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Congressional portraits are pricey — and not totally transparent

By [Vaughn Golden](#) | [June 28, 2019](#)



Former House Speaker Paul Ryan, with his Congressional Portrait (Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call)

Since 2004, congressional campaigns and PACs have spent more than \$144,000 on paintings portraying prominent members of Congress, often themselves.

That's in addition to an unknown level of contributions from outside entities, including wealthy individuals and businesses anonymously routed through a nonprofit to fund the congressional art.

The tradition of painting portraits of retiring House speakers and other prominent leaders from the chamber dates back to the mid-1800's, but the idea really took off during the New Deal period. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Dealers wanted artists to be able to survive the Great Depression, so the federal government commissioned dozens of portraits of national and congressional leaders.

Most committee chairs and party leaders who were the subjects of the portraits kept the practice alive long after the New Deal, but as time went on opposition to the use of federal money for the portraits grew, especially during economic downturns.

In 1999 the [U.S. Capitol Historical Society](#), a congressionally chartered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, provided members of Congress another way to fund the portraits without taxpayer dollars. They're now able to set up a committee through the historical society to raise money and make decisions surrounding the procurement of the portrait.

"They didn't want to deal with appropriated money and so they agreed that if there was a private entity that wanted to create a portrait and donate it to the Capitol that the society was the logical group to do that, and the society created a mechanism to do that," Jane Campbell, president of the U.S. Capitol Historical Society said in an interview with OpenSecrets.

In 2016, the practice of using federal taxpayer money for portraits ended altogether in a mostly bipartisan bill spearheaded by Sen. [Bill Cassidy](#) (R-La.) called the [End Government-funded Oil-painting.\(EGO\) Act](#).

"Senator Cassidy's primary concern with the EGO Act was to stop the use of taxpayer dollars to fund these oil paintings. We can certainly look into the other avenues in which these paintings are funded as well," a spokesperson for Cassidy said in a statement.

Since the passage of Cassidy's bill, all portraits are handled through the historical society and are funded mostly by donations which, unlike contributions from PACs and campaign committees, aren't publicly disclosed.

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Since the member's portrait committee is funded through the non-profit institution, donations for the portraits, which cost between \$20,000 and \$80,000 each, aren't subject to the same restrictions for contributing to elected officials under campaign finance laws. This means any donors -- including individuals, companies, PACs or other campaigns -- may contribute unlimited amounts of cash toward a member's portrait without any public disclosure of the transaction. Campbell said she's never heard of a single donor financing a whole portrait and that most draw a significant number of contributors.

"For some people, a donation of \$5,000 is a very large donation, for some people that's a very modest donation. We can't really opine on that, but the [portrait] committees usually have a larger number of donors," Campbell said

The historical society has facilitated 80 portraits since 2000, including those for former speakers [Newt Gingrich](#) (R-Ga.), [Dennis Hastert](#) (R-Ill.), [John Boehner](#) (R-Ohio), [Paul Ryan](#) (R-Wis.). It's optional for members to have a portrait done.

The PACs donating to committee chairmen are often from similar policy areas as the committees they oversaw prior to retirement. Last year, chairman of the House Agriculture Committee Rep. [Mike Conaway](#) (R-Texas) retired. At the same time the [United Egg Association](#) EGGPAC, representing a trade association for chicken egg processors, contributed \$2,000 to the U.S. Capitol Historical Society for "Mike Conway Portrait" (sic) [according to FEC filings](#).

Democrats [Dave Obey](#) (D-Wis.) and [Ike Skelton](#) (D-Mo.) also had PACs donate to their portrait funds.

PACs for postal workers, resorts, pilots and others have donated at least \$19,000 for portraits of members, though that number is likely higher because the figure only include disbursements to the historical society specifically mentioning portraits.

Other members have used campaign accounts to fund part of their portraits. Rep. [Lamar Smith](#) (R-Texas) retired last year after serving in Congress since 1987. During that time, he chaired the House Judiciary, Science and Ethics committees, allowing him to commission multiple portraits. Between 2013 and 2014, FEC filings show Smith spent almost \$44,000 on portrait services. In 2018, [Gulf States Toyota Inc.](#), contributed \$2,500 toward his portrait fund.

Ahead of another planned run in 2020, Rep. [Karen Handel](#) (R-Ga.) is sitting on a war chest of campaign cash after being unseated last year, following her special-election win in the most expensive House race of all time. She contributed \$2,500 to the portrait fund for outgoing Rep. [Diane Black](#) (R-Tenn.) who lost her bid for governor.

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Vaughn is a student at Ithaca College where he double majors in journalism and economics. He also covers state and national politics to various print and radio outlets in upstate New York. His clients have included NPR, WRVO, WSKG, The Ithaca Voice, The Hornell Evening Tribune, The Ithaca Times and the Corning Leader.

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