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Nonprofits, Politics, and Privacy

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INTRODUCTION

I am both honored and saddened to have this opportunity to remember Laura Chisolm and her pioneering work on advocacy by tax-exempt, nonprofit organizations. What set Laura’s work apart was her identification of the fundamental policy concerns driving the federal tax law’s restrictions on advocacy and her exposure of how
those restrictions were not always consistent with such concerns.  

With this Article, I plan to take a similar approach to the much more modest topic of disclosure obligations for tax-exempt nonprofits engaged in political activity.

The political involvement of tax-exempt nonprofit organizations, which often do not disclose their financial supporters, has become a topic of national interest. While such involvement is nothing new, the Supreme Court’s recent *Citizens United* decision and the resulting focus on the flows of corporate, union, and wealthy individuals’ funds into election-related activities has brought this involvement to the fore of the public’s consciousness. This increased attention has led to growing calls to publicly expose the financial dealings of politically involved nonprofit organizations, including the identities of their donors.

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1. See, e.g., Laura B. Chisolm, *Exempt Organization Advocacy: Matching the Rules to the Rationales*, 63 IND. L.J. 201, 207 (1987) (“The underlying principles can and should be identified; the law can and should be designed to reflect them.”); Laura Brown Chisolm, *Politics and Charity: A Proposal for Peaceful Coexistence*, 58 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 308, 315 (1990) (“[A]s currently formulated and applied, the section 501(c)(3) absolute prohibition on campaign intervention is constitutionally questionable, incongruent with campaign finance regulation, inconsistent with the premises underlying the charitable tax exemption, and contrary to free speech values.”).


The time is therefore ripe for a deeper consideration of the policy concerns that underlie such public disclosure requirements and the related issue of privacy. To clarify the discussion, one aspect for deeper consideration is recognizing that this particular area is at the intersection of three significantly different disclosure regimes. Those three regimes are (1) federal tax law generally, (2) federal tax law as it applies to tax-exempt nonprofit organizations, and (3) federal election law. These regimes are a study in contrasts. Federal tax law strongly protects taxpayer information from public disclosure. And while federal tax exemption law strongly favors public disclosure of institutional information, it is more ambivalent about public disclosure of information relating to individuals. In contrast, federal election law strongly favors public disclosure of all relevant financial information, including information relating to individuals. Understanding the reasons for these differences is important to determine whether disclosures at the intersection of the three regimes are appropriate and desirable.

The other, related aspect of this deeper consideration is privacy. The concept of privacy is one that is instantly recognizable and yet theoretically, much less legally, hard to define. This difficulty stems in part from the many possible applications of the privacy concept. Fortunately for the purposes of this Article, the context here is fairly clear and narrow: the public disclosure of information relating to nonprofit organizations involved in politics and their supporters. Even in this narrow context, however, there are at least two competing approaches with respect to privacy. One takes a cost-benefit approach. It judges disclosure requirements based on their...
quantifiable costs and benefits, including among those costs the harm to privacy, however measured. The other, less frequently used, is a right-to-privacy approach that considers privacy a fundamental right that can only be abridged if there is a relatively strong interest for doing so and then only to the extent required to further that interest.

The first Part of this Article briefly reviews and contrasts the history and current rules governing disclosure and privacy in the federal tax, federal tax exemption, and federal election law contexts. This review reveals that both the cost-benefit approach and the right-to-privacy approach can be found in this history, but to a greater or lesser extent depending on the context. The second Part explores these two different approaches and the extent to which the existing disclosure rules reflect those approaches. This Part shows that the rules are sometimes but not always based both on the cost-benefit approach to disclosure, in which privacy harms are but one possible cost, and on the right-to-privacy approach. The third Part considers recent proposals for disclosure rules relating to nonprofit organizations engaged in political activity using both the cost-benefit approach and the right-to-privacy approach. This consideration reveals that certain proposals, which relate to disclosure of financial information primarily about the organizations themselves, generally are justifiable under either approach. Certain other proposals that would require disclosure of financial information primarily relating to individuals, however, are more difficult to justify under a right-to-privacy approach. I conclude by discussing why this difference exists and what it means for the desirability of disclosure in this area.

I. THREE DIFFERENT DISCLOSURE REGIMES

A tax-exempt nonprofit organization that engages in political activities is potentially at the intersection of three significantly different federal law disclosure regimes. Each of the regimes requires the organization to disclose detailed financial information to the government, including to a lesser or greater extent information about other parties with which the organization has financial dealings. While the exact financial information that must be disclosed varies, the primary difference between them is whether the financial information that is disclosed to the government is also revealed to the public. This Part explores that aspect of each disclosure regime and the apparent reasons why public disclosure is not always required.

First, however, a brief explanation is needed regarding how this intersection came to be. As I have detailed elsewhere, federal election law requires public disclosure of financial information by entities
engaged in certain types of political (i.e., candidate supporting or opposing) activity; these entities include candidate committees, political parties, and political committees (i.e., PACs), and the publicly disclosed information includes identifying information for donors of any significant size.\(^7\) To accommodate these entities in the federal income tax system, Congress also created a separate exemption category for organizations engaged in “political activities” under Internal Revenue Code section 527 that have as their primary activity supporting or opposing candidates.\(^8\) Because “political activity” as defined by federal tax law is broader than the “political activity” regulated by federal election law, it proved possible to create “527 organizations” that were not covered by election law’s disclosure rules, which subsequently became known as “stealth PACs.”\(^9\) To correct this gap in required public disclosures, Congress amended federal tax law in 2000 to impose disclosure requirements on these stealth organizations that essentially paralleled the election law disclosure rules, including the public disclosure of information identifying donors of any significant size.\(^10\)

Under existing federal tax law, however, it is also possible for other types of tax-exempt organizations to engage in many types of political activity without becoming subject to either set of disclosure rules as long as that political activity does not become the primary activity of the organization.\(^11\) These tax-exempt organizations include section 501(c)(4) social welfare organizations, section 501(c)(5) labor unions, and section 501(c)(6) trade associations and chambers of commerce. While this ability has existed for many years, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Citizens United* appears to have triggered both a new attention to it and a new flow of funds into these politically active tax-exempt nonprofit organizations, with the sources of those funds generally not subject to public disclosure.\(^12\) This new attention and new funds have led commentators and politicians to call for

\(^7\) Lloyd H. Mayer, *The Much Maligned 527 and Institutional Choice*, 87 B.U. L. REV. 625, 633–34 (2007) (discussing the limits that federal election law places on contributions to certain entities); id. at 636–37 (discussing the disclosure rules).

\(^8\) Id. at 639–40.

\(^9\) Id. at 645.

\(^10\) Id. at 646.

\(^11\) See Aprill, *supra* note 4, at 381–87 (discussing which nonprofit organizations are able to engage in political activity as long as it does not become their primary activity); Tobin, *supra* note 4, at 429–31(same). In contrast to these non-charitable, tax-exempt nonprofit organizations, charitable nonprofit organizations that are tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) are not permitted to engage in any political activity (i.e., any support or opposition of candidates). See I.R.C. § 501(c)(3) (2006) (“[A]nd which does not participate in, or intervene in... any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office.”).

\(^12\) See *supra* notes 2–4 and accompanying text (discussing the effect of the *Citizens United* decision).
increased disclosure of information, including information relating to donors, about these organizations that sit at the intersection of the disclosure rules found in federal tax law, federal tax exemption law, and federal election law.\textsuperscript{13}

A. Federal Tax Law Generally

The Treasury Department has broad authority to require taxpayers to provide detailed financial information that would help the government collect tax revenues.\textsuperscript{14} The primary vehicle for providing this information is the myriad of forms and schedules prepared by the IRS and completed by taxpayers, a universe of paperwork that continues to grow both as Treasury identifies additional information that would aid in tax collection and as Congress enacts additional reporting laws.\textsuperscript{15} The Treasury Department also has the ability to require taxpayers to keep extensive records that the IRS may demand on audit, as well as to ask for relevant information from third parties.\textsuperscript{16}

At the same time, however, the Internal Revenue Code sharply limits the extent to which the IRS can share the information it receives from taxpayers with not only the public, but even with other governments and other federal government agencies. More specifically, Internal Revenue Code section 6103 provides a general rule that “[r]eturns and return information shall be confidential.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{13} See supra note 4 and accompanying text (citing proposed bills and other commentary that would require greater disclosure).

\textsuperscript{14} See I.R.C. § 6001 (“Every person liable for any tax imposed by this title . . . shall . . . render such statements [and] make such returns” as the Treasury Department may prescribe); I.R.C. § 6011(a) (requiring any person liable for tax to provide whatever information may be required by forms or regulations prescribed by the Treasury Department).


\textsuperscript{16} See I.R.C. § 6001 (requiring the keeping of records); I.R.C. § 7602(a) (authorizing the examination of any records and the taking of any testimony relevant to determining liability for federal tax).

“return” is defined broadly as “any tax or information return, declaration of estimated tax, or claim for refund . . . .”18 Similarly, “return information” includes essentially all financial information relating to a taxpayer. 19 This confidentiality provision is backed by both civil and criminal penalties not only on government employees who make unauthorized disclosures, but also on other persons who re-publish information received through an unauthorized disclosure. 20

There are a variety of exceptions to this general rule, primarily with respect to sharing information with certain other federal government agencies, such as the Social Security Administration, and with state tax agencies. 21 Public disclosure of returns or return information, other than in an aggregate form, is generally prohibited except for a narrow exception relating to obtaining needed information from third parties and for when a taxpayer chooses to contest a tax liability in court. 22 IRS materials confirm the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of this information. For example, one publication states that the Internal Revenue Code “makes the

18 I.R.C. § 6103(b)(1).
19 I.R.C. § 6103(b)(2).
20 See I.R.C. § 7213 (making unauthorized disclosure of return or return information, including republication of such information by any person when the disclosure was not permitted, a felony); I.R.C. § 7431 (imposing civil liability on the United States for prohibited disclosures or, if the prohibited disclosure is by a person who is not an employee of the United States, the person making the disclosure); see generally I.C.T REPORT vol. I, supra note 17, at 56–58 (discussing the imposition of criminal and civil liability for unauthorized disclosure); TREASURY REPORT, supra note 17, at 25–26 (same).
22 I.R.C. § 6103(h)(4) (providing for disclosures in judicial proceedings); id. at (k)(6) (providing for disclosures for investigative purposes); see also Bittker, supra note 15, at 490–91 (noting that while “taxpayers who wish to litigate their tax liabilities must open the relevant facts to judicial, and hence to public, inspection,” disclosure of taxpayer information to members of the general public is generally not permitted). For a discussion of some of the emerging disclosure issues relating to tax information, see Christopher S. Rizek, Taxpayer Privacy and Disclosure Issues Will Continue to Touch Us All, in TAX NOTES: 30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION 81 (2002).
confidential relationship between the taxpayer and the IRS quite clear.”

A 2000 Joint Committee on Taxation staff report that comprehensively reviewed the disclosure provisions in the federal tax laws summarized the policy reasons for these rules: “This confidentiality is based on persons’ right to privacy, as well as the view that voluntary compliance will be increased if taxpayers know that the information they provide to the government will not become public.” That is, these rules exist both to protect privacy as a right enjoyed by taxpayers and for pragmatic reasons relating to maximizing the collection of tax revenues owed. The report goes on to detail reasons why the narrow exceptions summarized above exist. In fact, the Joint Committee on Taxation staff strongly recommended against granting any additional access to returns or return information absent a “compelling need for the disclosure that clearly outweighs the privacy interests of the taxpayer.”

B. Federal Tax Law for Tax-Exempt Organizations

Federal tax law also governs the disclosure of financial and other information provided to the IRS by organizations exempt from federal income tax. In contrast to the general disclosure rules, the rules for tax-exempt organizations’ information strongly favor public disclosure, except in relatively limited circumstances. While tax-exempt organizations have not always had to disclose financial information—and some are still not required to do so—once they were forced to provide it to the IRS, the information also became subject to mandatory public disclosure.

23 INTERNAL REVENUE SERV., TAX INFORMATION SECURITY GUIDELINES FOR FEDERAL, STATE AND LOCAL AGENCIES (PUB. 1075), at 12 (2010).
24 JCT REPORT vol. I, supra note 17, at 5; see also id. at 127–28 (noting that a degree of confidentiality is necessary for effective tax law); TREASURY REPORT, supra note 17, at 33 (explaining how reasonable and continuing expectation of privacy is central to taxpayer concerns).
25 See JCT REPORT vol. I, supra note 17, at 129–32 (detailing certain exceptions to general rule of confidentiality); supra note 22 and accompanying text (noting that public disclosure of returns or return information is not permitted except in relatively narrow circumstances).
26 JCT REPORT vol. I, supra note 17, at 6; see also id. at 196–97 (discussing the Joint Committee on Taxation staff’s recommendation regarding disclosure of returns or return information).
28 See II JOINT COMM. ON TAXATION, 106th Cong., STUDY OF PRESENT-LAW TAXPAYER CONFIDENTIALITY AND DISCLOSURE PROVISIONS AS REQUIRED BY SECTION 3802 OF THE
Tax-exempt organizations provide information to the IRS primarily through two channels. First, some organizations provide information when seeking IRS recognition of their tax-exempt status—a requirement for most charitable organizations other than churches and certain church-related entities, but an option for other types of tax-exempt organizations. The information on those organizations’ application forms and related submissions are available to the public. Initially that availability was only through the IRS, but more recently Congress chose to require the organizations themselves to provide access to these documents upon request.

The other channel is the annual information return that almost all tax-exempt organizations—the major exception again being churches and certain church-related entities—have to file with the IRS. The amount of information that organizations need to provide on some version of the IRS Form 990 varies depending on the financial size of the organization, but in general the information on whatever return is filed is available to the public. As with the application, the return initially was only available from the IRS, but more recently Congress chose to require organizations themselves to provide copies of recent returns upon request. This information is also now widely available because of a private organization that made arrangements with the IRS to obtain electronic copies of all annual information returns and post them on the Internet. Congress has even extended public disclosure to the annual form tax-exempt organizations use to report taxable income from trades or business conducted but that are unrelated to the purpose that provides the basis for the organizations’ tax-exempt status.

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29 See I.R.C. § 508(a), (c) (2006) (requiring new organizations to notify the Secretary of tax-exempt registration unless they are a church).
31 See I.R.C. § 6104(d)(1)(A)(iii), (d)(1)(B) (outlining the classes of organizations that must make tax-exemption documents available upon request).
32 I.R.C. § 6033(a)(1), (a)(3).
36 See I.R.C. § 6104(d)(1)(A)(i) (requiring disclosure of all returns filed under section 6011 by 501(c)(3) organization).
While the information provided by tax-exempt organizations to the IRS is generally subject to public disclosure, there are some exceptions. Probably the most significant exception relates to information that identifies an organization’s donors. The Internal Revenue Code requires most tax-exempt organizations to disclose some identifying information regarding contributors to the IRS, but the IRS is not authorized to disclose that information to the public nor are the organizations themselves required to provide that information to the public; the only organizations for which this limitation on public disclosure does not apply are private foundations and political organizations.\textsuperscript{37} Private foundations are generally charitable organizations that initially are funded by a single donor or a small group of often related donors and are usually controlled by that donor or the donor’s family members.\textsuperscript{38} The public disclosure of the donors’ identities is one part of a larger set of provisions designed to limit the influence of donors to private foundations based on Congress’s perception that these entities were particularly susceptible to abuse through misuse of their charitable assets by their financial supporters.\textsuperscript{39} Political organizations are groups that primarily seek to influence the election of candidates.\textsuperscript{40} Requiring disclosure of their even relatively modest contributors is based on the reasons discussed in Part I.C that support public disclosure of contributors to candidates, political parties, and political committees.\textsuperscript{41}

Three other more limited exceptions to the public disclosure of information provided to the IRS on an application or annual information return also exist. One is an exception for identifying information for individual—but not organizational or government—grant recipients.\textsuperscript{42} Another is an exception for information that would

\textsuperscript{37} I.R.C. § 6104(b), (d)(3)(A).

\textsuperscript{38} See I.R.C. § 509(a) (defining a private foundation).


\textsuperscript{40} See I.R.C. § 527(c)(1)–(2) (defining a political organization and an exempt function); \textit{see also} supra notes 7–10 and accompanying text (discussing “political” organizations).

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{See} Fogg, supra note 17, at 803 (information disclosure with respect to political organizations is “more to benefit campaign finance law than to promote tax disclosure”); \textit{see generally} Mayer, supra note 7, at 637–48 (explaining the justification for and treatment of political activity by tax-exempt organizations).

\textsuperscript{42} See \textit{INTERNAL REVENUE SERV., FORM 990 SCHEDULE I GRANTS AND OTHER ASSISTANCE TO ORGANIZATIONS, GOVERNMENTS, AND INDIVIDUALS IN THE UNITED STATES (2010), available at} http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f990si.pdf (showing Part II as relating to organization and government grant recipients requires identifying information, while Part III relating to individual grant recipients does not).
reveal trade secrets or information which could adversely affect the national defense. Finally, an organization can refuse to provide copies of information upon request if the organization can demonstrate it is the subject of a harassment campaign and that compliance with the request is not in the public interest. This exception does not, however, prevent the party seeking the information from obtaining it through other means, including through public inspection of documents at the organization’s offices.

Outside of these narrow exceptions, and the broader exception for identifying information for donors, the information provided by tax-exempt organizations on these forms is otherwise accessible to the public.

That said, certain other information relating to tax-exempt nonprofit organizations is not subject to public disclosure. While private letter rulings, technical advice memoranda, and other tax documents relating to specific organizations are publicly available, identifying information is redacted from the public copies of such documents, as is the case for all taxpayers. Similarly, the progress and results of examinations with respect to specific tax-exempt nonprofit organizations is not publicly available or even available to an individual or organization that filed a complaint with the IRS that may have triggered the examination. The one exception is if the examination results in revocation of the organization’s tax-exempt status, in which case the fact of the revocation is publicly announced. These limits on public disclosure appear, however, to represent simply an application of the general bias toward confidentiality in the federal tax laws as opposed to a conscious decision by Congress or the Treasury to protect the confidentiality of such information for tax-exempt nonprofits.

44 I.R.C. § 6104(d)(4).
45 See id. (applying only to the provision of copies upon request).
46 See I.R.C. § 6110(c) (detailing the personal information that must be deleted before the Treasury Secretary makes a disclosure); JCT REPORT vol. II, supra note 28, at 37–41 (explaining the disclosure and privacy protections codified in section 6110(c)); TREASURY REPORT, supra note 17, at 27 (explaining section 6110 redaction policies and how to challenge the redactions); Fogg, supra note 17, at 775–76 (explaining the history of the disclosure provision).
47 See JCT REPORT vol. II, supra note 28, at 84–85 (“Present law does not provide for the disclosure of information relating to the audit of a tax-exempt organization.”).
48 See Rev. Proc. 82–39, 1982–2 C.B. 759, § 3.01 (providing that if “the Service subsequently revokes a ruling or a determination letter previously issued to it, contributions made to the organization by persons unaware of the change in the status of the organization generally will be considered allowable if made on or before the date of an appropriate public announcement”).
49 See JCT REPORT vol. II, supra note 28, at 40–41, 83–85 (noting several exceptions to
The Joint Committee on Taxation staff’s 2000 report mentioned previously also discussed the disclosure rules applicable to tax-exempt organizations. The report recognized that tax-exempt organizations have a right to privacy. The committee’s staff concluded, however, that the public’s interests in ensuring that organizations receiving significant tax benefits in fact qualified for those benefits and in having access to information about potential recipients of their donations generally outweighed this right. Consistent with that conclusion, the Joint Committee on Taxation’s staff recommended greater public disclosure of information about tax-exempt organizations, including information relating to all written determinations and closing agreements that resolve audits. The report’s conclusion regarding disclosure in this context is striking in its contrast to the Joint Committee on Taxation staff’s above-quoted statement relating to taxpayer information more generally: “The Joint Committee staff believes that disclosure of information regarding tax-exempt organizations is appropriate unless there are compelling reasons for nondisclosure that clearly outweigh the public interest in disclosure.”

C. Federal Election Law

Money has been an essential element in politics since time immemorial. At the same time, the possibility of money granting improper influence over government decisions and particularly over who governs has also been a perennial concern. One of the primary tools for addressing this concern in the United States has been required disclosure of the financial supporters of candidates, parties, and other political organizations to both the government and the public. The effect of such disclosure on those supporters is to reveal information about both their finances—at least with respect to how much they can afford to spend on political contributions—and their political views.

Current law requires disclosure of detailed identifying information regarding those who provide financial support to others that engage in the section 6110 framework that prevent disclosure but recommending that the present law be revised with respect to tax-exempt organizations to provide for more disclosure).

50 Id.
51 Id. at 5, 62.
52 Id. at 5–6, 63.
53 Id. at 7, 83–86.
54 Id. at 80. For the committee’s more general view on taxpayer information, see supra note 24 and accompanying text.
politics, such others including candidates, entities, and individuals that engage in politics themselves.\textsuperscript{55} Relatively small contributions or expenditures trigger such disclosure, even at the federal level—amounts as low as $201 in some situations.\textsuperscript{56} Thanks to technological advances, it is now relatively easy to access this information, whether through the Federal Election Commission’s database\textsuperscript{57} or through private databases that provide access to the same information.\textsuperscript{58}

The reasons for this disclosure are commonly stated in pure cost-benefit terms—whether the benefits of such knowledge to the political process and to the public outweigh the costs to those whose information is disclosed.\textsuperscript{59} This may be in part because that is how the constitutional debate over such provisions is framed. The Supreme Court has stated that the constitutional standard is “exact[ing] scrutiny,” which requires a “sufficiently important governmental interest” with which the disclosure requirement has a “substantial relation.”\textsuperscript{60} Once one or more particular governmental interests have been identified as sufficiently important, however, the Court appears to have essentially weighed the benefits from that interest or interests being furthered against the costs of disclosure to the affected parties.\textsuperscript{61} Even Justice Thomas, who is the most skeptical member of the Court with respect to the constitutional viability of disclosure requirements, based his argument on what he believes is a more accurate view of the costs of disclosure than the other Justices acknowledge, rather than on a fundamental right to privacy.\textsuperscript{62}


\textsuperscript{56} 2 U.S.C. § 434(a)(4), (b)(3)(A), (b)(5)(A), (c)(2)(C), (f)(2)(C) (requiring the disclosure of names and addresses of all individuals who donate over $200 in certain situations).


\textsuperscript{58} E.g., Huffpost Fundrace, HUFFINGTON POST, http://fundrace.huffingtonpost.com (last visited Jan. 11, 2012).

\textsuperscript{59} See infra note 61 and accompanying text (providing examples of this balancing done by the Supreme Court).

\textsuperscript{60} Citizens United v. FEC, 130 S. Ct. 876, 914 (2010) (internal quotation marks and citation omitted); see also Doe v. Reed, 130 S. Ct. 2811, 2818 (2010) (collecting cases); Buckley v. Valeo, 424 U.S. 1, 64 (1976) (laying out the constitutional standard affirmed in \textit{Citizens United}).

\textsuperscript{61} See, e.g., \textit{Citizens United}, 130 S. Ct. at 914–17 (discussing and rejecting the arguments offered by \textit{Citizens United}, which argued that the disclosure rules were unconstitutional as applied to it); McConnell v. FEC, 540 U.S. 93, 196–98 (2003) (citing the district court’s opinion weighing the competing First Amendment interests); Buckley, 424 U.S. at 67–68, 71–72 (noting that the Court must look to the “extent of the burden that [disclosure requirements] place on individual rights”); see also infra notes 106–107 and accompanying text (further developing this point).

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Citizens United}, 130 S. Ct. at 980–82 (Thomas, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).
In most instances that weighing has tilted toward disclosure, even though the evidence of both benefits and costs is relatively thin. In some specific instances, however, the costs to a particular group have been well enough established, or the benefits to the public are so ephemeral, that the courts conclude disclosure is constitutionally barred. For example, the Socialist Workers Party successfully litigated and then renewed an exemption from disclosure based on documented harassment of its members and supporters—i.e., significant costs. Margaret McIntyre, who distributed anonymous leaflets that opposed a local tax, successfully defended her anonymity in part because the benefits in terms of increased information to voters were minimal given her relative obscurity.

Even critics of most campaign finance restrictions, who primarily rely on a relatively strong and absolutist reading of the First Amendment’s free speech clause, have usually been willing to support disclosure as the preferable (and constitutional) means of combating corruption and the appearance of corruption in elections based on essentially a cost-benefit analysis. Moreover, there is an argument that because the effect of disclosure is in large part to publicly identify the political leanings of the persons subject to disclosure, there is no real privacy interest to protect since revealing a contributor’s leanings is simply “civic courage.” And so presumably the individual involved does not have a reasonable expectation of privacy. But some commentators have flagged the fact that the extensive disclosure requirements in this area of law are inconsistent with a right to privacy that would require more than a balancing of measurable costs and benefits to justify disclosure. Nevertheless,
both the constitutional and policy discussions have been dominated to date by such a balancing approach.

The different bases and underlying policy reasons for the disclosure rules in these three contexts intersect at one question: to what extent should politically active, tax-exempt nonprofit organizations be required to disclose both their political activities and the identities of their financial supporters. How to answer this question depends, therefore, to a large extent on whether this context is viewed more as one that is election-related, where disclosure is strongly favored; tax-related, where disclosure is strongly disfavored; or nonprofit-related, where disclosure relating to the nonprofit itself is strongly favored but disclosure relating to other parties, particularly individuals, is viewed with more ambivalence.

More fundamentally, the above analysis of the reasons for these different disclosure rules reveals two distinct approaches to disclosure and privacy. One approach, dominant in the general tax law context and almost invisible in the election law context, is that privacy is an intrinsic right that can only be infringed upon by public disclosure of otherwise private information in the most compelling of situations. The other approach, found in all three contexts but especially dominant in the election law context, is that what matters is a balancing of concrete costs and benefits in which privacy harm is only one cost (and a difficult to measure and generally minimized one at that). Part II examines these two different approaches more carefully, drawing on the broader privacy scholarship.

II. TWO DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO PRIVACY

The issue of privacy has caused significant confusion in legal scholarship.69 On one hand, scholars for the most part agree with the general intuition that there is a right to privacy distinct from other

legal rights, a right which the law should recognize and protect. In the other hand, scholars have struggled to develop a coherent theory regarding the extent of this right and how strongly the law should protect it. In large part, this struggle can be traced to the fact that the idea of “privacy” applies in many different contexts and in many different ways.

But there are some universal privacy concepts. One set of such concepts is the difference between a cost-benefit approach and a right-to-privacy approach. As this Part details, the former approach is characterized by an attempt to compare the resulting costs and benefits from infringing privacy. The latter perspective is characterized by privacy as a right that is fundamental to individuals and so can only be infringed upon if there are sufficiently important reasons for doing so.

Full consideration of these two different approaches would be a mammoth task. Fortunately, the context to which these approaches apply is relatively limited, and so the discussion of them can be

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70 See, e.g., BEATE RÖSSLER, THE VALUE OF PRIVACY 67–68 (R.D.V. Glasgow trans., Polity Press 2005) (2001) (rejecting reductionist approaches to privacy); Ruth Gavison, Privacy and the Limits of Law, 89 YALE L.J. 421, 423 (1980) (arguing that “privacy is indeed a distinct and coherent concept”); Tom Gerety, Redefining Privacy, 12 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 233, 236 (1977) (relying on “two purportedly shared intuitions—one normative and the other descriptive: first, that we have some common commitment to the value of what is private in our lives; and, second, that we have some common conception of what in our lives in fact is private”); Lindsay, supra note 69, at 144–45 (rejecting reductionist approaches to privacy). But see Judith Jarvis Thomson, The Right to Privacy, 4 PHILOS. & PUB. AFF. 295, 312–13 (1975) (arguing that privacy is a cluster of other rights as opposed to a coherent right in itself). Historically, the legal right to privacy is generally traced to an 1890 law review article by Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis. See Samuel D. Warren & Louis D. Brandeis, The Right to Privacy, 4 HARV. L. REV. 193 (1890). For examples of scholars tracing the right to privacy to Warren and Brandeis’s article, see SOLOVE, supra note 69, at 15; Irwin R. Kramer, The Birth of Privacy Law: A Century Since Warren and Brandeis, 39 CATH. U. L. REV. 703 (1990); Lindsay, supra note 69, at 140.

71 See SOLOVE, supra note 69, at 1 (“Philosophers, legal theorists, and jurists have frequently lamented the great difficulty in reaching a satisfying conception of privacy.”); Jonathan Kahn, Privacy as a Legal Principle of Identity Maintenance, 33 SETON HALL L. REV. 371, 371 (2003) (“The meaning of privacy . . . has proven elusive.”).

72 See, e.g., ANITA L. ALLEN, PRIVACY LAW AND SOCIETY 4–5 (2d ed. 2011) (listing six different senses in which privacy is discussed legally); RÖSSLER, supra note 70, at 6–7 (describing three uses of privacy; relating to action and conduct, to certain knowledge, and to spaces, as well as five groups of definitions of the word “privacy”); Kahn, supra note 71, at 409 (“Attempts to classify and define the right to privacy are . . . defeated by the underlying needs to diversity [sic] and split the concept so as to make it less broad.”); see generally SOLOVE, supra note 69, at 8–11 (proposing a “taxonomy of privacy,” which consists of four principal groups).

73 See generally DELANY & CAROLAN, supra note 69, at 12–16 (contrasting consequentialist and deontological theories of privacy); Ronald A. Cass, Privacy and Legal Rights, 41 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 867, 868–69, 871–72 (1991) (contrasting a deontological approach to privacy with a case-by-case intuitive approach that tends to draw on a cost-benefits analysis); Lindsay, supra note 69, at 144 (arguing that if privacy is accepted as a coherent concept, there is then a distinction between consequentialist and deontological approaches to privacy).
similarly limited. More specifically in the context here, what is private is financial information, and particularly financial information that tends to reveal (imperfectly) both the financial status of certain entities and individuals and their political leanings. Furthermore, the infringement on privacy is with respect to disclosure to the public, as disclosure to the government is already a given in this context.

A. A Cost-Benefit Approach to Privacy

One common approach to privacy is the well-known practice of comparing the measurable benefits of the relevant action against the measurable costs of that action. In the privacy context, the baseline or neutral state is when privacy is maintained while the action or change at issue is infringing on that privacy through disclosure. Difficulties with quantifying the benefits and costs of disclosure, however, often complicate the use of this approach.

1. In Theory

Turning to the baseline first, in the privacy context the baseline is generally the state of affairs absent legally compelled disclosure. Relevant, therefore, is whether the information at stake is already known to more people than the individual or entity making the privacy claim, including whether that information is already in some sense public. The baseline can, however, instead be a particular level of compelled disclosure that is taken as a given, with the infringing action being a broader level of disclosure whether with respect to what is disclosed or to whom disclosure is made.

Benefits can vary from the highly concrete to the highly speculative. Common benefits cited from compelled disclosure include more informed decision making by those receiving the otherwise private information, prevention or deterrence of specific harms, and enhanced enforcement of other laws. In many contexts, however, the benefits are more speculative. This Article, therefore, ignores the many privacy applications and issues that arise in other contexts. See generally Solove, supra note 69, at 101–70 (discussing privacy issues in the context of four different conceptions of privacy).

See Allen, supra note 72, at 4 (discussing “informational” invasions as one form of privacy invasion); Rössler, supra note 70, at 9 (same).

See Solove, supra note 69, at 22 (noting that if privacy is viewed, as it is in a variety of legal contexts, as secrecy, that “often leads to the conclusion that once a fact is publicly divulged . . . it can no longer remain private”).

See Delany & Carolan, supra note 699, at 24–25 (arguing that an all-or-nothing approach to the right to privacy is an “analytical mis-step”); Solove, supra note 69, at 23 (“The privacy-as-secrecy conception fails to recognize that individuals want to keep things private from some people but not others.”).

See Archon Fung et al., Full Disclosure: The Perils and Promise of
circumstances there are limited data quantifying such benefits, thereby requiring reliance on educated guesses and intuition to determine a sense of the benefits’ magnitude.79

As for costs, these can also vary significantly. A common cost of compelled disclosure includes actions by those to whom information was disclosed, such as retaliation or harassment, which negatively impact the individual or entity subject to disclosure. Other costs are the related “chilling” effect on the activities or choices of the individual or entity subject to disclosure and reduced transparency or honesty in the disclosure, both of which harm the individual, entity, or society more generally.80 As with benefits, quantifying such costs is often quite challenging.81

Because both benefits and costs can be difficult to quantify, the final, balancing step of the analysis can in many cases be suspect as a “garbage in, garbage out” situation. Yet sometimes a clear result—favoring or disfavoring disclosure—can be reached because even given some uncertainty the overall balance is clear. In many other situations, however, the result is less clear. And the question arises of whether privacy or disclosure should be the default result in the face of such uncertainty.

2. In Practice

In all three of the contexts at issue here the disclosure decision has been based at least in part on a cost-benefit approach. But that approach has resulted in three very different results. In the general tax context, it has tended to reinforce a right-to-privacy conclusion that privacy should be favored over disclosure. In the tax-exempt nonprofit context, it is the second step of analysis after the conclusion has been reached, based on more fundamental concerns, that disclosure should be favored over privacy. That second step becomes the basis for the limited exceptions from otherwise required disclosure. Finally, in the election law context the cost-benefit approach has been the primary and indeed usually the only approach

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79 See, e.g., Solove, supra note 69, at 87–88 (discussing how the benefits and costs of privacy can be difficult to quantify); Mayer, supra note 633, at 256–57 (finding such flaws in the election law disclosure context).

80 See Solove, supra note 699, at 79–80, 88 (listing the benefits of privacy that could be harmed by disclosure).

81 See supra note 79 (citing commentators who argue that the costs and benefits of privacy are hard to quantify).
taken, leading to a strong bias toward disclosure because the benefits have generally been considered significantly greater than the costs except in very limited situations.

With respect to the general tax rules, the baseline for consideration of costs and benefits has in recent times been disclosure to the IRS but not beyond (even to other government agencies). The reason for accepting this baseline is relatively clear—without disclosure of taxpayer financial information to the IRS, whether from taxpayers directly or from third parties, underpayment of taxes owed would almost certainly be rampant and substantial. This assumption is supported not only by common sense, but by the fact that such underpayment is still a significant problem where third-party verification of taxpayer submitted information is not available. Absent general IRS access to taxpayer financial information, underpayment would almost certainly become an enormous problem. So given the existence of a federal income tax system, disclosure of taxpayer financial information to the government is necessary for that system to function.

Working from that baseline, consideration of benefits and costs of disclosing taxpayer information publicly has generally been limited to the effect of disclosure on the primary goal of the federal tax system—raising revenues for the federal government consistent with the existing tax laws. Focusing on this goal, the only cost-benefit question that Congress and commentators have tended to ask is whether such disclosure would enhance or inhibit the collection of the correct amount of revenues.

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82 See JCT REPORT vol. I, supra note 17, at 256 (providing the historical backdrop to the Tax Reform Act of 1976, which made tax return information confidential); Marc Linder, Tax Glasnost’ for Millionaires: Peeking Behind the Veil of Ignorance Along the Publicity-Privacy Continuum, 18 N.Y.U. REV. OF L. & SOC. CHANGE 951, 966 (1991) (noting that the Tax Reform Act of 1976 codified the prohibition of disclosure to the general public, but did not reverse the trend toward intragovernmental disclosure); Robert P. Strauss, State Disclosure of Tax Return Information: Taxpayer Privacy Versus the Public’s Right to Know, 5 ST. TAX NOTES 24, 26 (1993) (discussing the considerations that influenced Congress’ decision in the Tax Reform Act of 1976).

83 See U.S. GOVT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE, GAO–06–208T, TAX GAP: MULTIPLE STRATEGIES, BETTER COMPLIANCE DATA, AND LONG-TERM GOALS ARE NEEDED TO IMPROVE TAXPAYER COMPLIANCE 6 (2005) (showing that the misreporting of income is greatest in areas with little or no third party reporting).

84 See, e.g., Strauss, supra note 822, at 28 (discussing the efficacy of state disclosure laws in terms of their propensity to encourage compliance with the tax laws).

85 See, e.g., S. REP. No. 94–938, at 318 (1976) (regarding disclosure to other government agencies, the Senate Finance Committee “tried to balance the particular office or agency’s need for the information involved with the citizen’s right to privacy and the related impact of disclosure upon the continuation of compliance with our country’s voluntary assessment system”); Joshua D. Blank, What’s Wrong with Shaming Corporate Tax Abuse, 62 TAX L. REV. 539, 590 (2009) (concluding that disclosure of corporate involvement in abusive tax shelters is
Their conclusion has generally been that such disclosure would inhibit the collection of the correct amount of revenues because the tax system is dependent on taxpayers accurately reporting their financial information on their tax returns, and such accuracy can only be partially verified through third-party information reporting and IRS audits. The reasoning is that if taxpayers knew the information they reported would be publicly available and so could be used by others—family members, employers, business partners, vendors, scam artists, etc.—in a manner that would disadvantage the taxpayers, they would be much less likely to report truthful information on their returns. There also may be a risk that such disclosure would actually reveal widespread noncompliance, with the perverse effect that compliance would decrease as taxpayers realize the ineffectiveness of government enforcement.

So while the reason for this conclusion can be traced to possible harm to taxpayers, it ultimately is based primarily not on the magnitude of that harm itself. Rather, the conclusion is instead rooted in the perceived magnitude of that harm’s effect on the collection of the correct amount of revenue. Similarly, proposals to publicly disclose tax information for corporations depend at least in part on whether doing so will enhance or inhibit the collection of the correct amount of revenue. While this issue is not the only one that is relevant to such proposals, it is a critical one.

not advisable because it would not deter such involvement and would potentially adversely affect other aspects of tax compliance).

86 See S. REP. NO. 94–938, at 317 (asking “the question of whether the public’s reaction to possible abuse of privacy would seriously impair the effectiveness of our country’s very successful voluntary assessment system which is the mainstay of the Federal tax system”); JCT REPORT vol. I, supra note 17, at 128 (noting that the degree of compliance is related to the degree of confidentiality of information provided to the IRS).

87 See TREASURY REPORT, supra note 17, at 34 (providing examples of how disclosure of return information could result in under- and over-reporting of income).

88 See Joshua D. Blank, In Defense of Tax Privacy, 61 EMORY L.J. (forthcoming 2011) (manuscript at 22) (noting that tax privacy allows the government to selectively release information about tax enforcement resulting in an inflated public perception of the government’s ability to ensure compliance with the tax laws, thereby increasing actual compliance); Schwartz, supra note 17, at 889–90 (presenting Italy as an example of when the government released information over the internet to support tax compliance but the opposite happened as people realized the government’s inability to enforce tax collection).

89 See Lenter, Shackelford, & Slemrod, supra note 17, at 820–21, 827 (discussing proposals that would require the disclosure of corporate tax return information).

90 Id. at 827; see also Fogg, supra note 17, at 809–10 (proposing public disclosure of information about taxes collected by private entities and held in trust for the government because such funds are held in public trust and because disclosure would improve tax collection).
In the tax-exempt nonprofit context the baseline is instead disclosure to both the IRS and the public. The reasons for the disclosure to the IRS aspect of the baseline are fairly obvious—absent detailed financial and activity reporting to the IRS, there would be a strong incentive to create purportedly tax-exempt nonprofits that did not in fact qualify for the exemption because the misclassification would only be exposed in the relatively rare event of an IRS audit. Interestingly, however, for many years nonprofits claiming exemption did not have to apply for such status (and non-charitable nonprofits still are not required to apply) or file annual returns documenting their continued eligibility for such status.\(^91\) Starting in the middle of the twentieth century, however, Congress realized the potential for abuse that this lack of filings created and gradually expanded the required disclosure to the IRS.\(^92\) Now most charities have to file such applications and most nonprofits claiming exemption have to file an annual information return, although the amount of information they are required to provide on the annual return varies depending on their financial size.\(^93\) The only major exception to both requirements is for churches and certain church-related entities.\(^94\) This exception presumably arises not from generic privacy concerns, but instead from concerns relating to First Amendment free exercise of religion and entanglement issues.

For nonprofit organizations, the baseline is disclosure to the public because of the public’s interest in knowing whether organizations that claim tax benefits are in fact qualified.\(^95\) While usually not stated explicitly, a related rationale is that by claiming such benefits, nonprofit organizations are voluntarily choosing to allow the information they provide to the IRS to also be revealed to the public.\(^96\) It could be argued for organizations in existence at the time

\(^{91}\) See I.R.C. § 6033(a) (2006) (identifying which organizations must file annual returns); JCT REPORT vol. II, supra note 28, at 24 (outlining different organizations that do not have to apply for status claiming exemption or file annual returns under Tax Reform Act of 1969).

\(^{92}\) See H.R. REP. NO. 91–418, pt. 1, at 36 (1969) (detailing the primary purpose of annual reporting requirements as ensuring enforcement of the tax laws, and finding that “more information is needed, on a more current basis, from more organizations”); id. at 58 (noting that the lack of required applications means “Congress and the [IRS] are handicapped in evaluating and administering existing law”); S. REP. NO. 91–552, at 52 (1969) (“[M]ore information is needed on a more current basis for more organizations . . . .”); id. at 54 (noting that the lack of required applications means “the [IRS] has been handicapped in evaluating and administering existing laws”).

\(^{93}\) See supra notes 29–32 and accompanying text for a discussion of the information that is required to be on annual information returns.


\(^{95}\) See supra note 522, 92 and accompanying text (discussing the reasons that information about nonprofit organizations is disclosed to the public).

\(^{96}\) See Nat’l Fed’n of Republican Assemblies v. United States, 218 F. Supp. 2d 1300, 1318
the disclosure rules went into effect that this is a false choice, as loss of the previously claimed tax benefits could have, in many cases, been financially devastating. But certainly new organizations are on notice of the now existing disclosure rules before they claim these benefits. The baseline of both IRS and public disclosure, therefore, makes particular sense for new entities, although it can be justified for all organizations claiming tax-exempt status.

Working from this baseline, the primary role of cost-benefit analysis is not to reinforce the conclusion favoring disclosure that more fundamental considerations support, although it may do so.97 Rather, the analysis is used primarily to identify situations in which an exception from the public disclosure rules should be granted because the benefits of permitting an exception outweigh its costs. In that role, however, the analysis also sometimes reinforces the support for exceptions that arguably are based on a fundamental right to privacy approach.

For example, the general rule that information identifying donors is not subject to public disclosure reflects both of these strands. The vast majority of donors to tax-exempt nonprofits are individuals and revealing their identities would disclose both information about their financial resources and their charitable preferences that often are not otherwise publicly available.98 Doing so would therefore conflict with a fundamental (and individual) right to privacy, as described below. At the same time, this exception is also often justified because it has minimal costs in terms of reduced compliance with the requirements for tax exemption. And, conversely, it promotes the significant

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benefit of encouraging donations, which helps the donee organization and supports the purpose of the charitable contribution deduction, i.e., encouraging donations.\textsuperscript{99} Where the costs of such an exception are viewed as more substantial in terms of inhibiting compliance with the restrictions on tax-exempt organizations, however, such as is arguably the case with donors to private foundations or with respect to information regarding executive compensation, then the analysis tilts the other way and public disclosure applies.\textsuperscript{100}

Finally, in the election law context the baseline also is generally disclosure to the government (here the Federal Election Commission). Historically, this baseline has been justified by three important governmental interests: (1) knowing about financial contributions to candidates, political parties, and other political players to prevent corruption and the appearance of corruption; (2) knowing about financial contributions to enable the government to enforce the various limits on contributions and other political expenditures; and (3) informing voters.\textsuperscript{101}

The reasoning and result of the \textit{Citizens United} decision, however, weakened the first two interests with respect to independent expenditures. The Court diluted the first interest by concluding that the government only had a compelling interest in preventing corruption via \textit{quid pro quo} arrangements, which the Court further concluded was not a concern with respect to expenditures made independently of candidates and political parties.\textsuperscript{102} But as a policy matter the government could still have an interest, albeit a less than compelling one in the Court’s view, in monitoring independent expenditures and contributions to entities making such expenditures to prevent more broadly defined corruption.

\textsuperscript{99} See S. REP. NO. 91–552, at 53 (1969) (concluding that the underlying rationale in modifying the law is that publicly disclosing the identity of substantial contributors might prevent some gifts); JCT REPORT vol. II, supra note 28, at 81 (same).

\textsuperscript{100} See H.R. REP. NO. 91–413, pt. 1, at 36 (1969) (stating that disclosure of information relating to substantial contributors, directors, trustees, other management officials, and highly compensated employees “is intended to facilitate meaningful enforcement of the limitations imposed by the bill, especially when combined with the publicity provisions”).


\textsuperscript{102} Citizens United v. FEC, 130 S. Ct. 876, 909–10 (2010).
Citizens United also virtually eliminated the second interest because no limits now apply on expenditures made independently of candidates and political parties or contributions to entities making such expenditures (with the possible exception of foreign individuals or entities).\(^{103}\) It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that the Court in Citizens United relied solely on the third interest—informing voters.\(^ {104}\) But that single interest still left the pre-disclosure baseline intact.\(^ {105}\)

Working from the historic baseline of disclosure to the FEC, a cost-benefit approach appears to usually control and generally favors public disclosure of the financial support provided by identified individuals and entities to candidates, political parties, political committees, and independent expenditures.\(^ {106}\) This may be in large part because the constitutionality of disclosure provisions is determined using the cost-benefit approach. More specifically, the current disclosure regime was unanimously upheld in Buckley v. Valeo based on the reasoning that the benefits of disclosure in the form of deterring corruption and the appearance of corruption, facilitating enforcement of other election laws, and informing voters generally outweighed any negative consequences of such disclosure.\(^ {107}\) More recently, in Citizens United, the Supreme Court by an eight-to-one vote upheld disclosure rules applicable to various forms of election-related spending engaged in independently of candidates and political parties based solely on the voter information benefits, rejecting as a general matter the arguments that the potential harm—including any chilling effect on speech—from disclosure outweighed those benefits.\(^ {108}\) Only Justice Thomas dissented, but he did not take a different approach than the majority. Rather, he differed with his colleagues because he viewed the likely harm from disclosure as substantially greater than they did.\(^ {109}\)

The Court has also recognized that in particular circumstances where the costs of disclosure outweigh the benefits, an exception to the generally applicable disclosure rules exists as a constitutional matter.\(^ {110}\) For example, in Brown v. Socialist Workers ’74 Campaign

\(^{103}\) Id. at 913.

\(^{104}\) Id. at 914.

\(^{105}\) Id.

\(^{106}\) See McGeveran, Persona, supra note 688, at 862 (detailing how recent Supreme Court cases in this area “represent an almost complete disregard for individual privacy interests”).


\(^{108}\) Citizens United, 130 S. Ct. at 914–16.

\(^{109}\) Id. at 980–82 (Thomas, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).

\(^{110}\) See Buckley, 424 U.S. at 71 ("There could well be a case . . . where the threat to the exercise of First Amendment rights is so serious and the state interest furthered by disclosure so
Committee, the Court found that given the extensive evidence of retaliatory actions taken against members and financial supporters of a socialist political party when their identities became known, the cost of disclosure to those individuals outweighed the benefits to the public, and so the Constitution required an exemption from the normally applicable disclosure rules. The same political party recently successfully petitioned the FEC for an extension of that exception, but only after producing extensive evidence of continuing retaliatory action against its members and financial supporters when their identities became publicly known.

The Supreme Court and lower federal courts have proven less sympathetic to such claims when the retaliatory action is less prevalent or traceable to the public disclosure. For example, reviewing same-sex marriage cases, the courts have generally rejected attempts to keep the identities of supporters of ballot initiatives opposing same-sex marriage private even given evidence of scattered acts of retaliation ranging from boycotts and job terminations to criminal acts. Again, these decisions appear to have been driven by a cost-benefit analysis, with costs found wanting.

For examples outside of the election law context, see, e.g., Gibson v. Fla. Legislative Investigation Comm., 372 U.S. 539, 554–56 (1963) (holding that a legislative inquiry regarding possible members with Communist affiliations was not constitutional when no relationship is demonstrated between association and subversive or Communist activities); Bates v. City of Little Rock, 361 US. 516, 523–24 (1960) (holding that the compelled disclosure to the government and public of the NAACP’s members was not constitutional when there exists “uncontroverted evidence” that members would then likely face “harassment and threats of bodily harm”); NAACP v. Alabama ex rel. Patterson, 357 U.S. 449, 462–63 (1958) (same for members of local NAACP chapters).


See, e.g., Doe v. Reed, 130 S. Ct. 2811, 2815 (2010) (holding that disclosure of referendum petitions does not generally violate the First Amendment and remedying for consideration of whether disclosure of a petitions relating to a specific referendum would); Nat’l Org. for Marriage v. McKee, 765 F. Supp. 2d 38, 47–48 (D. Me. 2011) (holding that required registration and reporting by ballot initiative committee did not violate the First Amendment); ProtectMarriage.com v. Bowen, 599 F. Supp. 2d 1197, 1226 (E.D. Cal. 2009) (concluding that, in the context of a motion for preliminary injunction, the claim that disclosure of donors to ballot committees would violate the First Amendment was almost certain to fail).

See, e.g., Doe, 130 S. Ct. at 2819–21 (balancing the state’s interest in “preserving the integrity of the electoral process,” supported by evidence of past referendum petition-related fraud, against the lack of evidence that, in general, public identification of petition signers results in harassment and intimidation); Nat’l Org. for Marriage, 765 F. Supp. 2d at 53, 53 n.85 (balancing the state’s interest in informing voters against the lack of any evidence of likely harassment); ProtectMarriage.com, 599 F. Supp. 2d at 1207–11, 1216–19 (balancing the state’s interest in informing voters, which would be seriously burdened if disclosure was not permitted, against the likelihood of threats, harassment, and reprisals resulting from disclosure, which was very low).
The one significant exception is found in the *McIntyre* case, where the Court concluded that an individual who personally created flyers relating to a local election issue (but not a candidate) could not be compelled to identify herself on the flyers.\(^{115}\) Though the Court cited to the long history of anonymous political involvement in our country,\(^{116}\) it still relied in large part on a cost-benefit analysis. The Court ultimately concluded that since the election related to an issue, not a candidate, preventing corruption and the appearance of corruption was not at stake, and given the fact that revealing the relatively obscure individual’s identity would not help voters interpret the flyer’s message, any benefits from disclosure were minimal.\(^{117}\) Mrs. McIntyre’s case was also probably aided by the fact that the complaint about her lack of disclosure appeared likely to have been made in retaliation for her political position.\(^{118}\)

### B. A Right to Privacy

#### 1. In Theory

The concept of privacy as a fundamental right is traceable to the view that a basic right of all individuals is a right to autonomy.\(^{119}\) This view asserts that for individuals to fully be human they must be free to make choices.\(^{120}\) Anything that limits choices, therefore, threatens this basic aspect of what it means to be human.

A right to privacy is necessary for autonomy because when otherwise private information regarding an individual’s choices is

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\(^{116}\) Id. at 343, 343 n.6.

\(^{117}\) Id. at 348–49, 356.

\(^{118}\) See id. at 338 (noting that the official who reported her supported the opposite position).

\(^{119}\) See, e.g., DELANY & CAROLAN, supra note 699, at 16–20 (exploring how privacy enhances autonomy); RÖSSLER, supra note 70, at 116 (same with respect to informational privacy); Geoffrey Gomery, *Whose Autonomy Matters? Reconciling the Competing Claims of Privacy and Freedom of Expression*, 27 LEGAL STUD. 404, 408–09 (2007) (same); Kahn, supra note 717, at 378 (explaining how “privacy is an attribute of individuality”); id. at 384–86 (summarizing the relationship between privacy and autonomy); Lindsay, supra note 699, at 148 (proposing that the moral autonomy of individuals is the basis for the deontological approach to privacy). A right to privacy may also be based on other more fundamental concepts, such as dignity, but in this context the autonomy basis is the most applicable. See SOLOVE, supra note 699, at 85–87 (describing nonconsequentialist grounds for a right to privacy, including but not limited to autonomy).

\(^{120}\) See, e.g., RÖSSLER, supra note 70, at 50 (“Only a life lived autonomously . . . can also be a rewarding life.”). An extension of this view is that privacy deserves protection not so much because autonomy benefits the individual but because individual autonomy ultimately benefits society. See DANIEL J. SOLOVE, *NOTHING TO HIDE: THE FALSE TRADEOFF BETWEEN PRIVACY AND SECURITY* 50 (2011) (“A society without privacy protection would be oppressive. When protecting individual rights, we as a society decide to hold back in order to receive the benefits of creating free zones for individuals to flourish.”).
expected to be revealed to others, an individual may alter his or her choices to conform to the views of others regarding the choices that are best. If this occurs, the disclosure of that individual’s otherwise private information reduces that individual’s autonomy. Infringement of privacy therefore requires a compelling justification, since such infringement negatively impacts a basis aspect of being human.

There are two important refinements to this approach. First, while this approach supports a stronger legal right to privacy it does not mean that the Constitution contains such a right in all contexts. While the Supreme Court has identified a right to privacy in the Constitution, that right is a limited one. This constitutional right does not, importantly for our purpose here, reach the required disclosure of financial information in connection with the federal tax or election laws. Instead, the Court considers such disclosure under the exacting scrutiny analysis discussed above.

Second, because this right to privacy flows from an individual’s need for autonomy, it is a right of individuals and not of other entities. Artificial persons such as nonprofit corporations only enjoy the protection granted by this right to the extent necessary to facilitate protection of individual privacy. In other words, any privacy right of such artificial persons is derivative of the privacy right of individuals.

2. In Practice

This autonomy of the individual right to privacy plays a significant role in the disclosure rules found in the three legal regimes detailed above. In the federal tax regime generally, acknowledgement of that right leads to a strong bias against public disclosure of taxpayer information. Indeed, the bias is so strong it has been extended to

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121 See RÖSSLER, supra note 70, at 73 (“To be able to develop authentic plans, to design or define oneself through one’s dealings . . ., one’s expectations with respect to other people’s knowledge about oneself must not be mistaken.”); Daniel J. Solove, A Taxonomy of Privacy, 154 U. PA. L. REV. 477, 532 (2006) (“The risk of disclosure can prevent people from engaging in activities that further their own self-development.”).


123 See supra notes 6060–622, 1077–1099 and accompanying text (discussing the exacting scrutiny standard).

124 See McGeveran, Persona, supra note 688, at 881–82 (noting that “privacy theory focuses on individuals, not collectives”).

125 See S. REP. NO. 94–938, at 317 (1976) (asking whether disclosure of federal tax information, even to other government agencies, “breaches a reasonable expectation of privacy...
artificial entities such as for-profit corporations, as well as protecting the privacy of the individuals who are the vast majority of taxpayers. A recent proposal suggests, however, that there should be limited disclosure of tax information relating to corporations in part to improve tax compliance. While not framed in these terms, a relaxation of the anti-disclosure rules for artificial entities is also consistent with this conceptualization of a right to privacy when doing so does not reveal individual financial information. Such relaxation would be less consistent with this right-to-privacy approach, however, if it extended to situations when entity-level disclosure would be more likely to reveal individual financial information, as would often be the case with closely held corporations and other entities owned by a small group of individuals, which would presumably include many if not most partnerships and limited liability companies.

The disclosure rules for tax-exempt nonprofit organizations also reveal the influence of this right-to-privacy approach in two important ways, even given the general pro-disclosure position of those rules. First, and as detailed previously, the existence of such a right is acknowledged but is deemed to be outweighed—or perhaps waived—by the receipt of tax benefits by such organizations and the resulting need for the public to be assured that such benefits are in fact deserved. Although not generally justified in this way, disclosure is also consistent with the right being primarily a right for individuals, not artificial legal entities, since disclosure of financial and activity

126 When the focus is on public disclosure of information relating to entities as opposed to individuals, however, a right to privacy is usually not considered but instead only the cost-benefit concerns relating to the effect of such disclosure on tax compliance. See, e.g., Blank, supra note 855, at 590 (discussing potential costs and benefits of “shaming sanctions” to address corporate tax abuse); see also Bittker, supra note 15, at 480 (“To present the conflict between disclosure and privacy in its sharpest form, I will limit myself to the disclosure of individual income tax returns; since corporate returns contain fewer personal details, disclosure would be less dramatic.”). 127 Lenter, Shackelford, & Slemrod, supra note 17, at 827; see also Strauss, supra note 822, at 31 (considering a similar proposal relating to state business tax information). 128 See supra notes 522, 955–966 and accompanying text (discussing why the baseline for nonprofit organizations is pro-disclosure).
information for tax-exempt nonprofit organizations generally does not reveal financial information for identified individuals.

Second, it is also consistent with a right-to-privacy approach that at least some of the areas where nonprofit organizations are not required to publicly disclose information involve information about individuals—e.g., information about donors and individual grantees. At the same time, the disclosure of information about private foundation donors and director, officer, and key employee compensation is also consistent with this approach as it is justified by the strong interest in the public being assured that individuals with a high level of influence over tax-exempt nonprofit organizations do not use that influence to improperly enrich themselves.

The right to privacy as described above plays a relatively minimal role in the election law context. But it has not completely escaped notice. Even here, however, the election laws are arguably consistent with this approach in two ways. First, the information disclosed about individuals involved in the political process is relatively limited—the amount and recipients of their contributions, plus the names, addresses, and employers of the contributors—as compared to the much more comprehensive financial information provided by taxpayers to the government. A reasonable argument can therefore be made that the infringement on the financial privacy of such individuals is relatively limited.

Second, because the individual financial information disclosed is so limited, the primary effect of the existing election law disclosure rules is to reveal, publicly, the political leanings of the individual contributors. Indeed, it is this effect of such disclosures that is most commonly cited as infringing on the right to privacy of individuals. There are, however, at least two arguments against the right to privacy either attaching to information about political leanings or controlling whether such information remains private. The first

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129 See JCT REPORT vol. II, supra note 28, at 81 ("[D]onors have legitimate privacy concerns."); supra note 42 and accompanying text (discussing individual grantees).

130 See supra notes 397–411, 100 and accompanying text (discussing private foundations and officers).

131 See McGeveran, Persona, supra note 688, at 860 ([S]erious attention to political privacy remains relatively invisible compared to areas such as health care or social media"); supra note 688 and accompanying text (citing commentators that have argued that the balancing approach, which is currently used in the election law context, is inconsistent with the right-to-privacy approach).

132 Compare supra note 15 and accompanying text (federal tax law filings), with supra note 565 and accompanying text (election law filings).

133 See McGeveran, Persona, supra note 688, at 866 (noting but criticizing the focus on retaliation and chilling effects while ignoring other negative effects of disclosure in this context).
argument is that one of the natural consequences of having and acting on political leanings is having to defend such political leanings publicly.134 That is, politics is an inherently public activity because it is generally conducted publicly and affects the broader public. Thus, an individual who seeks to influence politics in a direction that they desire has no legitimate expectation of privacy. Any exceptions to this general view, such as those that currently exist with respect to voting, should therefore be limited to situations where the costs of public disclosure clearly exceed the benefits to society.

The second, related argument is that an individual’s political views, if acted on, potentially affect matters that will primarily impact others, including possibly the entire public. Given this potential effect, it is the public’s business to know about an individual’s political actions even if that individual’s political views would otherwise be private. In other words, the public has a right to know about such actions, even if they reveal otherwise private political leanings. The public’s right to know trumps the contributor’s right to privacy similarly to the way that the public’s interest in knowing whether nonprofit organizations that receive significant tax benefits qualify for those benefits trumps any right to privacy (derivative or otherwise) such organizations might enjoy. Again, exceptions should only exist for particular situations where the costs of disclosure clearly outweigh the benefits.

There is, however, a reasonable counterargument. The counterargument is that since the right to privacy for individuals has its roots in the fundamental human characteristic of autonomy, including autonomy with respect to political choices, it would be inconsistent with that origin to expose such choices to public scrutiny and therefore influence. That is, if an individual’s political action is not inherently public—as would be the case with, for example, making an endorsement or having a yard sign—such action should be protected by a right to privacy because otherwise there is significant risk that the individual’s autonomy will be comprised.135 This line of

134 See Transcript of Oral Argument at 12, Doe v. Reed, 130 S. Ct. 2811 (2010) (No. 09–559) (Scalia, J.) (“[T]he fact is that running a democracy takes a certain amount of civic courage. And the First Amendment does not protect you from criticism or even nasty phone calls when you exercise your political rights to legislate, or to take part in the legislative process.”); McGeveran, Persona, supra note 688, at 867 (“[I]n the election disclosure cases, calls for ‘civic courage,’ characterizations of political activity as ‘lawmaking,’ and references to the ‘public sphere’ all endeavor to define conflict away, simply by placing involvement with elections on the ‘public’ side of a clear and dispositive line.”).

135 See McGeveran, Persona, supra note 688, at 872 (“[D]onations, petition signatures, and party registration generally are not intended as announcements of political views to one’s neighbors.”); id. at 877 (“The prospect of disclosure can discourage individuals from taking certain political actions, and it pushes citizens toward conformity with dominant views.”).
reasoning suggests that not all political actions are inherently public and so the right to privacy applies to at least some political actions. And even though private political actions have public effect, that alone should not be sufficient to overcome the right to privacy. Part III considers these arguments further in the specific context of individuals financially supporting politically active, tax-exempt organizations.

Vindicating privacy concerns therefore can be pursued in two strikingly different ways. The different approaches to privacy and disclosure in the general tax, nonprofit tax, and election law contexts reveals that the approach chosen can lead to a large variation in results. The choice made in each context may make sense in that context. But when the contexts intersect—as is the case when discussing expanding disclosure with respect to politically active, tax-exempt nonprofits—a choice about which and to what extent each approach will be applied to determine the appropriate level of disclosure and privacy is required. To the proposals for such expanded disclosure and these choices we now turn.

III. NONPROFITS, POLITICS, AND PRIVACY

The increased attention to and amount of political spending by tax-exempt nonprofits in the wake of Citizens United has generated a plethora of proposals for increasing the public disclosure of information about both these entities and their financial supporters. This Part briefly summarizes these proposals and then considers them from first a cost-benefit perspective and then a right-to-privacy perspective. Perhaps not surprisingly, the cost-benefit perspective generally supports such proposals with only the caveat that in some, relatively unusual situations, an exception might be required. The application of the right-to-privacy perspective is, however, more complicated. Because that right primarily applies to individuals, it does not create a barrier to public disclosure of information relating to the entities themselves. But with respect to information relating to financial supporters, many if not most of whom may be individuals or entities closely associated with specific individuals, the right does provide a ground for objecting to such public disclosure. That objection is only valid, however, if the right applies not only to financial information but also to political leanings that otherwise would not be publicly known.
A. Proposals

While commentators and lawmakers have floated many proposals to increase public disclosure of information relating to politically active, tax-exempt nonprofit organizations, these proposals can be grouped into essentially two categories. The first category is information relating to such organizations themselves, including their finances and activities. Examples of such proposals include requiring such entities to apply to the IRS for recognition of their tax-exempt status, requiring more detailed, and quicker, reporting of political expenditures and activities than currently exists through the generally required annual information return, and requiring such entities to report on their political activities to their members or donors.

The second category is information identifying significant financial supporters of tax-exempt nonprofit organizations. While tax-exempt nonprofits are already required to report identifying information for relatively large donors to the IRS as part of the annual information return, such information is not disclosed to the public, except if the donations are to a private foundation or a political organization. Current proposals would generally require that for other types of tax-exempt nonprofits engaged in political activity such information would both be made public and be submitted much more...
quickly. And some proposals would also expand the universe of donors subject to disclosure.

Whether such proposals are desirable depends in significant part on the approach one takes with respect to privacy. This Part therefore considers these categories of proposals using each of the two approaches discussed above.

B. The Cost-Benefit Approach

1. Entity Disclosure

As discussed above, the existing rules requiring public disclosure of applications for recognition of exemption and annual information returns filed by tax-exempt nonprofit organizations are justified for two reasons: (1) the public’s interest in knowing whether such organizations qualify for these benefits; and (2) the consent of tax-exempt organizations to disclosure as a condition for receiving tax benefits.140 Thus, additional or quicker disclosure of information relating to the subset of organizations that engage in political activities should only be rejected under the cost-benefit approach if the costs of disclosure generally outweigh the benefits. Most political activity by a tax-exempt nonprofit organization is a public matter in itself—advertisements, mailings, phone banks, and so on. And financial information relating to tax-exempt nonprofit organizations is also already public given the pro-disclosure baseline. Thus, there does not appear to be generally any significant costs of such additional and faster disclosure.

Furthermore, additional and faster disclosure provides the benefit of enabling the public to better ascertain in a timely fashion whether a given organization in fact qualifies for the tax-exempt status they are claiming.141 Specifically, non-charitable tax-exempt nonprofit organizations that are not Internal Revenue Code section 527 political organizations may only engage in political activity as a secondary activity. Yet there have allegedly been repeated attempts to violate this rule in recent years.142 Thus, a clear need exists for the public to

140 See supra notes 522, 955–966 and accompanying text (discussing why the baseline for nonprofit organizations is pro-disclosure).
141 See Tobin, supra note 4, at 439–40 (discussing the problems with the current application regime).
142 See Nicholas Confessore, Watchdogs Call Out 4 Nonprofits as Too Political for Tax Exemption, THE CAUCUS (Sept. 28, 2011, 5:26 PM), http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/28/watchdogs-call-out-4-nonprofits-as-too-political-for-tax-exemption/ (discussing how several watchdog groups argue for tighter campaign laws that would take away tax exemptions for nonprofit groups that become too
have a faster way to ensure this rule is satisfied. Finally, it should be noted that while certain charitable nonprofits—primarily churches and church-related entities—are exempt from the existing filing and disclosure rules, those nonprofits would not be affected by these proposals since they are prohibited under current federal tax law from engaging in any activities that would support or oppose a candidate for elected public office.\textsuperscript{143}

Thus, under a cost-benefit approach, it appears that there are no plausible general objections to proposals that would require additional and faster disclosure of financial and political activity information for politically active, tax-exempt nonprofit organizations. If such disclosure would be problematic for a particular entity under this approach an exception could be considered to cover such situations. But especially given the public nature of most political activity, it is difficult to imagine a scenario where an exception would be needed.

2. Donor Disclosure

Currently, information regarding financial supporters of tax-exempt nonprofit organizations is not subject to disclosure except with respect to private foundations and political organizations.\textsuperscript{144} The private foundation exception arises out of the combination of the control of private foundations by a single donor or small group of donors and deductibility of contributions that donors to private foundations, as section 501(c)(3) organizations, enjoy—a combination that does not exist and so is not relevant for non-501(c)(3)s that are permitted to engage in political activity, albeit as less than a primary activity, but whose donors do not enjoy deductibility for their contributions.\textsuperscript{145} The reasons for the section 527 exception are the same reasons as for the current proposals to expand this exception to encompass donors to other types of politically active tax-exempt nonprofit organizations and is considered below.
In general, public disclosure of donor information is disfavored under a cost-benefit approach. While there is a baseline of complete public disclosure, the benefit from an exception for donors in the form of significantly increased donations is generally seen as substantially outweighing the cost, if any, to ensuring compliance with the requirements for being tax-exempt that the lack of such disclosure would generate (except in the case of private foundations). The key question, for both the proposals at issue here and the existing political organization donor disclosure rules, is therefore whether the calculus is different when the recipient organization is engaged in political activities.

The benefits of donor disclosure commonly cited are some of the same ones that support donor disclosure under election law. They include increased voter information and preventing corruption and the appearance of corruption. For reasons I have developed elsewhere, such interests are generally only served when the amount of contributions by the publicly identified donor are relatively large. For such significant donors, however, there is a plausible argument that knowing who financially supports a particular, politically active organization helps targets of that organization’s political communications interpret those communications and deters improper influence (and the appearance of improper influence) of public officials even if, as the Supreme Court held in *Citizens United*, such influence does not rise to a quid pro quo level.

At the same time, the costs of such disclosures to the donors are usually relatively minimal. The financial information disclosed provides only a very partial picture of a donor’s financial situation, unlike the much more comprehensive financial information provided on taxpayer’s federal income tax return. As for disclosing the donor’s political leanings, even if those leanings were not previously known to the public, there is scant evidence of negative repercussions from

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146 See supra note 999 and accompanying text (discussing the benefits donor anonymity creates).

147 See supra note 107 and accompanying text (discussing election law). The other oft-cited benefit of ensuring increased compliance with other laws is not a factor here. That is because tax-exempt, nonprofit organizations that are not Internal Revenue Code section 527 political organizations generally only make expenditures independently of candidates and political parties, and under *Citizens United* and a subsequent FEC ruling applying that decision there are no longer limits on the sources or amounts of financial support for such expenditures (with the possible exception of few limited categories of sources). See *Citizens United v. FEC*, 130 S. Ct. 876, 913 (2010) (striking down limits on independent expenditures); FED. ELECTION COMMISSION, ADVISORY OPINION 2010–11, at 2 (2010), available at http://saos.nictusa.com/saos/search?ao (finding that “soliciting and accepting unlimited contributions from individuals, political committees, corporations, and labor organizations for the purpose of making independent expenditures” was legal).

148 Mayer, supra note 633, at 281–82.
the leanings becoming publicly known except in relative rare circumstances. Such rare circumstances can be accommodated by building in an exception mechanism similar to the one available in the election law context for the supporters of groups such as the Socialist Workers Party.

There are also potential costs to the organization involved in the form of reduced contributions because some donors will shy away from having their contributions—and thus their political leanings—revealed publicly. That is a legitimate concern, but the extent to which donors will in fact change their behavior has not been demonstrated in other contexts—such as opposition to same-sex marriage—that have proven to be particularly controversial. Thus, the benefits already discussed appear to outweigh what at this point are relatively speculative costs.

A cost-benefit approach therefore does not raise any general barriers to public disclosure of information regarding donors to politically active, tax-exempt nonprofit organizations, at least if the donors are relatively large financial contributors. Indeed, in apparent recognition of the fact that disclosure is generally only beneficial if the donors involved have contributed substantial sums, most commentators who have put forward such proposals are willing to limit their reach to donors who give at or even above the already relatively high trigger amounts for currently required disclosure to the IRS. Subject to this caveat and the need for an exception mechanism in the rare case of demonstrated significant harassment of donors to certain types of groups or causes, the cost-benefit approach supports all of the existing disclosure proposals.

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149. See supra note 11313 and accompanying text (citing cases dealing with disclosure of political leanings that found the evidence of harassment insufficient to justify an exception). But see McGeveran, Persona, supra note 688, at 871–79 (discussing additional costs of disclosure). What McGeveran lists as additional costs of disclosure I would instead identify as reasons for supporting the use of the right-to-privacy approach, which, for the reasons I have discussed, is conceptually and practically distinct from the cost-benefit approach. See supra note 733 and accompanying text (noting this distinction).

150. See supra note 644 and accompanying text (discussing the Socialist Workers Party situation).

151. See Mayer, supra note 633, at 277–78 (discussing the same-sex marriage evidence).

152. Compare, e.g., Tobin, supra note 4, at 440 n.79 (setting a threshold over $25,000, but expressing a willingness to consider an even higher threshold), with INTERNAL REVENUE SERV., FORM 990 SCHEDULE B SCHEDULE OF CONTRIBUTORS (2010), available at http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f990ezb.pdf (requiring, as a general rule, disclosure to the IRS of identifying information for donors who contribute $5,000 or more annually).
C. The Right-to-Privacy Approach

1. Entity Disclosure

With respect to increased disclosure by entities of their own finances and activities, the right-to-privacy approach does not require rejection of the proposals for two reasons. First, the right to privacy is a right of individuals, not entities. Second, unlike a family business or a family foundation (for which disclosure of donors is already required for other reasons under any conditions), disclosure of information about politically active, tax-exempt nonprofits does not represent an indirect infringement on the privacy of individuals who financially support such organizations. Even if an organization is supported by a single individual or small group of individuals, neither the organization nor those individuals need to disclose that connection publicly. That in fact is one of the grounds cited for requiring disclosure of donor information, which I address in a moment—it is relatively easy for donors to maintain their anonymity in this context absent government compelled disclosure of their identities.

2. Donor Disclosure

The situation is less clear, however, when it comes to disclosure of information about donors to politically active, tax-exempt nonprofit organizations. Many, perhaps most, donors are individuals who under this approach have a fundamental right to privacy. If that right to privacy extends to the information at issue here, then there has to be a relatively strong justification for setting that right aside in whole or in part.

As discussed previously, publicly disclosing the identities of financial supporters reveals two pieces of information. First, it reveals information about the supporters’ financial situations, but only in a very partial way—again, much less comprehensive financial information than what is found, for example, on an individual’s federal income tax return. Second, it reveals information about the political leanings of those supporters.

If the fundamental right to privacy applies to otherwise private financial information but does not extend to otherwise private political actions, there is a strong argument that it should not apply in

153 See supra note 1244 and accompanying text (discussing the theory of the right to privacy).
154 See supra note 2 (citing sources that discuss the propensity of tax-exempt nonprofit organizations to keep their donors secret).
this context, or at least not apply very strongly, because of the very limited amount of financial information that is disclosed. Such a lack of application or weak application of the right to privacy would suggest that the cost-benefit analysis conducted above should be controlling, so proposals to increase disclosure of donor information should not be barred by this right. That is, the cost associated with revealing this otherwise private financial information should simply be included in the cost-benefit analysis. And for most donors that cost will be minimal or non-existent since the public can gain information about their general financial situations through other channels such as the neighborhood in which they live, the house they own, the type of car they drive, the job they have, and so on.

If, however, the fundamental right to privacy extends to information about otherwise private political actions, then disclosure of contributions is much more problematic. But there are at least two arguments against such an extension. First, the inherent public nature of politics suggests that no right to privacy should attach to any political actions. And second, the potential public effect of all political actions suggests that even if a right to privacy attaches to some political actions, the public’s right to know about actions that could affect it generally outweighs the private political actor’s right to privacy. At the same time, however, it could be reasonably argued that because public disclosure of otherwise private political actions may cause individuals to change their choices regarding political actions and thus lose a portion of their autonomy, the right to privacy should extend to such actions.155

Resolving this debate generally is well beyond the scope of this Article. But, below, I attempt to at least to resolve it as it applies to the specific context of proposals to disclose information about the individual financial supporters of politically active, tax-exempt organizations. In this context, it is plausible to conclude that publicly revealing the identities of financial supporters for politically controversial tax-exempt organizations, such as National Right to Life, the Planned Parenthood Action Council, the Human Rights Campaign, or the National Organization for Marriage, will cause some individuals to shy away from providing financial support that they would otherwise be willing to contribute. Indeed, such financial support seems similar to voting, which is intentionally kept private in order to preserve the ability of individual voters to vote without undue

155 See supra notes 119–121 and accompanying text (discussing the integral relationship between individual autonomy and the right to privacy).
influence from others.\textsuperscript{156} Thus, despite the public nature of politics, to say that the right to privacy simply does not attach at all to political actions that the actor could keep private absent government compelled disclosure appears to go too far.\textsuperscript{157} Furthermore, because donations to politically active, tax-exempt nonprofit organizations generally do not result in a tax benefit for the donor, it cannot be argued credibly that the donor has consented to disclosure in exchange for receiving a tax benefit.\textsuperscript{158}

That conclusion, however, only addresses the first argument against extending the right to privacy to financial support of politically active, tax-exempt nonprofit organizations. There is still the issue of whether the right to privacy in this context should generally be overcome by the public’s interest in the information because of the potential public effect of the financial support. It is important to emphasize that this comparison is not the same as the cost-benefit analysis conducted previously, where the demonstrable benefits to the public are balanced against the demonstrable costs to the individuals involved. Rather, under a right-to-privacy approach, it is assumed that the individuals involved have a right to privacy that can only be overcome by a similarly weighty right that would be sufficiently vindicated by public disclosure.

There is undoubtedly a right in a liberal democratic framework for the public to know about actions that affect or are likely to affect the operation of government.\textsuperscript{159} Numerous government transparency laws are based on this right, including laws that reveal information not

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\textsuperscript{157} See James A. Gardner, \textit{Anonymity and Democratic Citizenship}, 19 WM. & MARY BILL RTS. J. 927, 956 (2011) (considering whether anonymity in politics induces citizens to come closer to consensus norms of ideal democratic behavior and concluding that this determination is “highly variable and context-dependent”); McGeveran, \textit{Persona}, supra note 688, at 872 (arguing that since the flow of information to the public is unintended in many activities that have political connotations, such as giving a donation to an organization, signing petitions, or registering for a political party, such acts are not inherently public).

\textsuperscript{158} While donors to charitable organizations may receive a tax benefit in the form of a charitable contribution deduction, such organizations are prohibited from supporting or opposing candidates. See I.R.C. § 170(c)(2) (2006) (defining a “corporation, trust, or community chest, fund, or foundation” to which a donor can donate and take a charitable contribution deduction to exclude any organization that “attempt[s] to . . . participate in . . ., any political campaign on behalf of (or in position to) any candidate for public office”).

\textsuperscript{159} See, e.g., John Adams, \textit{A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law} (1765) reprinted in \textit{The Political Writings of John Adams} 3, 13 (George W. Carey ed., 2000) (“[T]he people . . . have a right, an indisputable, unalienable, indefeasible, divine right to that most dreaded and envied kind of knowledge, I mean, of the characters and conduct of their rulers.”).
only about government actors but also about those who interact with
government actors in a way that might influence their actions, such as
lobbyists, contractors, and, of course, campaign contributors. Thus,
the key question is not whether such a right exists. Rather, it is
whether the public’s right to know is sufficiently vindicated by public
disclosure of information about the individual financial supporters of
politically active, tax-exempt nonprofit organizations to overcome the
donors’ right to privacy.

Whether the public’s right to know is vindicated by disclosure
does not depend on whether the knowledge revealed will be used by
the public—an issue that is considered under the cost-benefit
approach—because that is the public’s choice. Instead, the question
depends on whether the knowledge revealed actually relates to actions
that influence or are likely to influence ultimate government action.
Additionally, the scale of the knowledge revealed should at least
roughly match the scale at which such influence is likely to occur.
Compare, for example, a single individual’s action, which is highly
unlikely to actually influence government action, and a large group of
individual’s action, which is likely to have such influence. The
public’s right to know is vindicated by public disclosure of
information relating to the group. But public disclosure of
information relating to the single, by themselves inconsequential,
individual, does not vindicate any right to know because it will not
influence the government in any way.

Most financial supporters of politically active, tax-exempt
nonprofit organizations provide only modest support both in absolute
terms and relative to the overall finances of the supported
organization. Thus, the right-to-privacy approach suggests that the
public disclosure of individual information about most financial
supporters will not sufficiently vindicate the public’s right to know so
as to justify overriding the supporters’ right to privacy. Of course if
they support the organization in other, more influential ways—such
as serving on the organization’s board of directors or as an officer of
the organization—then the public’s right to know would appear to
trump the right to privacy of those individuals, but such information
is generally already publicly disclosed. With respect to supporters

160 See Fung et al., supra note 788, at xii (describing “[right-to-know” laws that apply to
governments as a “cornerstone of democratic governance”); David A. Anderson, The Failure of
American Privacy Law, in PROTECTING PRIVACY 139, 140 (Basil S. Markesinis, ed. 1999) (“We
expect government to conduct its business publicly, even if that infringes the privacy of those
caught up in the matter.”).

161 See INTERNAL REVENUE SERV., FORM 990, at Part VII (2010), available at
http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f990.pdf (providing a section for an organization to list its
current officers, directors, trustees, key employees, and highest compensated employees).
who provide only financial support, however, the public’s right to know would only be vindicated when those supporters provide a substantial amount of support in either absolute or relative terms such that the organization’s influence—which is what presumably then may influence government action that affects the public—to a significant extent reflects the supporter’s influence.

The right-to-privacy approach leads to a similar place as the cost-benefit approach, but arguably for more compelling reasons. Public disclosure of information about individual financial supporters of politically active, tax-exempt organizations is only justified when the financial support provided by a given individual (or perhaps group of closely related individuals) is substantial enough that it effectively gives that individual the ability to influence government actions through the operation of the recipient organization. An example of such a situation would be when a single wealthy individual funds an organization. But other, less extreme examples could exist. For example, the government could set a threshold dollar amount or a threshold percentage of the recipient organization’s annual revenues that the contribution would have to exceed. The selection of these thresholds would necessarily be somewhat arbitrary. But the selection of both should recognize that the public’s right to know depends on the actual likelihood of influence over government action. And to adequately protect financial supporters’ right to privacy, the dollar threshold should be significantly higher than the current disclosure to the IRS threshold of $5,000. \footnote{\textsc{Internal Revenue Serv.}, Form 990 Schedule B Schedule of Contributors (2010), available at http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/f990ezb.pdf.} While almost certainly not based on this reasoning, at least some commentators who have proposed disclosure rules have put forward higher thresholds that are consistent with this approach. \footnote{See, e.g., Tobin, supra note 4, at 440 n.79 (proposing a threshold of $25,000 and noting that there is a possibility that the amount should be set even higher); see also Justin Levitt, Confronting the Impact of Citizens United, 29 Yale L. \\& Pol'y Rev. 217, 227 (2010) (proposing a “‘Democracy Facts’ disclaimer” on political communications that would list the five largest contributors to the group paying for the communication).} Furthermore, because the right to privacy is primarily an individual right and only derivatively of entities, a lower threshold could be adopted for entities that make donations to politically active, tax-exempt nonprofits. \footnote{This would also be desirable from an enforcement perspective. Otherwise multiple entities could be used as conduits by a single individual donor to avoid reaching the disclosure threshold.}

That if the cost-benefit approach relied on almost exclusively in the election law context is applied to the current proposals for disclosure of information relating to politically tax-exempt nonprofit
organizations, such proposals fair relatively well is not coincidental. After all, that approach has tended to support the existing election law disclosure rules even among otherwise skeptics of campaign finance laws. If, however, the right-to-privacy approach used in the general tax context is extended to this context, the results become somewhat more muddied. While the latter approach does not undermine proposals for disclosure of the finances and activities of the organizations themselves, it at least raises questions about proposals that would reveal the political leanings of individual financial supporters of those organizations. If the right to privacy extends to those political leanings—granted, a debatable point—then a more compelling case for disclosure is required. A case can be made by invoking the public’s right to know about individual actions that are likely to influence government actions that affect the public. But even then the case is only valid when the disclosure is limited to individual financial supporters whose level of support in either absolute or relative terms is likely to permit them to influence the supported organization and, as a consequence, the government’s actions.

CONCLUSION

Favoring ever-increasing disclosure of information relating to the highly public and influential sphere of activity that is politics is understandably easy. In most instances such favor is justified. Yet at some point that disclosure must have a limit, at least if we accept that disclosure can both have real costs for those whose information is disclosed and that individuals enjoy a fundamental although not unlimited right to privacy.

Exploring these limits in the context of federal tax law generally, federal tax law as it applies to tax-exempt organizations, and federal election law reveals the operation of two significantly different approaches to disclosure and privacy that have long been known to privacy scholars. Consideration of both a cost-benefit approach and a right-to-privacy approach is necessary to ensure that those whose privacy is infringed are sufficiently protected, especially when considering new disclosure rules. The current debate over the extent to which information about the activities and financial supporters of politically active, tax-exempt nonprofit organizations should be disclosed is one example of an area where both approaches should be applied.

Consideration of the disclosure proposals reveals, not surprisingly, that under the cost-benefit approach, which tends to drive the federal election law, the new disclosure provisions are favored, both with
respect to the nonprofit organizations involved and their financial supporters. While the cost-benefit case for disclosure is perhaps less compelling for entities and individuals who provide relatively modest financial support, this approach reveals little ground for objecting to disclosure except in the relatively rare case of demonstrated and significant retaliation or other concrete costs.

The right-to-privacy approach, which has more influence in the tax area, also generally supports the disclosure proposals with one major caveat. When those proposals relate to individual financial supporters, they are only justified if they are limited to the individuals who provide the largest levels of financial support such that their influence over the recipient organization is likely sufficient to cause the organization’s attempts to influence government action to significantly reflect the individual supporter’s influence. This latter approach, which is generally not considered in the federal election law context, supports greater caution when considering disclosure relating to individual financial supporters than the cost-benefit approach would likely require. If for no other reason, consideration of the right-to-privacy approach is important to ensure that in the zeal to uncover possible undue or improper influence in the political sphere, we as a society do not unnecessarily and improperly infringe on the privacy and therefore the autonomy of individuals.

Laura Chisolm brought to the relatively new area of nonprofit law a commitment to deeper thought and consideration of the reasons for which that law exists and whether that law in its then current form matched those reasons, particularly as it related to political involvement. It is an honor to have had this opportunity to follow in her footsteps with respect to the relatively narrow but important issue of the extent to which the government should compel public disclosure of information relating to politically involved nonprofits. While I know this brief consideration does not match her work either in its thoroughness or insight, I offer it in memory of her many contributions as a scholar, teacher, and friend.