



# The Club: Making GOP Establishment Vehicles Insecure Since 1999

*By Marc Ambinder*

To all the Tea Parties go the credit for recent outside-the-establishment candidate victories, but the original moneyed grassroots conservative movement, the Club for Growth, now a silver-haired veteran of Republican primary wars, has been present at the scenes of many of these campaign drive-bys. Contrary to popular belief, the Club's PAC did not endorse Rand Paul in Kentucky. They didn't endorse anyone in that Senate race. So, don't blame (or praise) the Club for that one.

But the Club's PAC was the first major group to bring statewide attention to Sen. Robert Bennett's vote in favor of the TARP bailout, and spent more than \$175,000 on television ads after its anti-endorsement in January and before the April caucuses, the goal being to "change the composition of the caucus universe." His major crime was the Wyden-Bennett bipartisan health care legislation, which, according to the Club, "would impose an unconstitutional individual mandate, increase federal taxes and spending by hundreds of billions of dollars, and force Americans to pay their insurance premiums through the IRS." The Tea Party got national attention, but its organizing efforts paled in comparison to what the Club's PAC was able to do. (By the way: the Club will not play in the primary, which features two acceptable candidates.)

As Matt Lewis [noted](#) when he observed the Club's role in Utah's convention, the Club endorsed Marco Rubio in Florida way before it was cool -- right after the off-year elections. Former Club President Pat Toomey is getting Club money and got its endorsement in Pennsylvania.

And next week, if Sharron Angle defeats the other Republicans in Nevada's primary, she can thank the Club's \$400,000 in ads and targeted get-out-the-vote resources.

Aside from being a destructive force to the powers that be, what's the Club's deal? What do its [roughly 9000 dues-paying members](#) (there are many more who've signed up online and/or who receive Club mail) want? In the Senate, more Jim DeMints and Tom Coburns -- i.e., less government intervention, lower taxes and less spending. It was among among the first groups to use the term "RINO -- Republican in Name Only" to refer to party members who abandoned their conservative economic principles once they got to Washington. Atypical conservatives like Mike Huckabee and John McCain

became avowed opponents.

Its supply-side, pro-growth pedigree is impressive. On its original board directors were Art Laffer of the famous "curve," Ed Crane, founder of the Cato Institute, Stephen Moore, now on the Wall Street Journal's editorial page, the publisher of the National Review. The PAC has a record of endorsing candidates who win. .

In 2005, a [tumultuous internal controversy](#) involving Moore's leadership led to an ugly bout of public relations; many of the main group's donors found themselves exposed. Other donors were feeling enormous pressure from the Bush White House to stop messing around in primaries. Moore formed a splinter group, which was not a competitor. The Club emerged with better management and even more independence now that Republicans are out of power.

It has two branches, now. The regular Club is organized as an issue advocacy group under section 501c4 of the tax code. The Club's donors tend to be among the mainstays of the conservative grasstops, like Richard Schafie and Bob Perry. The Club itself handles research and overhead. The PAC bundles contributions and plays directly in federal elections. The mainstay of the Club has been its government affairs director, Andy Roth, who joined in 2003. Over a decade, the Club and its adjuncts have raised and spent more than \$50 million.

I've only detected mild frustration from some in the Club's orbit that they're not getting too much public credit for their part in these victories. More credit means more donors, certainly, but the Club seems to have enough money to strategically insert themselves where they want. Their precision makes them deadly.

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