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Chamber pressed on foreign contributions

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By Joseph Picard | October 14, 2010 1:21 PM EDT

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is blasting critics, including the [White House](#), for claiming that the Chamber is using foreign monies in its \$75 million effort to help the Republican Party gain seats in Congress this November. But even as the Chamber cries "smear campaign," calls mount for the organization to make public its accounting methods and the liberal website that broke the story of possible foreign funds in the Chamber's campaign has published additional information to support its claim.



REUTERS

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden attends the daily press briefing at the White House in Washington, June 17, 2010. Biden has joined the chorus of voices calling on the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to prove it is not using foreign money to fuel its elections ad campaign.

"We've caught them collecting \$885,000 from over 80 foreign companies by finding the Chamber's own fundraising documents," said Lee Fang from ThinkProgress, which is the website for the Center for American Progress.

Among the companies listed in the ThinkProgress [story](#) are AXA Group, Credit Suisse, Novartis, KPMG and [HSBC](#).

Fang said that this list is partial and that "the Chamber likely has many more foreign corporations as dues-paying members - but refuses to divulge any of the funders for their ad campaign."

The ThinkProgress article emphasizes that "all of these annual dues are collected in the same 501(c)(6) the Chamber is using to run partisan attack ads."

ThinkProgress claims that the Chamber receives foreign money by three vehicles: 1) AmChams, or mini-Chambers, founded in foreign countries, where members pay dues; 2) Business Councils, run from the U.S., where foreign corporations pay to join and the Chamber promises to promote members' interests - the

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companies in the list on the ThinkProgress website are Business Council members; and 3) through direct donations from foreign corporations.

"Most of the Chamber's foreign sources of funding come from large multi-national corporations which

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are headquartered abroad, like [BP](#) and Siemens," said Faiz Shakir of ThinkProgress.

It is illegal in the United States for foreign entities to give directly or indirectly to American political campaigns, although loopholes exist.

The Chamber admits receiving foreign money through these vehicles, but categorically denies using any of the monies received to fund their ad campaign.

"We're careful to ensure that we comply with all applicable laws," said Tita Freeman, a Chamber spokesperson. "No foreign money is used to fund political activities."

Freeman said the Chamber uses money it receives from AmChams and Business Councils to fund its international programs.

But the Chamber has refused to provide any documentation to show how it keeps the monies it receives separated so that no foreign-raised money enters its American elections spending.

"Short of the Chamber opening its books, there is no way we can know for certain what it's doing with the foreign money," said Mary Boyle, spokesperson for Common Cause. "The Chamber simply wants us to take its word for it."

Last week, U.S. Sen. Al Franken, D-MN, requested the Federal [Elections](#) Commission to investigate the charges made against the Chamber, and President Obama referred to foreign money being used against Democrats. On Monday, Vice President [Joe Biden](#) called for the Chamber to come clean.

"I challenge the Chamber of Commerce to tell us how much of the money they're investing is from foreign sources," Biden said. "I challenge them. If I'm wrong I will stand corrected. But show me, show me."

In response, the Chamber circled the wagons and fired back.

"It's sad to watch the [White House](#) stoop to these depths and try to salvage an election," Chamber President Thomas Donohue wrote this week in a letter to his Board of Directors.

"This is simply a sad and predictable attempt to use the threat of federal action to silence legitimate political speech," the Chamber's Freeman said regarding Franken's actions.

On its website, under a heading of Myth vs. Fact, the Chamber called ThinkProgress "a [George Soros](#)-funded, anti-business blog" and its charges against the Chamber "unfounded, deceitful, and completely erroneous."

The allegations constitute "a desperate attempt to silence those who support free enterprise, and a diversion by people upset about their grim prospects in the upcoming election," the Chamber said.

Fang said the Center for American Progress receives funding from [George Soros'](#) Open Society Institute, as do other nonprofits including the right-wing Cato Institute.

"Soros is an American citizen," Fang said.

Interestingly, both the Chamber and ThinkProgress are critical of the media. ThinkProgress said the mainstream media did not bother to contact them for clarification or follow-up, but simply printed the Chamber's deceptive responses to the original article, while the Chamber charged that the media picked up the ThinkProgress smear and uncritically "legitimized" it.

Chamber spokespeople have reiterated that the Chamber will not reveal its funders or accounting methods.

Boyle from Common Cause said people need to understand that the foreign companies who have given money to the Chamber are going to expect things back from the Chamber and the people the Chamber's ad campaign helped to elect.

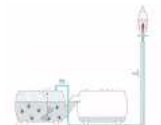
"It's alarming," Boyle said. "The influx of foreign money will change the face of our democracy."

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The Chamber points out on its website that it has given money to some Democratic campaigns, including West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin's bid for the Senate and the re-election campaign for Rep. Walt Minnick, D-ID. No one is denying, however, that the bulk of the Chamber's ad campaign favors the election of Republican candidates. The GOP is defending the Chamber in the foreign money flap.

"It wasn't enough for Democrats to spend the last two years enacting a job-killing agenda that was an assault on small businesses," said Paul Lindsay, spokesperson for the Republican National Congressional Committee. "They now see the need to pile on and attack an organization that represents those very same workers. I'm sure the Democratic candidates who have been endorsed by the U.S. Chamber this year will be interested to know that their party committee has thrown them under the bus in a puzzling and desperate political ploy."

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