

Democracy Alliance's success created a new model of political activism that should be watched



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COMMENTARY

McDonalds and Burger King became powerhouse franchises in the 1950's.

Both recognized the rich potential of the "speedy service system." The great American diet on the fly, a stroke of marketing genius that would eat up billions

of dollars from willing fast food aficionados.

In recent years the creation of an umbrella organization whose purpose was to influence federal elections was equally shrewd. It, too, attracted large amounts of money — in this case, from political donors.

The same enterprising spirit that brought us fast food franchises has spawned a new model of political activism.

By coordinating like-minded groups and organizing them into a progressive coalition, several millionaires and billionaires formed a partnership called the Democracy Alliance.

The best known partner was George Soros, a man who strove to usher in a period of Democratic party ascendancy in Washington.

The Alliance directed funds toward groups and organizations that shared their policy objectives and political agenda.

This affiliation of wealthy donors is not required to disclose their contributors and overall financial activity. They essentially serve as a conduit for funding think tanks, voter registration and voter education groups, cyberspace groups, and issue

It is thought that at least 30 such organizations have been funded by the Democracy Alliance. Moreover, there was an attempt to federate the Alliance by forming affiliated organizations in the States, most successfully in Colorado.

The Democracy Alliance has been successful. The Democratic party took control of Congress in 2006 and the White House in 2008. This was after years of Republican domination.

But just as Wendy's imitated McDonalds and Burger King, Republicans are now borrowing from their Democratic opponents. Good ideas rarely go unnoticed

A group of insiders in the Republican party are organizing their own formidable umbrella organization, which according to Mike Allen and Kenneth P. Vogel of Politico, is "based on the model assembled by Democrats early in the decade."

Its goal — to recapture Congress. Like the Democracy Alliance, it is separate from the National Party Organization.

Well known Republican strategist Karl Rove is the main force behind the network that will include 527 groups, 501c(3), and 501c(4) think tanks and issue advocates, and organizations focusing on statewide and legislative offices.

According to Politico, the goal is to raise \$50 to \$70 million to advance the more conservative Republican agenda.

The new alliance doesn't have a name as yet but is well on the way toward raising significant funds to promote the Republican cause in Congressional elections this fall.

The question for New Jersey is, what will be the impact of these umbrella groups, both Democratic and Republican, on state and local elections?

Will it affect disclosure and the overriding concern for greater transparency over the state's electoral process?

Last year's governor's race offered a sneak preview since it included campaign attacks by 527 committees linked to governor associations representing both parties.

This trend is likely to intensify given the federal Supreme Court's recent Citizens United case, which said corporations and unions can spend unlimited sums on independent campaign spending. But the high court also said it is entirely legal to

This is why it important for those of us in the field, and those interested in it, to begin thinking about the impact of the new umbrella groups.

At the very least, legislation to require disclosure by 527 issue advocacy groups, as well and 501c(3), and 501c(4), organizations, with ELEC before elections — not just afterward with the Internal Revenue Service — should be passed. These organizations are a big part of this fundraising leviathan now at the federal level.

Jeffrey Brindle is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission. The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.