

# ***The Super PAC Era: Presidential Elections and Advertising Strategy in a New Age***

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*University Honors*

*Completed: Spring 2013*

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**Abstract:** More money was spent in the 2012 election cycle than ever before, \$2 billion in the presidential contest alone. \$500 million of this spending came from super PACs, largely unregulated organizations independent from campaigns. Because these organizations are relatively new, research on their effects has been scant and preliminary. Furthermore, because unlimited donations and loose-disclosure rules mean super PACs operate largely out of the public eye, there is concern that super PACs may have a significant negative effect on the tone of presidential campaigns. No research to this point has been undertaken to see whether the creation and operation of super PACs has had a significant effect on the tone of presidential campaigns. This project uses an original dataset of nearly 500 television ads from candidates and super PACs in the 2012 elections to test whether campaigns have begun “outsourcing” their negativity to the super PACs. I expect to find that independent-expenditure organizations, unaccountable to the public and able to raise vast sums of unregulated capital, are more likely to run negative advertisements than will candidates who operate directly in the public eye and who are compelled to conduct business under stricter campaign finance regulations.

### ***Introduction: Research Area, Topic and Purpose\****

With the advent of the super PAC in 2010, stemming from the controversial Supreme Court case *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Committee (2010)*, the campaign finance landscape has been dramatically altered. With its most recent decisions, the court has allowed individuals, unions, and corporations to contribute unimpeded, unlimited sums of money and super PACs to create, distribute, and run however many television advertisements, mailers, and other promotional materials that they can afford. The decision was so important that the President of the United States criticized the Court in perhaps the most watched speech of 2010, his State of the Union Address. President Obama contended, "With all due deference to separation of powers, last week the Supreme Court reversed a century of law that I believe will open the floodgates for special interests -- including foreign corporations -- to spend without limit in our elections." The issue of super PACs and what role corporations, unions, and other special interests should have in our electoral system, especially in determining who gets elected, is extremely divisive, with opposing sides dug in and unwavering in their beliefs. And as more and more money is needed to execute a successful campaign, the issue of campaign finance law and regulation is unlikely to be going away anytime soon. As such, and because these organizations are still in their infant stages, they have become an incredibly important research topic for academics and politicians alike.

However, due to limited contribution data and only one electoral cycle having taken place since the creation of the super PAC (the 2010 congressional elections), research on the effects that these independent-expenditure political committees have had on elections has only been

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\* An enormous thank you to Professors Antoine Yoshinaka and Kimberly Cowell-Meyers for their continued support and assistance through every stage of the process. Without them, this paper would not be anywhere near as thorough or well developed.

studied preliminarily. Moreover, the lion's share of previous research has been composed almost entirely of academic suppositions and qualitative analyses as opposed to using quantitative methods and empirical data. No research to this point has been undertaken to see whether the creation and operation of super PACs has had a significant effect on the *tone* of presidential campaigns.

This research topic follows from the key differences between the operations of a candidate running for office and a political action committee that is supporting or opposing him/her through independent expenditures. The Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002 ensured that candidates stood by their ad, directly tying themselves to any and all irresponsible or harshly negative statements that their advertisements conveyed. And as elected officials whose job forces them to operate almost entirely in the public eye, any deliberate spreading of misinformation or lying about another candidate could negatively affect their chances at being re-elected. But that is not the case with super PACs. These organizations were created for one exclusive purpose: to ensure the election or re-election of one candidate over another. Super PACs operate almost entirely behind closed doors and have very loose rules when it comes to donor disclosure. What's more, these organizations not only have the power to solicit unlimited contributions and spend unimpeded sums of money, but they can freely do so without having to publicly go on record and defend the validity of their messaging.

Thusly, the ultimate purpose of this study will be threefold: *i)* To determine whether or not presidential candidate's campaigns (i.e the Obama Campaign or the Romney Campaign) have become more negative between the years of 2008 to 2012; *ii)* If super PACs have played a role in any alterations in tone; and *iii)* whether super PACs, having to worry less about reputation than the candidates themselves, actually have begun to absorb the negative aspects of campaign

advertising for the candidates, allowing candidates to portray an “above the fray” image and remain positive. The study proposed here is an essential first step into understanding how super PACs operate and how they have altered the tone of campaigns. If the hypothesis presented is correct, and super PACs have stepped in to assume the “attack dog” responsibilities that campaigns had previously undertaken, that finding would have considerable implications for our system of campaign and elections. Rejecting the null hypothesis of this study, that no difference exists between the tones of campaigns and super PACs, should provide impetus for Congress to limit the currently unimpeded role of corporations and unions in our elections and ensure that the most democratic aspect of the United States, our free and fair elections, remain as democratic as they were upon the founding of this nation.

### ***Literature Review***

The origins of campaign finance in the United States date all the way back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Congress passed the Tillman Act of 1907 in an attempt to prohibit corporations from donating directly to political campaigns. With each passing decade, it seems that the role of money in getting elected and staying elected grows exponentially. Now, as the US moves forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new generation of non-campaign entities, labeled independent-expenditure committees (i.e. “super PACs”), are thriving, consolidating money, power, and influence in an attempt to elect ideologically compatible officials. But with limited donation data and few electoral cycles available to study, political scientists are unsure of just how much authority these new entities actually wield with campaigns and how they fit into the electoral strategy.

Previous research in this field has assisted in understanding what strategies both campaigns and interest groups utilize to build influence, as well as how they use varying

methods of advertisements, from television to radio to mailings, to build popular support for their causes. Moreover, researchers have attempted to analyze the potential impact, both positive and negative, of negative tone in both candidate and interest group advertisements on voter turnout and voter engagement. Due to a number of recent landmark Supreme Court decisions, research on the potential role of super PACs on elections is starting to expand as more electoral spending data becomes available. However, one area that has remained relatively unexplored relates to the question of whether the presence of super PACs running ads for political candidates creates a situation in which the super PAC, not worried about its long-term reputation like elected officials may be, assumes responsibility for running the lion's share of negative advertisements. Subsequently, this would allow official campaigns to appear to float "above the fray" and focus primarily on the positive, whether that be touting the candidate's legislative accomplishments or highlighting his/her leadership credentials. This project sets out to determine if super PACs have had a sharply negative effect on campaign tone, using television advertisements as an empirical medium.

### *Background: The Campaign Finance System*

The most recent attempt at comprehensive legislation meant to regulate money in politics came in the form of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, better known as the McCain-Feingold Act. The BCRA provided some minor, but noteworthy checks on the amount of money entering the political arena. Most notably, the BCRA banned the use of corporate or union money to pay for what the bill called "electioneering communications," defined as any television or radio advertisements airing within one month of a primary election or two months of a general election that specifically mentioned a political candidate who is running for federal office (Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act 2002, 9).

Most notable for this study was the “Stand By Your Ad Provision” of the bill, which required a candidate running for office to include in their advertisements a statement declaring his/her support and approval of that specific communication. The provision was intended to compel federal candidates to connect themselves directly with their advertisements, which would discourage them from making controversial, negative, or irresponsible claims in their advertisements.

The BCRA was challenged by Mitch McConnell in 2003, but in *McConnell vs. FEC*, the Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, upheld the constitutionality of all of its major provisions. However, with the fall of the Rehnquist Court, generally seen as deferential towards government on campaign finance issues, and the rise of the Roberts Court, this quickly changed. As Kahn (2010) recently noted, “The replacement of Chief Justice Rehnquist and Justice O’Connor with Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Alito produced a clear rightward shift in the Court’s campaign finance decisions” (248). In the Roberts Era, two separate court decisions drastically changed the landscape of campaign finance.

In the majority opinion of *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission (2010)*, Justice Anthony Kennedy asserted that previous financial restrictions on independent expenditures by corporations and/or unions was a direct violation of those organization’s right to free speech. Summed up by the DC Court of Appeals, “The Supreme Court declared [the] expenditure ban unconstitutional, holding that corporations *may not be prohibited* (emphasis added) from spending money for express political advocacy when those expenditures are independent from candidates and uncoordinated with their campaigns” (SpeechNow Opinion 2010).

The first application of this new precedent, however, took place in a case referred to as *SpeechNow vs. Federal Election Commission (2010)*. The court found that “contribution

limits...violate the First Amendment by preventing plaintiffs from donating to SpeechNow in excess of the limits and by prohibiting SpeechNow from accepting donations in excess of the limits” (SpeechNow Opinion 2010). This is generally cited as having directly led to the creation of the independent expenditure political committees (super PACs) which, as stated, can raise an unlimited amount of money from individuals, unions, and corporations as long as they in no way discuss strategy with political candidates or campaigns.

In response, Democrats in Congress attempted to pass the DISCLOSE Act, which would have compelled the heads of these non-campaign organizations who fund political advertisements (such as super PACs) to abide by a nearly-identical “stand by your ad” provision. While supported by a large number of congressmen and Senators, the bill failed to pass a cloture vote in the Senate and was all but defeated.

### *Post Citizens United*

While research on the impact of *Citizens United* and *SpeechNow* decisions is still rather limited in its scope, preliminary conclusions among the academic community show relatively mixed results. Franz (2010) found that interest groups in 2010 had increased the total amount of money they spent over 2008 by 168% in House races and by 44% in Senate races (Franz 2010, 6). Furthermore, Franz looked at the use of the “magic words,” terms that signified express advocacy for one candidate over another, such as “vote for,” “elect,” “support,” “cast your ballot for,” and “vote against.” While PACs were banned from using these words in advertisements in the *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976), *Citizens United* overturned this declaration and opened the door for PACs and super PACs to advocate for or against whomever they wanted. Franz found that the number of interest groups advertisements in House races using these words jumped from 7% in 2008 to almost 30% in 2010. In the Senate, the number increased from just 1% in 2008 to 10% in



2010 (Franz 2010, 10). However, arguments that Republican-supporting corporations would quickly dominate the campaign finance landscape and provide a massive and unfair advantage for conservative office-seekers was less supported by the data, as, when factoring in interest group, candidate, and party funds, the two parties and their supporting interest groups spent nearly identical amounts in 2010 (Franz 2010, 12).

*PAC Contributions and Strategy: How Much, To Whom, and What For?*

As the post-Citizens United era is ushered in, with greater access to contributors and very loose disclosure rules, super PACs have begun to adopt a number of diverse strategies to achieve their goals, whether it be to influence legislation, or whether it be to influence elections, as this paper sets out to discuss. Generally speaking, PACs and super PACs tend to show their support for candidates and causes through either (a) direct (and federally regulated) campaign contributions; (b) by working alongside the candidate's operation, whether that be providing assistance through the running of advertisements, the dissemination of mailers or pamphlets, or helping get out the vote; or (c) utilizing both methods. But the diversification of PACs goes deeper than simply how they spend their money.

Many researchers have suggested that PACs and super PACs can be "sorted" into a number of different "categories," each with varying intentions, partisan affiliations, and tactical styles. Eismeier and Pollock (1986), echoing the broader community, explain what in their view are the three most common styles of PACS. There are the "access-seekers," who tend to donate to incumbents, especially to those who may be facing an uphill battle in their next election and desperately need contributions to stay alive. There are also the "adversarial partisans," who tend to remain faithful to their party in both good times and in bad, attacking when the party is in power and defending when the party is on the ropes. And lastly, there are the "mobile partisans,"

who use the expectations of a party's electoral performance when determining where to donate, contributing the lion's share of their resources to the party who is generally seen as the likely winner of an election (Eismeier and Pollock 1986, 213).

Other scholars have focused primarily on businesses and corporations, and have suggested that different industries tend to donate to different types of candidates. Burris (1987) explains that traditionally regulated industries, such as banks, utilities, and airlines, who have a longstanding and relatively productive relationship with congressional oversight committees and relevant agencies are more likely to donate substantial amounts of money to incumbents than to their challengers, with far less focus on party affiliation (Burris 1987, 734). On the other hand, industries with a high number of labor and environmental violations who do not have close ties with Congress (chemicals, oil, paper products) generally donate low amounts to incumbents and much higher amounts to Republicans in the hopes of electing individuals who are more ideologically similar and would generally support far more relaxed regulations on those industries (Burris 1987, 735-736).

Research has also been undertaken on the relative influence that these PACs may hold in Congress. A large body of academic literature has pushed the idea that, generally speaking, interest group contributions may play far less of a role in affecting policymakers than commonly believed. Ansolabehere and De Figuerido's (2002) research suggested that "in three out of four instances, campaign contributions had no statistically significant effects on legislation or had the wrong sign (suggesting that more contributions lead to less support)" (Ansolabehere and De Figuerido 2002, 17). And in a critical review of major previous research, Smith (1995) concurs with the aforementioned conclusion, explaining that, despite some methodological

inconsistencies, the consensus appears to be that “campaign contributions of interest groups have far less influence than commonly thought” (Smith 1995, 91).

But while campaign contributions and advertisements may not have a direct effect on roll call votes, research has shown that PACs and their donations can have a definite effect on who gets elected in the first place. According to Elliot (1980), PACs play an absolutely essential role in providing early money to candidates and campaigns, essentially supplying the “seed” money that is necessary in order to get a candidate’s name out in the public and begin distributing information and mass mailers about his/her positions. PACs can also run negative advertisements against a candidate’s opponent in an attempt to remove him/her from office, advertisements “centering on the incumbent’s voting records and [hammering] relentlessly on such issues as national defense, abortion, and government spending” (Kitchens and Powell 1986, 216). Subsequently, PACs can use their loaded coffers to run tracking polls on these advertisements to provide instant feedback and use this feedback to “develop ads directed at single-issue voters who [feel] strongly about one particular issue” (Kitchens and Powell 1986, 216).

Furthermore, according to Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991), independent expenditures (whether it be advertising or direct mail or something else) made by PACs early in campaigns may also assist a candidate’s election chances in two different political scenarios. The first is the “lightning rod scenario,” in which negative advertising undertaken by a PAC serves to reduce the positive base of support for the incumbent without directly involving or implicating the challenger who the PAC is supporting. Second is the “attention diversion scenario,” in which negative PAC advertising draws the incumbent’s attention away from the challenger and towards the PAC, allowing the challenger more time to get organized and raise money (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991, 186).

### *Negative Advertisements and Relative Effectiveness*

While super PACs can use both direct contributions and independent expenditures like advertisements to aid a candidate in his election prospects, a combination of the still-strict regulations on direct donations and the recent loosening of regulations on independent expenditures by the Supreme Court have driven super PACs to largely embrace the latter, running ads either advocating for one candidate or in opposition to his or her opponent. As Johnson-Cartee and Copeland note above, this oftentimes manifests itself in advertisements with sharply negative tones. These negative advertisements have a long history and a rather mixed track record when taking into account their effectiveness on voters.

Negative advertisements have long been deplored by the media as despicable, outrageous, and as doing more harm than good. But history and research have shown that this may not always be the case. Perhaps the most famous historical example is that of the “Daisy Ad,” which depicts a young girl counting down as she picks the petals off of a daisy. When she reaches the number nine, a deliberately menacing voice begins the countdown of a missile launch, which results in the depiction of an enormous mushroom cloud from a nuclear bomb. The ad, run only once by Lyndon B. Johnson in his 1964 presidential campaign against Barry Goldwater, was meant to attack Goldwater for comments he made asserting that nuclear weapons should be used in Vietnam, a statement which he later recanted. While the ad was widely criticized for its sharply negative tone and for attempting to incite unfounded fears, the advertisement was covered by every single major media outlet at the time and is widely seen by political science scholars as playing a notable role in Johnson’s landslide victory over Goldwater.

Scholars argue that negative campaigning entered its current “high-intensity phase” in the late 1970s and early 1980s, “when political action committees targeted a number of

congressional incumbents for attack,” a strategy that “quickly carried over into presidential elections, which induced a rise in the ‘negativism’ trend line (Lau and Sigelman 1999, 851). Prevailing wisdom at the time (as it largely is now) was to “advertise early if you have the money,” “go negative early, often, and right through election day if necessary,” “if attacked, hit back harder,” and, among others, that “it’s easier to give voters a negative impression of your opponent than it is to improve their image of you” (Kamber 1997, 46-37). Many have argued that this uptick in negative advertisements is due in large part to the more prominent role that television has played in both American life and, subsequently, campaign life. Jamieson (1992) asserts, “When skillfully used, television's multiple modes of communication and powerful ability to orient attention can invite strong, unthinking negative responses in low-involvement viewers. And, by overloading our information-processing capacity with rapidly paced information, televised political ads can short circuit the normal defenses that more educated, more highly involved viewers ordinarily marshal against suspect claims” (Jamieson 1992, 50).

Moreover, a limited number of studies have been undertaken to determine what factors or circumstances may lead candidates to utilize negative campaigning instead of remaining positive throughout, or “staying above the fray.” Sigelman and Buell (2003) suggest that where a candidate stands in the “horserace” of the election may be the central determinant as to his/her electoral strategy and campaign/advertisement tone. As they point out, “Conventional wisdom about campaigns holds that candidates will strike a balance appropriate to their understanding of the competitive situation in which they are involved” (2003, 520). This means that if a candidate is likely to win his/her seat or office, then he/she will engage in “more positive, and less negative, campaigning than his opponent” (Skaperdas and Grofman 1995, 52). This is supported by Benoit (1992) who, in an analysis of campaign advertisements, “report[ed] that ads

acclaiming the sponsoring candidate dominated among those who either held a safe lead or were locked in a tight race, but attacks dominated among those who trailed by a wide margin” (182). Sigelman and Buell aptly conclude, “If one side is running far behind, it should be expected to go on the attack in order to give itself a chance, however slight, of catching up. By contrast, the side that enjoys a clear lead presumably has little incentive to attack” (521). However, Harrington & Hess (1996) disagree that one’s standing in the polls shapes a candidate’s ability to stay above the fray. Instead, they suggest that a candidate’s ideology and personality are far better predictors (210).

But while candidates may be more likely to run negative advertisements if they are behind in the polls, or if their personality makes them more inclined to do so, the academic literature on how *effective* these advertisements are is still mixed. The most often cited idea in popular culture and the news media is referred to in the literature as the demobilization hypothesis, which states that “negative ads undermine political efficacy and make it less likely that citizens will find their way to the polls” (Freedman and Goldstein 1999, 1189). In a study of a controlled set of congressional races in California, Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) found that while negative advertisements do enlighten potential voters with pertinent (albeit slanted) information, what they also do is “demobilize” the electorate, leading to a decrease in voter turnout and a “weakened sense of political efficacy” (1984, 829). Moreover, “voters who watch negative advertisements become more cynical about the responsiveness of public officials and the electoral process,” leading to greater voter disillusionment (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994, 829). But these conclusions have been contested.

Most notably, Finkel and Greer’s (1998) research has led to a countervailing hypothesis, what they refer to as a “stimulation hypothesis,” which suggests a number of reasons why

exposure to negative advertisements may actually increase, rather than decrease, voter turnout. First, as Ansolabehere and Iyengar also note, negative ads actually provide a fair amount of policy related information and performance evaluation to potential voters, and Neuman (1986) contends that the more knowledgeable a voter is on the issues and the candidates, the more likely they are to turn out at the polls (Neuman 1986, 15). Second, Finkel and Geer assert that, in general, “negative information is given more weight in political information processing,” demonstrating that these negative ads “may be more likely to provide the kind of information with which voters can discriminate between the issue positions or other attributes of the candidate” (577). Lastly, they argue that negative advertisements may stir more emotional responses from viewers, which could enhance turnout by increasing a voter’s enthusiasm for his or preferred candidate(s), “or by increasing the degree to which the voter cares about the outcome of the election” (Finkel and Geer 1998, 577).

But while negative advertising could, according to Finkel and Greer, provide some benefits for voters, other scholarship suggests that negative advertisements could significantly lessen a voter’s perception of a candidate. According to Pinkleton (1997), “Negative political campaigning may produce unintended effects, including a backlash against its sponsor” (1997, 19). And both Garramone (1984) and Roddy and Garrome (1988) note that the evaluations of a *sponsor* of a negative advertisement may decrease to a greater extent than the target of the advertisement. Shen and Wu’s (2002) empirical study strongly concurs with this finding: “Results provide strong support for the hypothesis that negative advertisements...backfired against the sponsoring candidate” (395). To combat this, Trent and Friedenberg (1995) found that incumbents are likely to use strategies that limit their direct involvement in negative political advertising, such as using a neutral reporter to deliver attacks. Moreover, political candidates

often employ “the use of comparative political advertising as a means of communicating negative information about a candidate’s opponent to voters while avoiding the stigma attached to purely negative ‘attack’ advertising” (Pinkleton 1997, 19).

The same cannot be said for PACs. Research has shown that, while negative advertisements may reflect back poorly on sponsoring candidates and thus drive them to potentially limit their negative tone, the same is not true for PACs. National Conservative Political Action Committee Chairman Terry Dolan is famous for having once said, “A group like ours can lie through its teeth, and the candidate stays clean” (MacPherson 1980). Furthermore, according to Engstrom and Kenny (2002), “independent spending, it seems, has all the advantages enjoyed by those who spend money on campaigns, and is free from the hindrance of accountability” (887). Lastly, Shen and Wu (2002), who also found that negative advertisements backfire against sponsoring candidates, found the opposite in regard to PACs: “The backlash effects were minimal when negative advertisements were sponsored by soft-money political organizations” (395).

### *Measurements of Campaign Tone*

Some scholars have suggested that one possible cause for the general lack of agreement regarding the effectiveness of negative advertisements may be due to a lack of consensus on how to *measure* the tone of a campaign or of an ad, whether to use media coverage, political advertisements, or citizen perceptions. Moreover, the issue is even further complicated because different scholars have different ways of defining the term “negativity” when discussed in regards to political campaigns. Some, such as Lau and Pomper in their 2004 book, claim, “Negative campaigning is talking about the opponent – criticizing his or her programs, accomplishments, qualifications, and so on” (Lau and Pomper 2004, 4). While this appears to be



the most simple and efficient definition, some academics dispute such a claim because, in their opinion, it incorrectly assumes that all types of negative messages yield identical results.

This point is made by Jamieson and Kenski (2000), who assert that one of the central problems of current research is that academics tend to equate all types of negative advertisements, whether it be an attack ad regarding their opponent's record on a certain issue or an attack ad criticizing their opponent's character, while citizens may perceive those ads in completely different ways. The authors explain, "Academics, pundits and reporters tend to conflate ads that feature one-sided attacks, contrast ads that contain attacks, ad hominem attack ads, and ads featuring attacks that deceive" (Jamieson, Kenski, et al. 2000, 97). In their interpretation, different types of advertisements may yield very different measurable results from any given sample of people.

However, in the first-ever comprehensive analysis of the validity of a number of different measures of campaign tone, Ridout and Franz (2008) concluded that "choosing one measure of campaign tone over another should not lead [researchers] astray," noting, "when newspapers portray a campaign as negative, local news broadcasts tend to portray it as negative, television advertising tends to be negative, and people tend to perceive the campaign that way too" (171). They argue that there are a number of reasons to believe that measurements of tone based on different aspects of a campaign may be consistent with one another. Most notably, that "the various components of a campaign are generally highly coordinated, and it makes sense that candidates would disseminate a consistent message regardless of the medium or forum" (Ridout and Franz 2008, 159).

While previous literature has addressed in great detail the effectiveness of negative advertisements among both candidates and PACs, the most appropriate statistical measures of

campaign tone, and the varying strategies of different groups and campaigns, no specific study has examined the direct effects of newly formed super PACs on the tone of both campaign and super PAC television advertisements. This research would be significant in attempting to explain whether or not super PACs have had a measurable effect on the tone of presidential candidate's ads. This study would be particularly relevant in the United States as the implications of the opinion in *Citizens United* are just beginning to sink in and the super PAC is just now beginning to be utilized to its full potential by unions and corporations. Moreover, the study would be valuable as it will come immediately on the heels of the 2012 presidential election, and will attempt to lay some of the very first building blocks for other scholars as to whether or not super PACs had a noticeable impact on the 2012 presidential campaign.

### ***Research Design***

In order to properly evaluate these variables, a code and subsequent data set was created. In order to keep the analysis relatively simple, a code of 1 to 5 was used. As such, this analysis used the method of coding implemented in the Freedman and Goldstein (1999) analysis of campaign ads and their effectiveness. They explain, "Students were asked to evaluate the tone of each spot on a five-point scale ranging from 1 ('most positive' appeals by a sponsoring candidate) to 5 ('most negative' claims about an opponent). Students were instructed to code as '3' ads containing a fairly even mix of positive appeals...and criticisms" (6). While Freedman and Goldstein only focused on official campaigns, this study utilized their method of coding and simply expanded it to super PACs. Because coding can be plagued by criticisms of subjectivity, three individuals coded the advertisements in order to ensure that each ad was assigned an appropriate value. Moreover, to ensure that partisan bias does not interfere, one coder was outwardly left-of-center politically while another was equally right-of-center. The third coder

was someone who was admittedly apolitical and who spent much of her life outside of the United States. To further ensure proper coding, all testers results underwent an examination of intercoder reliability.

This study aimed to view as many advertisements as possible from the campaigns and the super PACs. In total, 441 advertisements were viewed. This broke down to *a)* 84 McCain campaign ads from 2008; *b)* 76 Obama campaign ads from 2008; *c)* 95 Romney campaign ads from 2012; and *d)* 91 Obama campaign ads from 2012. With regards to super PACs, the data is far more limiting and no database exists that has aggregated these advertisements. With that in mind, this project was compelled to use official YouTube channels to collect its raw advertisements and rely on statistical sampling. This project set out to view and code *e)* 95 total ads produced and distributed by the major super PACs of 2012 (explained in greater detail in the following paragraph).

When all was said and done, three scores were collected for the tone of each advertisement and a mean was collected. For each separate grouping listed in the above paragraph (*a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, *e*), the scores of tone were then averaged with one another and a mean was collected for each of those groupings (meaning that a mean was collected for the average tone of a Romney campaign ad in 2012, or an Obama campaign ad in 2008). These numbers provided the insights that we wanted, as to whether official campaign tone had changed between 2008 and 2012 (comparing *a* and *b* to *c* and *d*) and/or whether super PACs had changed the campaign tone in 2012 (comparing the mean found in *c* and *d* to the mean found in *e*).

Due to data limitations, this study utilized a number of different political commercial archives. Most importantly, campaign advertisements collected by the Stanford University Political Communication Lab for the years of both 2008 and 2012 was used as the primary

source for official campaign ads. For super PAC advertisements, two sources were used: the first was the Washington Post Ad Tracker, which compiled most 2012 super PAC television advertisements and made them available on their website. Second, due to the nonexistence of super PAC archives, this study used *official* YouTube channels of the largest super PACs on each side.

### ***Findings and Analysis***

Before delving into a comprehensive discussion of the findings, it is important to first demonstrate that the data is reliable. Controls were taken to ensure that the results collected were not tainted in any way. Outside of a very basic understanding of the project and a group discussion on a limited few sample advertisements to ensure that coders knew what to be looking for while coding, all actual coding for the project was done individually and without dialogue between coders. Moreover, after running a test of intercoder reliability with STATA, all coders were statistically compatible with one another, with a correlation of higher than .9, therefore lending reliability to the data found independently by our coders.

After creating a dataset, comparing the numbers, and running a number of tests, it appears that the hypothesis presented in the literature review and study design is in part confirmed and in part inconclusive.

***Figure 1: Raw Averages of Candidate/Super PAC Advertisements (scaled 1 to 5, from most negative to most positive)***

Candidate/Super PACs	Year	Number of Advertisements	Average Score (1 to 5)
Barack Obama	2008	76	2.4342
Barack Obama	2012	91	2.5333
John McCain	2008	84	2.7381
Mitt Romney	2012	95	2.4316
Conservative super PACs	2012	65	1.7727
Liberal super PACs	2012	28	1.1414
Official Candidate Ads	2008 & 2012	343	2.5289
Candidate Ads 2008	2008	160	2.594
Candidate Ads 2012	2012	186	2.655
All Ads (2012)	2012	281	2.199
Average super PAC Ad	2012	93	1.6632

When utilizing a comprehensive and broad comparison between all the candidates and all the Super PACs, super PACs are very clearly more negative in tone than the candidates themselves. On a one to five scale, with one serving as a wholly negative advertisement and five as a wholly positive advertisement, the average official candidate campaign ad in an analysis of 343 advertisements, nearly every candidate ad run in both 2008 and 2012, yielded a score of 2.53. Compare this number with the average official super PAC score in an analysis of 96 super PAC ads, again nearly every ad run, of 1.66, and one can see that ads run by super PACs were starkly more negative than ads run by the official campaigns. Moreover, with a p-value of  $<.00001$  (seen in figure 2 presented below), this finding is statistically significant at any level of data scrutiny. This finding lends credence to our hypothesis presented above; super PAC advertisements are far more negative and mean-spirited in tone than the advertisements run by Obama, Romney, or McCain. A rather revealing statistic here is that Priorities USA, the main super PAC supporting President Obama in 2012, did not run a *single* advertisements above a “2” on the five point scale. Instead, every single advertisement they ran focused exclusively on attacking Romney as opposed to highlighting President Obama.

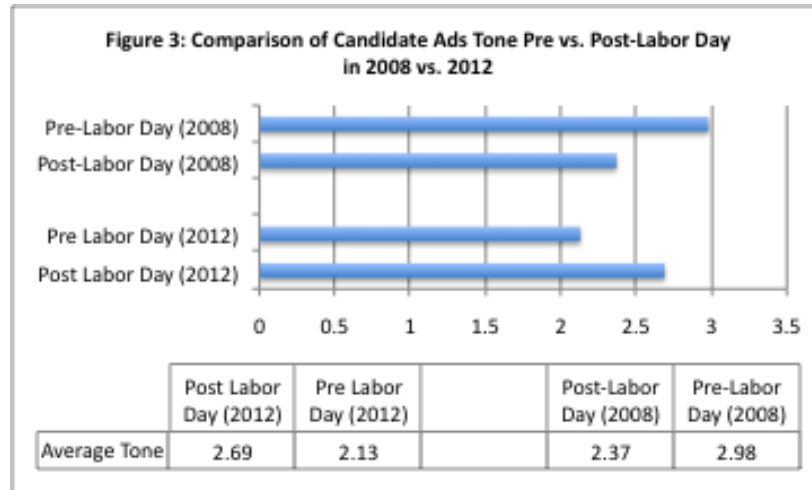
**Figure 2: Statistical Values for Tests of Difference Between Observed Averages**

Test for difference	T-value	P-value
Candidate Ads vs. super PAC Ads	6.0433	.001***
Obama 2008 Ads vs. Obama 2012 Ads	-0.3664	.71
Conservative super PAC ads vs. Liberal super PAC ads	1.8905	.06*
Candidate ads 2008 vs. 2012	0.7558	0.45
McCain 2008 ads vs. Romney 2012 ads	1.3445	0.18
Obama 2012 ads vs. Liberal Super PAC	6.0951	<.001***
Romney 2012 ads vs. Conservative Super PACs	3.0383	.003***
Candidate Ads 2012 vs. SuperPAC Ads 2012	5.1169	<.001***
Overall Ads 2008 vs. Ads 2012	2.6834	.007***

\*\*\*Significant at the 99% confidence level  
\*\*Significant at the 95% confidence level  
\*Significant at the 90% confidence level

However, the second and more specific area of the presented hypothesis, that campaigns would “shift” their negativity to the super PACs, appears to be unsupported by these t-tests. Not a single test run for this study comparing the candidates between 2008 and 2012 led to a statistically significant difference between the two election years. In comparing President Obama from 2008 to 2012, the 76 advertisements that Senator Obama ran in 2008 were given a score, on average, of 2.34 out of 5. In 2012, that number was largely similar, with Obama’s 91 advertisements averaging a 2.53 out of 5. While Obama’s advertisements in 2012 were slightly more positive than in 2008, the rather minor increase is statistically inconsequential, as the results were found to be insignificant. The same can be said for Republicans in 2008 and 2012. In 2008, John McCain ran approximately 84 advertisements, which averaged a composite score of 2.74 out of 5. In 2012, Mitt Romney ran approximately 95 advertisements, which averaged a composite score of 2.43 out of 5. Whereas my secondary hypothesis made the argument that campaigns would shift their negativity towards super PACs and would therefore become more positive from 2008 to 2012, the Republican field appears to suggest otherwise, in that the Romney Campaign was in fact more negative than McCain four years earlier.

In order to evaluate this idea of outsourcing further, I made the decision to look at when the ads were run, to see if perhaps candidates were becoming more positive as they got closer to the election. In order to simplify this, I created a new variable that coded advertisements as a “1” if it was run post-Labor Day and a “0” if the ad was run pre-Labor Day. While this may be contested, it is my belief that this split is rather fitting, as both the Democratic and Republican nominating conventions usually occur right around this period and serve as a rather appropriate split of the electoral cycle.



The results demonstrated by this graph are actually rather striking. What this graph shows is that prior to Labor Day in 2008, the mean rating for advertisements run by Obama and McCain was a 2.98. In the period after Labor Day and leading up to the election, their tone rating fell to 2.37. This means that in 2008, the tone of candidate advertising, on the whole, became more negative in the ads aired after Labor Day and in the days and weeks before the election. However in 2012, what the tests run and what this graph shows is the exact reverse. Prior to Labor Day, Obama and Romney ran advertisements that had a mean rating of 2.13 out of 5. But post-Labor Day, this number jumped to 2.69. This means that, unlike 2008, the advertisements run by the candidates in the 2012 presidential election actually got more positive as they got closer to the election. What's more, for both 2008 and 2012, the differences between pre- and post-Labor Day were statistically significant. And while I cannot say that this is definitely linked to the presence of super PACs in the 2012 elections, it would certainly seem to be a reasonable causal explanation.

With these results in mind, I can draw three central conclusions from the data. First, my hypothesis was correct in its determination that super PACs would run harshly more negative advertisements than would the campaigns themselves. Second, the overall tone of advertisements run in 2012 were more negative, statistically significant at the 99% confidence level, than in

2008, meaning that on the whole, the electoral playing field became more negative in their advertisements. Third, the idea that candidates were outsourcing their negativity, while not entirely confirmed, seems to be at least partially supported by the data presented here when considering when the advertisements were run. While candidates in 2008 ran advertisements that were more negative the closer they got to the election, the opposite is true for 2012; candidates ran on average a far more positive set of advertisements the closer they got to the election. While I cannot say definitely that this was due to the presence of super PACs, the results are at the very least add an interesting facet to the data and provide future researchers with an area of this subject to pursue further.

This study also found significant results in comparing the differences in tone between liberal super PACs, which ran an advertising regime that was exclusively negative, versus the conservative super PACs, which were also rather negative, but less so than their liberal counterparts. There are a number of reasons that this may be the case. The finding could be due to the fact that the liberal president had already spent the last campaign defining himself in a positive light and therefore found it unnecessary to do so. Conversely, because Governor Romney had been so vilified by the opposing party, he and his super PAC may have found it necessary to run a campaign of more positive ads to try to redefine the candidate away from the unsympathetic businessman that he had been painted as. Moreover, it may have been that the Romney-supporting super PACs simply had more money than their liberal counterparts, and therefore had the luxury and the funds to run both positive and negative advertisements instead of spending their money going wholly negative. It would be very interesting for future researchers to explore this and assist in determining what differences exist between conservative and liberal super PACs and what accounts for this statistically significant difference.



## ***Conclusions***

The basic hypothesis presented here was that super PACs, with their unlimited contributions from unions and corporations, their loose disclosure rules, and their operations largely out of the public eye, would run more negative ads than a politician who maneuvers in the public eye and is forced by law to “stand by his/her ad.” In many ways, the data seems to confirm this hypothesis. Super PAC advertisements were far more negative on the whole than were advertisements released by the candidates themselves. Qualitatively speaking as well, in our coding, super PAC ads were far more likely to be mean-spirited and downright offensive in attacking the other candidate, such as when Priorities USA ran an advertisement all but blaming Mitt Romney for the death of a man’s wife. What’s more, while our initial t-tests did not find a significant relationship to support the idea that campaigns were “outsourcing” their negativity to super PACs, a comparison based on when advertisements were run in 2008 versus 2012 shows that candidates in 2012 actually became more positive leading up to the election, while candidates in 2008 become far more negative. While I cannot say for sure that this was because of super PACs, it is certainly an interesting finding.

As in any study, it is important to discuss the limitations. While the analysis pre- vs. post-Labor Day showed promising results, it is still impossible for us to entirely reject the null hypothesis. There are a number of reasons why this study could not entirely reject the null hypothesis. First, super PACs are incredibly new organizations, and this was their first real national election in which they fully participated following the Supreme Court ruling. In politics as in most things, changes do not occur overnight. Instead, it could take many years, even decades, for political tacticians and organizations to utilize the true strength of the super PAC. I call on future researchers to continue tracking this trend, because it seems that the inability to entirely reject the null on this facet of the hypothesis could very well change in the coming

election cycles. It is also possible that the tone of a candidate's advertisements may be at least partially driven by their personality or by their chances of winning in the upcoming election, as opposed to the presence of super PACs, something that cannot be coded for or controlled for.

Another interesting observation of note here is the rather curious point that, despite all of the horrible and downright untruthful things said about them by super PACs, the candidates did not respond to these attack ads, instead opting to use their money to strike back at the advertisements run only by the candidate. In my opinion, this is largely for two reasons. First, the cost of responding to this advertising, on top of the other ads being run by the candidates, was simply too high. Second, and more important, candidates chose not to target these super PACs because these organizations have nothing to lose and, despite running advertisements that are incredibly negative in tone, remain faceless and out of sight. It does no good for a candidate to run an ad against a super PAC because the candidate has nothing to win from this interaction. If anything, super PACs would revel in this development, as this would cause candidates to waste their finite resources attacking an entity that the American voter does not know or understand. Because these super PACs can remain in the shadows while running false and harmful advertising is exactly why they pose such a threat to our democratic system of elections.

With regards to campaign finance reform as a whole, the ruling in *Citizens United* and subsequent application in *SpeechNow* by the DC Court of Appeals drastically altered the campaign finance landscape in the United States. More money is now entering the electoral system each and every cycle, more advertisements are running across the country (especially in the battleground states), and many candidates, especially at the national level but also in congressional races, are forced to rely on super PACs and outside spending to sustain their campaigns and keep them competitive (Franz 2010; Burris 1987).

And *Citizens United* could have far-reaching implications on all aspects of politics, especially in regard to campaigns and elections. As previously noted, super PACs can use their money and focus to create single issue ads that are likely to attract certain key voting blocs, or run advertisements that are solely focused on removing a certain person from office (Kitchens and Powell 1986). Moreover, super PACs rely on a number of different strategies to achieve successful outcomes, including spending for or against a candidate early in campaigns and using their resources to force an opponent to spend money in defense of their positions rather than on offense (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991; Elliot 1980). However, some have argued recently that the worry over super PACs is overblown. Kang (2012) makes the argument that super PACs are actually a *benefit* for democracy. He explains that super PACs will soon out-raise and outspend candidates by so much that candidates will be unable to keep up, forcing them to neutralize these super PAC attacks by getting out into the public they represent and utilizing face-to-face interactions.

Research has also shown that, generally speaking, negative advertising has the potential to backfire on the sponsoring candidate (Pinkleton 1997; Garramone 1984; Roddy and Garramone 1988; Shen and Wu 2002). In some cases, the assessments of the sponsoring candidate were actually worse than the candidate that the advertisement was attacking. What's more, the same has not been found for independent expenditure committees like super PACs. Any backlash against these organization's advertisements was minimal (Shen and Wu 2002). Researchers have also asserted that independent expenditure committees have all the advantages of those who spend money in campaigns without any of the accountability (Engstrom and Kenny 2002). This can be seen directly from our results above. While candidate ads may not have become significantly more positive in 2012 when compared to 2008, super PAC ads were still far

more negative than candidate ads in 2012, significant at the 99% confidence level. This means that as voters, in the election cycles to come, we are now even more likely to be overwhelmed by the amount of negative advertising that is being run on our televisions than in election cycles prior.

The study undertaken here adds to the body of research on super PACs, largely because these organizations are so new and there is such limited academic research undertaken on them. At the very least, the original dataset created for this study has the potential to serve many future researchers who may find it appropriate to reevaluate this topic in the coming electoral cycles. Moreover, our study is the first of its kind to directly and quantitatively demonstrate that super PACs were in fact running more negative advertisements and, from a purely qualitative perspective, advertisements that were far harsher and uncivil than the candidates themselves. While assumed by many political commentators and talking heads, our paper provides the first demonstrable, statistical support for these claims.

As previously stated, future researchers should be sure to follow this trend of super PAC involvement as more data becomes readily available and more elections are undertaken. Even though candidates have not yet shifted their negative messaging to super PACs, it is still possible that this trend could gradually develop as campaigns become privy to the power, influence, and money that these super PACs wield in the political arena.

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