



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on July 13, 2016

State Dept. Funded Group That Tried to Defeat Netanyahu

A nongovernmental organization with a history of political activism was given nearly \$350,000 in taxpayer funds by the State Department and then used the fruits of that grant — voter databases, trained activists, and social media platforms — in an effort to unseat Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (shown), a Senate investigation has found.



According to a [report](#) from the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, over a nine-month period in 2013 and 2014, the State Department granted \$349,276 to OneVoice, an activist organization operating in Israel and the Palestinian territories, for the express purpose of building support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the time, Secretary of State John Kerry was trying to facilitate negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and his department hoped that the grant would “engage Israelis [and Palestinians] and mobilize them to actively support the resumption of peace negotiations and a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.”

When it applied for the grant, OneVoice informed the State Department that it had mounted a grassroots campaign during the 2013 Israeli parliamentary elections to elect more “center-left” candidates to the Knesset. The department nevertheless approved the grant and failed to include a supposedly standard provision in the grant contract prohibiting OneVoice from influencing elections. Furthermore, said the report, “the documents provided by the State Department contain no evidence that any grant officers conducted any risk assessment associated with” OneVoice, and “there is no evidence that any risk mitigation plans associated with the political nature of the grantee’s previous conduct — or any other risks — were designed or implemented.”

In its grant application, “OneVoice emphasized its plans to expand its social media presence, train young Israelis and Palestinians through its ‘Youth Leadership Program,’ and use its existing network of ... youth chapters as a ‘springboard’ for further grassroots activity,” the subcommittee wrote. The group was highly successful in all those endeavors, reaching over two million Israelis with its media campaign, getting hundreds of thousands to pledge their support for its movement, and more than doubling its Facebook “like” count. In addition, it built a sizable database of volunteers, supporters, and voters.

While it was expanding its footprint on the U.S. taxpayers’ dime, OneVoice, foreseeing an imminent call



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for elections, began crafting a strategy for defeating Netanyahu's Likud Party. "That strategy," reads the report, "relied on grassroots voter outreach and mobilization using campaign infrastructure built, in part, with State Department funds."

OneVoice was relatively forthcoming about its plans, informing at least two State Department officials of them during the grant period.

In September 2014, Consul General Michael Ratney, then the second-highest-ranking American diplomat in the region, received via e-mail a detailed proposal explaining exactly how OneVoice intended to influence the upcoming elections. Ratney told the subcommittee that while he remembered the e-mail, he had not read the attached proposal. The State Department, demonstrating roughly the same concern for e-mail retention as it had for taxpayer dollars, could not produce the e-mail exchange, but OneVoice's e-mail archives indicated no response from Ratney.

Frank Lowenstein, then a senior advisor for Middle East strategy, received an executive summary of the proposal, though this one omitted OneVoice's plans to influence the elections and, in fact, explicitly stated that the organization would "not directly support individual candidates or political parties in Israel or Palestine." Lowenstein appears to have ignored the proposal as well.

Just after the grant period ended, elections were indeed called, and OneVoice followed through on its announced strategy. According to the report, "OneVoice did not use State Department funds directly for political activities, or seek State Department grants in anticipation of the Israeli elections, but it did use the campaign infrastructure and resources that it had built, in part, with State Department funds to support a campaign to defeat Prime Minister Netanyahu in the 2015 elections." In short, Americans were forced to pay for building up an organization in a foreign country — a U.S. ally, no less — that then used its greatly increased influence to interfere in that country's elections in hopes of toppling the head of state.

Though the relationship between the Obama administration and Netanyahu has hardly been a cordial one, the grant to OneVoice does not appear to have been part of a deliberate administration plan to oust the Israeli leader. The subcommittee — which, like all other Senate panels, is run by Republicans — did not charge the administration with anything worse than lax oversight. OneVoice, it wrote, "fully complied with the terms of its State Department grants." The real problem, as far as the subcommittee is concerned, is that "the State Department failed to adequately guard against the risk that resources built with government grants would be deployed for political purposes," especially given OneVoice's previous political activities and its stated intentions to involve itself in the next elections.

"The State Department ignored warnings signs and funded a politically active group in a politically sensitive environment with inadequate safeguards," subcommittee chairman Rob Portman (R-Ohio) said in a [statement](#). "It is completely unacceptable that U.S. taxpayer dollars were used to build a political campaign infrastructure that was deployed — immediately after the grant ended — against the leader of our closest ally in the Middle East. American resources should be used to help our allies in the region, not undermine them."

Ranking member Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.), in the same statement, echoed Portman's criticism of the State Department, saying the report "highlights deficiencies in the department's policies that should be addressed in order to best protect taxpayer dollars."

The real deficiency in the State Department's policies is that it is disbursing taxpayer funds to private organizations in foreign countries in the first place, not merely that it is ignoring what those



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organizations do with the money. The federal government has no constitutional authority to spend public monies in that fashion, period. That they are being used first to influence public opinion in a foreign country — itself a form of interference in that nation's political life — and then, indirectly, to foment political change only compounds the problem. Such intervention breeds distrust and resentment on the part of those living in the foreign country and, of course, costs Americans more of their hard-earned money.

The best way to make sure something like this never happens again is to halt all unconstitutional spending and foreign intervention. That would do far more to promote peace and burnish America's reputation than all the State Department programs combined.

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