The airwaves and the newspapers have been peppered with reports belittling the impact of outside groups on the 2012 election. Many have taken it a step further and concluded that super-PACs and “dark money” groups — the groups that don’t disclose their donors — are not the threat to our democracy that many had feared. That is where they are wrong.

Outside groups spent $1 billion dollars on the 2012 election, with $400 million of that coming from “dark money” groups, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. In one Senate race alone, Virginia, outside groups pumped in $37 million; the candidates themselves, by contrast, spent $30 million.

Much of it might have been misspent, but that is another story altogether. The tiny cadre of wealthy Americans who were campaign bundlers, as well as the donors who gave to super-PACs and dark money groups, will be the winners — regardless of whom they gave to. How can that be? If their candidate lost, wouldn’t a good businessman question whether he got a good “return on investment”?

While favorable electoral outcomes might not have been successfully purchased in many instances, you can be very sure that what was successfully purchased was access and influence.

Regardless of whether their party won or lost, these donors can now convert their large contributions into a ticket to be cashed in for access to and influence with elected officials and their staffs. Having demonstrated their willingness to give large amounts, elite donors seeking audiences with powerful politicians will be rewarded. Savvy politicians will recognize the people they need to keep happy. So, they will continue to court these big-money donors.

A bundler for Mitt Romney recently described the proper care and feeding required to keep the big donors and bundlers like himself happy. “You have to stroke them, you have to pay attention to them, you have to thank them, you have to encourage them, you have to do all sorts of very logical maintenance items in order to keep folks motivated in order to make folks feel cared about and valued and wanted.” It makes you wonder what happens when one of those people needs to feel cared about when it comes to a piece of legislation.

The biggest impact of this outside money will be on the politicians’ actions to come. And the threat this big money brings is corruption of the legislative process — regardless of party — in the form of buying and selling access and influence.

These outside groups — and especially the “dark money” groups — are a cancer within our democratic process.

That cancer will continue to grow and metastasize post-Citizens United. Some groups have indicated they are already discussing ways to use their deep pockets to run ads as part of lobbying campaigns on some issues. More and more “big money” — often from secret sources — is a very real and growing threat to our founding democratic ideals of equality and the concept of one person, one vote.

Do not be fooled into thinking all this outside money didn’t matter in 2012 or that, as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) claims, all the spending was simply “more speech”

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and therefore healthy for the system. The outside money gave a miniscule minority of Americans the power to control the dialogue. That money may even have turned what might have been a “wave” election into a status quo result. But there is no doubt that the big donors have become even more important to both parties.

Those individuals, corporations and unions with the ability and willingness to cut checks for millions or even tens of millions of dollars will receive the care and feeding they feel they deserve. To borrow from the Romney bundler quoted above, they will be stroked, paid attention to, thanked, encouraged, cared about and valued. They will continue to be wined and dined at exclusive resorts, they will find the red carpet rolled out for them whenever they come to Washington, and their lobbyists will never lack for an attentive audience in the halls of government.

The new reality in Washington will see the ultra-well-heeled getting even more preferential treatment than in the past. But where does that leave the rest of us?

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