about dark money and candidates taking it?
- How much do you trust your government representatives to represent you and the issues important to you? How can you make your voice heard around these issues?
- What empowers you as a voter? What do you do when you feel overwhelmed (by dark money, the inaccessibility of politics, or loud voices for extremist views)? How do you combat those feelings and move toward an understanding of your power and the power of a positive community working together for change?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A Guide to Online Youth Radicalization

<https://www.splcenter.org/peril-community-guide>

Citizens United

Citizens United Explained (Brennan Center) <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/citizens-united-explained?ref=indi.ca>

Citizens United and Foreign Influence (The Intercept)

<https://theintercept.com/2016/08/03/citizens-united-foreign-money-us-elections/>

Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (SCOTUS Blog)

<https://www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/citizens-united-v-federal-election-commission/>

End Citizens United <https://endcitizensunited.org/>

Civic Engagement

How To Vote

<https://www.rockthevote.org/>

Helpful Guidance in Writing a Letter to the Editor (and Getting Published)

[Writing an Effective Letter to the Editor | Union of Concerned Scientists \(ucsusa.org\)](#)

Dark Money

Book Review of Dark Money by Jane Mayer

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2017/03/20/book-review-dark-money-the-hidden-history-of-the-billionaires-behind-the-rise-of-the-radical-right-by-jane-mayer/>

Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right by Jane Mayer

Dark Money (Brennan Center) <https://www.brennancenter.org/issues/reform-money-politics/influence-big-money/dark-money>

What is Dark Money? (Open Secrets) <https://www.opensecrets.org/dark-money>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Free Speech/The First Amendment

History of Freedom of Speech (History Channel) <https://www.history.com/topics/united-states-constitution/freedom-of-speech>

What Does Free Speech Mean? The United States Court <https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/educational-resources/about-educational-outreach/activity-resources/what-does>

Public Trust

Americans' Views of Government (Pew Research)
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/public-trust-in-government-1958-2023/>

Public Trust in Government (Pew Research)
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/public-trust-in-government-1958-2023/>

Transparency

Sunlight Foundation <https://sunlightfoundation.com/>

Transparency International <https://us.transparency.org/issue/demand-democracy/>

Add Your Own – Create a Collective List for Additional Learning Below

ABOUT JOURNEYS IN FILM

Journeys in Film is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to the use of film to promote a richer understanding of our diverse and complex world.

JOURNEYS IN FILM RESOURCES AND SERVICES

We create educational resources that spark community discussions and/or promote proactive learning for youth, parents, educators in K-12 and higher education, homeschoolers, and other learning communities. We also **create impact materials for libraries and community organizations.**

We leverage our established educational relationships to **promote materials in active outreach** to these audiences. We **extend the reach of a film and its lifespan** in the educational marketplace and beyond.

We work with a wide array of partners (non-profit organizations, educational institutions, educators, museums, teacher training institutes) to **develop resources tailored to the individuals and communities we work with and the audiences they seek to reach.**

Our resources focus on cultivating human empathy and compassion, developing a deeper knowledge of global issues and current challenges, and encouraging civic engagement.



JOURNEYS IN FILMTM
educating for global understanding

journeysinfilm.org