

*Special interests and big corporations have an overwhelming influence on elections through the use of super PACs*

By David Price

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When the dust settles, historians may look back on 2012 as the Year of the Super PAC. According to the Wesleyan Media Project, super PACs spent more on advertising than all GOP presidential primary candidates combined in January, and total interest group spending was up 1,282 percent compared to the same month in the 2008 cycle.

Super PACs represent the culmination of a decades-long campaign by conservative groups and corporate interests to undo the laws enacted in the wake of Watergate to limit the influence of special-interest money in politics. These laws were crafted to reduce corruption as well as the risk of corruption and the appearance of corruption. They also enshrined a set of principles with which the vast majority of Americans agree: Voters have a right to know who pays for their elections, and outside groups shouldn't be able to spend unlimited sums of money to hijack the marketplace of ideas and drown out other voices, including those of candidates themselves.

While the Supreme Court placed some questionable limits on these earlier laws, for decades it upheld their basic premise—until *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, that is. Breaking with precedents dating back a century, the court removed all limits on spending by political committees not directly affiliated with candidates. Yet candidates and parties still have to play by the old rules of the game when it comes to such pesky things as disclosing their donors and "standing by" their ads. What to do? Form super PACs to take advantage of the opening provided by the court.

Think of super PACs as the guns-for-hire of campaign spending: They're brought in to unload on other candidates while letting their favored politicians keep their hands clean. They can raise unlimited amounts from special interests and run ads without having to take immediate responsibility for their actions. While super PACs do have to report their donors, the FEC's

arcane reporting requirements and reporting deadlines that may fall after elections, as well as the ability of donors to create shadowy pass-through organizations to obscure their true identities, make it easy for super PACs to avoid accountability.

It's easy to see why super PACs have grown so powerful in such a short time. A big corporation, billionaire, or millionaire with interests to protect—a lower effective tax rate than middle-class Americans pay, for example (see: Romney, Mitt)—is free to dominate the political playing field, make unlimited donations, intimidate candidates, or run misleading attack ads without viewers knowing who's behind them. For the rest of us, though, there is only one conclusion: This undue influence strikes at the heart of our democracy and it renders the principle of one person, one vote irrelevant.

Restoring transparency and accountability to our electoral process should be a national emergency. I've reintroduced a bill called "Stand By Every Ad" to require super PACs, corporations, and others empowered by Citizens United to accept responsibility for their ads and list their top five donors on the TV screen. If candidates have to claim responsibility for their ads, CEOs should too. The DISCLOSE Act, a broader measure to limit the fallout from Citizens United, was also recently reintroduced by House Democrats.

Further steps will be needed—a Supreme Court with a different balance of power and/or a constitutional amendment—but these are critical first steps in restoring integrity in our democracy. Americans deserve transparency and accountability in elections. Let's make 2012 a year of real debates about the issues facing our country--not the Year of the Super PAC.