

CITIZENS UNITED AND THE 2012 ELECTION:  
HOW DID THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS  
AND OUTSIDE PACs FRAME THE CANDIDATES?

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A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled:

CITIZENS UNITED AND THE 2012 ELECTION: HOW DID THE PRESIDENTIAL  
CAMPAIGNS AND OUTSIDE PACs FRAME THE CANDIDATES?

presented by Daniel Leveton

a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts

and hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## DEDICATION

Many students take the long journey to a master's degree and like many I have had much help on the way. It included juggling work, family, classes, projects and the daily requirements that we all have to deal with.

I would like to thank my family for giving me the time, when needed, to focus on this long process, especially my wife. She has successfully gone through graduate school herself and knows firsthand the dedication it takes, and the support from family, friends and work, to be successful.

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# CITIZENS UNITED AND THE 2012 ELECTION: HOW DID THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS AND OUTSIDE PACs FRAME THE CANDIDATES?

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## ABSTRACT

Campaign finance has long been a controversial political subject in the United States and was made more so by the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court ruling on Citizens United. The ruling struck down limits on donations made to and spent by outside groups supporting candidates or causes, including money donated by either corporations or individuals. Perhaps just as importantly, the ruling also allowed some donors to remain anonymous, thereby potentially shielding them from outside criticism. As expected, the change in campaign finance rules led to a surge in political advertising along with the birth of new political advocacy groups known as “super PACs” (political action committees).

This study reviewed how that new influx of money was spent during the 2012 campaign for president, and more specifically if candidate and PAC spending differed in the type of negative advertising used (personal attacks vs. issue attacks). If there were significant differences, the success or failure of advertising strategy could affect decisions made in the next presidential election in 2016. This study determined that the amount of negative advertising created far exceeded positive for all sponsors, and perhaps more importantly there was little difference in the type of attack ads produced by the candidates’ campaigns and their supporting PACs.

## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 decision on campaign finance legislation has led to considerable debate in the political arena and among the public. The aftermath of the ruling in "Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission" has been a flood of new political advertising throughout the country that has only continued to grow. Research completed following the 2012 and 2014 elections shows a dramatic increase across the board. In total, nearly \$2-billion was spent on federal races leading up to November 2012. That is nearly double the amount from the 2008 cycle in which just over \$1-billion was spent. The number of political ads that aired also jumped by nearly a third, from approximately 2.2 million to 3 million (Fowler & Ridout, 2013). The total amount spent nearly doubled again in 2014's midterm election, totaling nearly \$3.8-billion (Opensecrets.org).

Perhaps just as important is not the amount spent on political advertising following the court's January 2010 decision, but the new regulations on who could donate, how much they could donate and whether they had to be identified (Supreme Court of the United States, 2010). The bottom line is there are now no limits on how much individuals, corporations or other organizations can donate, and in many cases those donations can remain anonymous. It's also becoming clear that the public is not satisfied with the new system. A June 2015 poll released by the New York Times and CBS News found that vast majorities of both Democrats and Republicans want campaign finance rules changed. An overwhelming majority (85%) of those asked say there need to be at least fundamental changes to how we fund political campaigns: 46% say the system

should be completely rebuilt, while another 39% want fundamental change. Three-to-one majorities also believe the amount outside groups should be allowed to spend should be limited and they should be required to publicly disclose their contributions. Clearly, five years after the Citizens United ruling, Americans across the political spectrum are giving the aftermath of the decision a thumbs down.

The NY Times/CBS News poll did not ask people why they want change, but other studies point to one major reason – negative advertising. A poll completed just before the 2014 vote found that 63% of regular television viewers thought most political advertising on TV attacked the opposing candidate while just 14% said it promoted the candidate paying for the ad (Rasmussen Reports). Another example came in Florida, where nearly 100,000 negative ads ran leading up to the November 2014 general election (Center for Public Integrity).

Prior research has concentrated on such issues as whether attack ads are effective, with some concluding that negative advertising might influence the images of the attacked candidate and his or her opponent (Garramone, 1985, pg. 148). Another concluded that negative ads lead to a greater likelihood of turning out to vote (Meirick and Nisbett, 2011, pg. 689).

Other research indicates that political advertising changed in 2012 because of who, more than ever, was making editorial decisions about the content of the ads. Decisions about attack ads and negative campaigning that once weighed on candidates are now made by consultants and donors with little or no accountability to the public (Confessore, 2012).

No matter who made the decisions on content, or who provided the financing, this study sought to find out if presidential candidates and their outside super PACs took different approaches to advertising. This research will try to determine if the campaigns focused on remaining positive while leaving the negative advertising to PACs. And in the case of negative ads, did the campaigns and PACs attack the opponent in different ways. In other words, did the candidates (Obama or Romney) attack the opponent's policies while the PACs attack them personally?

Answering these questions is important for the political communication field because it will help determine the strategy of third-party advertising, and whether allowing outside groups to "go negative" with unlimited amounts of money shapes the outcomes of elections.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Questions and research about campaign financing have always been a compelling topic for mass communication and political researchers, and that became even more so following the Supreme Court's decision in January 2010 (*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*), which not only changed the way political campaigns are financed but potentially opened up an entirely new line of research revolving around mass communication and political theories. This research project used one common theory to guide exploration of how the presidential candidates in 2012 (Barack Obama and Mitt Romney) and their outside supporters (national political parties and super PACs) pursued specific strategies in the use of advertising. Specifically, did the candidates' campaigns and their outside supporting groups not only focus on different *tones* of advertising – positive advertising or negative advertising – but more specifically, was the negative advertising, when it appeared, focused on the opponent's character or policies. The goal of this research is to use quantitative data attained through a content analysis to determine if the campaigns focused on attacking policies while their outside supporting PACs focused on attacking character.

This research will use framing theory to help analyze the hypotheses.

### **Framing theory**

Framing is an important theory for this research because it helps us understand the types of arguments that are made about why people should vote (or not vote) for candidates, plus how and why advertisements were created for television and the internet to frame the public's perception of the candidates, whether positive or negative.

Framing theory can originally be traced to Erving Goffman's 1974 book "Frame Analysis" in which he said framing transforms the meaning of a social situation. Goffman said the materials of the situation must be already meaningful to participants and, secondly, culturally meaningful cues must be available in the situation to demarcate boundaries around when and where the meaning transformation will occur. In other words, frames give meaning to a collection of information units that otherwise would be meaningless (Goffman, 1974). Connecting it to this research, people must be aware of politics, and political ads, and that socially they should be able to determine what a positive ad looks like as opposed to a negative one. Media consumers should be able to tell the difference and use that information to make choices. Some analysts say Goffman's 1974 book was a reworking of analyses that "occupied (Goffman's) attention since the early 1950s" (Denzin & Keller, 1981) and his intention was to address the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives.

In his work, Goffman says he borrowed the term "frame" from another writer, Gregory Bateson, (1955, 1972) stating:

"...it is Bateson's paper that the term 'frame' was proposed in roughly the sense in which I want to employ it...I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events - at least social ones - and our subjective involvement in them..." (pg. 10-11).

Others have concluded similarly. For one, Tuchman (1978) cites Goffman (1974) as the originator of the idea that a frame is needed to organize otherwise fragmentary items of experience or information. Information is gathered and used in the media, whether by the media or by others who push their messaging using the media.

Issue ownership in presidential elections (using the 1980 presidential contest between incumbent Jimmy Carter and challenger Ronald Reagan as a case study) used job performance to “frame” the debate between the campaigns (Petrocik, 1996). Petrocik said the following:

“The theory of issue ownership finds a campaign effect when a candidate successfully frames the vote choice as a decision to be made in terms of problems facing the country that he is better able to ‘handle’ than his opponent (pg. 826).

...a candidate’s campaign can be understood as a ‘marketing’ effort: the goal is to achieve a strategic advantage by making problems which reflect owned issues the programmatic meaning of the election and the criteria by which voters make their choice” (pg. 828).

Of importance to this research and how candidates and/or PACs “frame” the election, Petrocik found that Carter led in the early months of 1980 and the race remained close through the summer and therefore was evidence that “prevailing conditions do not automatically decide an election.” In essence, Petrocik’s research indicates that advertising can have a dramatic impact on the vote:

“It is clear that a decisive fraction of the turnout (of unknown size, but maybe as large as 25 or 35%) was influenced by what they heard during the campaign” (pg. 846).

Another study linking political advertisements and framing was conducted by Scheufele (1999). He asked, do the ways individuals frame issues for themselves have an impact on their willingness to engage in political action or participation?

“Within the realm of political communication, framing has to be defined and operationalized on the basis of this social constructivism. Mass media actively set the frames of reference that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss public events” (Tuchman, 1978).

McQuail (2010) suggests framing has two main meanings: one, the way in which news content is typically shaped and contextualized by journalists within some familiar frame of reference, and two, a second related meaning that concerns the effect of framing on the public in which the audience is thought to adopt the "frame of reference" offered by journalists and to see the world in a similar way, related to priming and agenda-setting (pg. 557). Future research on this subject may be able to determine if there is a correlation between media framing and public decisions in elections. For this research, however, the framing will be done within the media but by outside parties (the candidates' campaigns and their outside supporters).

McQuail (2010) also says the content frame has to be compared with the frame of reference in the mind of an audience member, in this case the television or internet audience. Framing is also thought to be appropriate because framing research has provided evidence for how information is communicated and what effect it has on people (McQuail, 2010).

McQuail also cites Entman (1993) who argues that framing involves selection and salience. Frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993). McQuail says it is clear that a very large number of textual devices can be used to perform these activities. They include using certain words or phrases, making certain contextual references, choosing certain pictures or film, giving examples as typical, referring to certain sources and so on. Tying it to this research, all of these can be found in advertising.

Entman also makes another crucial point related to framing and therefore this research project, saying that "frames have at least four locations in the communication process"

(p. 52): the communicator (in this research project the source of the ad), the text (in this case the advertisement), the receiver (television viewers) and the culture (voters and possible predetermined beliefs). Entman also refers to salience, the highlighting of certain items that makes them more meaningful, noticeable and memorable (Entman, 1993).

Previous research on positive and negative political advertising has generally focused on the amount of each, the trends on negative advertising or whether one is more effective than the other in getting people to vote and in influencing that vote. However, in looking at prior studies there appears to be very little scientific research on which groups, together and separately during one election cycle, focused on which tones, positive or negative, which themes (personal attributes) and which topics (issues). Additionally, 2012 was the first presidential election following the 2010 Citizens United decision and provides an opportunity to see if more money in the system changed the philosophy of political groups, and whether they did or not could provide guidance for future political advertising strategists.

Finally, framing should be the appropriate theoretical approach to use in a study of advertising because past framing research has shown it can lead to evidence on how issues are communicated and the effect that may have on an audience, in this case the viewers and potential voters in the 2012 election (McQuail, 2010).

### **Background on Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission**

When the U.S. Supreme Court made its decision in January 2010, it removed restrictions on the amount of donations made to and spent by outside groups, including money donated by corporations and individuals (remaining unchanged, however, was the restriction on collaboration between outside groups and the candidates' campaigns when

it comes to advertising). However, that does not mean that the campaigns and their supporters cannot at least try to use advertising in different ways to frame the election in ways that would benefit the candidate.

The decision to change campaign finance laws in 2010 had a major impact on advertising during the midterm elections in November of that year, but two years later, in November 2012, it provided an opportunity to see what kind of impact the new law would have on a national, presidential election. The result was dramatic, with nearly \$2-billion spent throughout the country, doubling the total from just four years earlier (Fowler & Ridout, 2012).

Though it is clear that there was more money donated and spent during this race, more than at any time in U.S. political history, there is still a question of how that money was spent, and whether the official campaigns for the presidential candidates sent the same messages as super PACs.

Looking further at the history of “Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission,” the Supreme Court ruled that the first amendment protecting free speech should apply to corporations and unions when it comes to campaign finance, in essence ruling that political spending is a form of protected speech under the First Amendment, and the government may not keep corporations or unions from spending money to support or denounce individual candidates in elections (Supreme Court of the United States, 2010).

Another major difference following the Citizens case, and one that had a major bearing on this study, is that unlimited donations were allowed to be made to groups that directly advocate the defeat of a candidate (so related to this study, outside groups could

focus completely on negative advertising). Beforehand, those donations could be made but only for “electioneering communications” which were commercials about political issues that could mention candidates but not call for their election or defeat. Just as important, donations can now be anonymous - meaning certain organizations placing the ads on air don’t have to disclose who gave them the money.

An offshoot of the Citizens decision has been the creation of super PACs. PACs have been around since 1974 (when the FEC was created) but super PACs differ in that there is no limit to how much money they can receive from an individual, corporation or union (thus the name “super”). The only limits are that they cannot give money directly to candidates or coordinate with political campaigns.

The Supreme Court’s decision on Citizens United is probably the most dramatic ruling in the history of campaign finance reform, but it is hardly the first attempt by government to regulate the amount of money corporations, unions and the public can put into an election. The most recent attempt at campaign finance reform, prior to Citizens United, was the 2002 Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), also known as McCain-Feingold after Senators John McCain and Russ Feingold (Public Citizen, 2011).

At the time, the BCRA was the most comprehensive campaign finance legislation in American history, regulating soft money, electioneering communications, coordinated and independent spending, and limits on individual contributions (Bauerly, 2011). One of the key regulations remaining in effect following the passage of the BCRA was the ban on direct corporate and union donations (however, employees of those corporations and unions could still donate individually or through “527” PACs) (Bauerly, 2011).

One of the key components of the BCRA was the section on “electioneering communications” which oversaw “issue ads” - advertisements that discussed candidates and their views on different issues without specifically calling for a candidate’s election or defeat. It also set limits on how close to an election those ads may run. The reason it was key is because that’s the section that Citizens United attacked in its original argument before the Supreme Court in 2008. Specifically, Citizens United created a documentary about Sen. Hillary Clinton (titled *Hillary*) that was critical of Sen. Clinton and came as she was attempting to secure the democratic nomination for President (Public Citizen, 2010). Because the film was going to be broadcast via satellite (along with other distribution) FEC rules said it was covered by BCRA. Citizens United was challenging portions of the electioneering provision of BCRA that included disclosure requirements (Public Citizen, 2011) and also the restriction on directly mentioning a candidate within 30 or 60 days of a general or primary election (Supreme Court of the United States, 2010). Citizens United filed its case with the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia on Dec. 13, 2007, and a month later that court denied a motion for a preliminary injunction (Jan. 15, 2008) and eventually dismissed the lawsuit, which led to the group’s petition to argue the case to the Supreme Court (Public Citizen, 2011).

After hearing arguments at two different times in 2009, the Supreme Court ruled on January 21, 2010 (by a 5-4 majority) that the law restricting certain parts of campaign Hlimiting corporate funding of independent political broadcasts in elections, saying it violated free speech (de Blasio, 2010). Writing for the majority, Justice Anthony Kennedy said “political speech must prevail against laws that would suppress it, whether by design or inadvertence. Laws that burden political speech are ‘subject to strict

scrutiny,' which requires the Government to prove that the restriction 'furthers a compelling interest and is narrowly tailored to achieve that interest.' Justice Kennedy's 57 page opinion also says "when Government seeks to use its full power, including the criminal law, to command where a person may get his or her information or what distrusted source he or she may not hear, it uses censorship to control thought. This is unlawful. The First Amendment confirms the freedom to think for ourselves" (Supreme Court of the United States, 2010).

Writing a 90-page opinion for the minority, Justice John Paul Stevens disagreed, saying "at bottom, the Court's opinion is thus a rejection of the common sense of the American people, who have recognized a need to prevent corporations from undermining self-government since the founding, and who have fought against the distinctive corrupting potential of corporate electioneering since the days of Theodore Roosevelt" (Supreme Court of the United States, 2010). One part of the law that does remain in place is the restriction on advertising coordination between campaigns and outside supporters.

### **Related literature**

A review of the literature on the subject of money spent in the 2012 presidential election and the 2010 midterm elections indicated that the Citizens United decision had a major impact on three areas -- the overall amount of money spent, the increased amount of anonymous donations and, as an offshoot, the shift towards even more negativity in political advertising.

According to research, the 2010 midterm (congressional) elections featured an avalanche of television advertising, at the time more than any previous election in

modern times (Franz, 2010). A total of 1.6 million airings (of ads) took place before the election, a 36 percent increase over 2008 (Fowler & Ridout, 2010). Candidates, the political parties, and outside groups all together spent \$4-billion on the 2010 congressional elections, more than had been spent in any previous midterm election (Kurtzleben, 2010).

Research also indicates that in the 2010 election cycle, groups taking in anonymous donations spent more than \$130 million, and over 30% of all outside spending was funded by anonymous donations (de Blasio, 2010). The 10 most costly Senate races racked up \$421-million in spending, including nearly \$80-million judged to be specifically related to the Citizens decision (de Blasio, 2010).

In its report, Public Citizen said spending from outside groups jumped to \$294-million in the 2010 election cycle, up from \$68-million during the last midterm cycle (2006) - a whopping 427 percent increase. Of those contributions, nearly half (\$138-million) came from just 10 groups, the top spender being the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which spent \$31.2-million.

The amount of money and anonymous donations, and the power of outside groups, were equal to what many experts had predicted following the Citizens United decision. Benjamin Ginsberg, a Republican campaign attorney, said immediately following the ruling that “it will put on steroids the trend that outside groups are increasingly dominating campaigns. Candidates lose control of their message. Some of these guys lose control of their whole personalities. Parties will sort of shrink in the relative

importance of things, and outside groups will take over more of the functions — advertising support, get out the vote — that parties do now” (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

Along with the volume of advertising, groups also saw an increase in negativity. The report “Advertising Trends in 2010” concluded that the 2010 campaign was the most negative in recent history, with 53.5% of the ads that aired after September 1<sup>st</sup> purely negative in tone. Only 26% were pure positive ads (Fowler & Ridout, 2010).

Polling indicates that the American public wasn’t in love with the aftermath of Citizens United and may have seen the negative wave coming. In an ABC News/Washington Post poll taken just after the decision, in February 2010, 80 percent of Americans opposed the Court's decision, 65% of them "strongly." Opposition came from both parties – 76% of Republicans and 85% of Democrats opposed the ruling (Washington Post, 2010).

Prior research has also concentrated on such issues as whether attack ads are effective, with some concluding that negative advertising might influence the images of the attacked candidate and his or her opponent (Garramone, et al, 1990). That study suggested that negative advertising is useful to voters in developing images of candidates and differentiating or discriminating between those images. Another study concluded that, even though positive ads received higher marks that reflected well on the candidate who sponsored (or were the subject of them) from those who viewed them and were surveyed, negative ads lead to a greater likelihood of turning out to vote (Meirick & Nisbett, 2011). A third study conducted by Fridkin and Kenney concluded that negative ads can have an impact on how citizens evaluate candidates if the messages focus on

relevant topics. If an incumbent focuses on irrelevant topics in an uncivil manner, citizens react by lowering their opinion of that incumbent (Fridkin & Kenney, 2011). That study would logically point to the need for PACs to take on more of the negative aspects of advertising, as opposed to the candidates.

The focus on negative advertisements has also been part of past research. Benoit (2001) looked at the distinction between attacking policy vs. character and found that attack ads were mostly (61%) aimed at policy as opposed to character. However, Benoit was involved in another study in 1996 that said it did not matter whether the candidate was being attacked, or the candidate's policies, concluding that the way a candidate approaches an issue has an inevitable impact on image (Benoit & Wells, 1996).

The frequency of negative campaigning has also been the focus of numerous studies. Teinowitz found that the final days of competitive campaigns, especially in battleground states during presidential elections, the campaign messages are almost exclusively negative (Teinowitz, 2008).

Despite the record amounts of money spent since Citizens United, an interesting related question exists, namely did it work? Is it possible to gauge if the untapped dollars had a desired effect? The report by Public Citizen says yes, at least in 2010. Of 75 congressional contests in which partisan power changed hands, spending by outside groups favored the winning candidate in 60. And in the six Senate contests in which power changed hands, winning candidates had an average \$2.7-million advantage in money spent by outside groups (Public Citizen, 2011). Interest groups in 2010 increased

their advertising totals over 2008 by 168% in House races and 44% in Senate races (Franz, 2010).

Many observers predicted another major increase in spending in 2012, saying the Presidential election would likely be the most expensive ever, and they were correct. Statistics confirm that spending by PACs, groups and individuals jumped from about \$43-million in the 2008 cycle to over \$210-million in 2010 - a nearly five-fold increase (Federal Election Commission, 2012).

Research completed following the 2012 elections shows a dramatic increase across the board. In total, nearly \$2-billion was spent on federal races leading up to November 2012. That is nearly double the amount from the 2008 cycle in which just over \$1-billion was spent. The number of political ads that aired also jumped by nearly a third, from approximately 2.2 million to 3 million (Fowler & Ridout, 2013). That study also found that in the presidential race alone there were 1.4-million ads costing campaigns and PACs \$950-million.

Other literature connected to 2012 shows negativity was the driving force behind most advertising, by all parties. For example, a study by the Wesleyan Media Project in May 2012 suggested that 70% of the ads for all sponsors up until that point were negative, and 86% of the ads created by interest groups were negative (Fowler, E., 2012). A Washington Post project posted just after the election pointed to the same trend, saying 86% of all ads in favor of Barack Obama (created by his campaign or supporters) were negative as were 91% of those in favor of Mitt Romney (Washington Post, 2012).

A study directly related to this research was conducted following the 2012 election and focused specifically on the use of tone and appeal in super PAC advertisements (Ohl et al, 2013). The authors concluded that outside groups were significantly more negative in their advertising, and in addition super PACs were much more likely to run attack advertisements as opposed to the official candidate campaigns (and in a connected analysis, pro-Romney PACs were more negative than pro-Obama PACs).

This project sought to advance previous studies by not only focusing on the content of the overall political ads, but by drilling down even further into the data to analyze the topics and themes of the ads, and whether those dominant frames were positive or negative. The research will not only help us determine if candidates, political parties and super PACs produced positive or negative advertising, but also if those groups appeared to intentionally focus on attacking or promoting the candidates or the issues. This project will quantify the data by using scientific methods to code and analyze a random sample of advertisements cataloged during the 2012 cycle.

The influence of super PACs in 2011 and 2012, during the race for the GOP nomination, was clear, with a more than a 1,600% increase in interest-group sponsored ads aired as compared to 2008 (Fowler, 2012). Comparatively, only 3% of all ads in the 2008 Republican race came from interest groups. For the 2012 cycle that number rose to 44% (Fowler, 2012).

Perhaps the main question following Citizens United and the issue at the heart of forming a super PAC is: will it work? Will political action committees formed specifically to collect unlimited funds help elect the candidates they favor? And, despite

laws prohibiting consultation, will the candidates and super PACs work in concert to send the same message? Those are questions for another study but still have some bearing on this research in attempting to see if one part of the candidate/supporting team remained mostly positive while the other was negative.

### **Contributing to the literature**

This research came on the heels of the Citizens United decision made by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2010, which had a dramatic effect on campaign financing (in essence removing nearly all limits on how much money could be donated, by individuals, corporations and interest groups). This research compared how that money was used by candidates and outside supporters in 2012, and whether there was a difference in strategy between the two groups. This study also sought to provide a foundation for future research on advertising strategy following the Citizens United decision. For example, were the decisions made in 2012 effective (did negative vs. positive advertising help one of the candidates win), or did the influx of money in 2012 change the weighting of positive vs. negative advertising as compared to 2008 and other pre-Citizens United elections, and how might that affect strategy in 2016?

Citizens United was decided in January 2010, so the election in 2012 was the first opportunity to see the impact on a presidential race. However in the past there have been multiple studies on political framing completed. Relevant to this research, Jacoby (2000) targets issue framing in a political context and concludes that the media is simply a conduit for politicians and political causes to promote their particular views. By having

those views accepted, politicians and political movements can achieve their goal of winning elections.

Jacoby said “issue framing is an explicitly *political* phenomenon,” adding:

“Issue frames typically originate with political leaders; the mass media serve as the ‘conduits’ through which their messages flow...

It is highly rational for elites to pursue strategies based upon issue framing. The logic is as follows: favorable public opinion – in the form of popular support for policy positions – is an important resource that political leaders can use for achieving their ultimate political objectives, such as winning elections” (pg. 751).

According to research already conducted on the 2012 campaign, record amounts of money went to purchase television advertising (Fowler & Ridout, 2012). That study also found that the advertising was extremely negative, especially at the presidential level and frequently evoked the emotion of anger (Fowler & Ridout, 2012).

That research showed generally if the ads were positive or negative. This study, however, attempted to determine how the candidates’ campaigns and outside groups “framed” the candidate and the opponent (identifying and analyzing topics and themes), and whether there was a trend for one group to focus on issues vs. personal qualities.

Presidential advertising campaigns, whether conducted by the campaigns themselves or outside groups, have always mixed positive and negative messages by promoting the candidates while attacking the opponent. This research project hypothesized that the new campaign finance laws, with unlimited money now pouring into the system, led to a strategic shift by the candidates and super PACs.

Political campaigns generally attempt to portray their candidate as a strong leader, for example, or someone with good morals, or who is the more patriotic candidate. It is hypothesized that continued in 2012. However, because of the reported larger donations

by backers of the Republican candidate this research also looked at whether Mitt Romney's campaign was freed up to spend more of its money on positive framing. If so, and if future research indicates that strategy helped to shift votes, one can conclude the tactic will be used in future campaigns.

This research proposal took the theory of framing in another direction specifically focused on 2012: now that outside groups have more money than ever at their disposal, did the super PACs and candidates (President Obama and Mitt Romney) try to influence the electorate by framing the choices in the election? How did the candidates frame the issues, their opponent, and the impact of the vote? Specific to this research question, did the candidates and super PACs use negative advertising to attack the opponent in different ways?

This project focused on determining if the political campaigns of the major party presidential candidates in 2012 (Barack Obama and Mitt Romney) used similar strategies as their outside supporting groups in defining themselves and their opponents. A content analysis was used to determine the types of messaging, positive or negative, used by the political operations of the candidates and their national party campaigns and super PACs. Further research sought to find out if, and which side, concentrated on using mostly positive advertising while the other used mostly negative. In other words, did the political campaigns of the candidates use positive advertising while their supporting groups focused on negative advertising, thereby allowing the candidates to be portrayed in a more favorable light? Finally, the research looked at which type of negative advertising was used – an attack on the opponents policies or his character.

A content analysis of advertisements produced by the campaigns, national parties, and super PACs helped this study confirm or reject these hypotheses and answer the research questions. By collecting data captured within those advertisements, focusing on variables including image (personal traits) and topics (issues being debated) a determination was made as to whether the advertisement was positive, negative or neutral.

Determining what is considered positive and negative was a major part of this study. However, one study that provides a foundation was completed by Travis Ridout and Michael Franz in 2008 and said:

“There is a further complication, though, in that negativity is still a contested concept. Many authors define a campaign message as negative if it *mentions* an opponent (e.g., Lau & Pomper, 2004). This offers a relatively easy and elegant way of placing a message into one of two different categories (positive or negative), but it also treats the same messages that might be quite different on a qualitative level” (pg. 159).

Data collection and coding in this research was similar to previous studies, including one completed in Dalton and McIlwain (2011) in which the researchers compared third-party and candidate spots from the 2004 presidential election to look for, in part, differences in sponsor negativity. That study concluded that third-party ads were much more negative than those produced by the candidates, but it focused on 2004, well before the Citizens United decision. In fact, the authors recommended further research such as this study to review “the effects of ad negativity, sponsor salience, and third-party and candidate message consistency” (Dalton & McIlwain, 2011, p. 129).

### **Research hypotheses**

This research study used terms, visual cues and audio to determine whether an ad is negative or positive (or neither). If the terms and cues were considered mostly negative or

positive, the ad was scored as negative or positive. If neither could be determined, or if both positive and negative references appeared to be equal, the ad was scored neutral. There were several key targets for this research project. One was to determine the extent of negative vs. positive advertising. There is an overwhelming amount of evidence that negative advertising far outweighed positive in both the presidential election of 2012 and other political races (Washington Post, 2012). However, it was important for this study to determine whether the ads chosen specifically for this review were weighted positive or negative, and if the ad was determined to be negative whether it was sponsored by the candidate or the PAC. Only then could we definitively use those negative ads and sponsors to confirm (or reject) the subsequent hypotheses.

Therefore, the decision was made to compare all commercials reviewed to determine who the sponsor was, and if they were positive, negative or neutral:

***Hypothesis 1a: The campaign operation for Barack Obama used a different framing strategy than his supporting super PACs, with the Obama campaign focused on positive advertising while his PACs focused on negative advertising.***

***Hypothesis 1b: The campaign operation for Mitt Romney used a different framing strategy than his supporting super PACs, with the Romney campaign focused on positive advertising while his PACs focused on negative advertising.***

These hypotheses are suggested specifically by a study completed by Ohl, Nader and Pfister (2013) showed the dominance of negative advertising in the 2012 campaign, especially among PACs. The authors determined that 89% of all outside group advertisements were strictly attack ads compared to 50% for the candidates' campaigns.

Other previous studies came to similar conclusions on the tendency, ever increasing, to go negative. For example, in the 2000 Senate elections, the portion of negative ads in competitive races was 65% (Goldstein and Freedman, 2002).

The percentage of negative ads aired in the presidential race continues to rise over time. In 2000, it was 29%, but in 2004 jumped to 44% and in 2008 to 51% (Fowler & Ridout, 2013). That study also found that 85% of the ads sponsored in 2012 were purely negative.

Other research also suggests that Republican-leaning super PACs raised and spent more money on advertising than did Democratic-leaning groups. Post-2012 research found that the amount of money spent by outside groups was much greater than previous elections. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the 2012 presidential election saw a 594% increase in that category (PAC spending), from \$144 million in 2008 to approximately \$1 billion in 2012 (Hansen, Ortiz & Rocca, 2015).

Digging deeper, 2012 election money spent by outside groups (PACs) favored Mitt Romney by a wide margin. Romney's supporting PACs spent three times as much as Obama's did, \$478 million on behalf of Romney compared to \$155 million spent by those supporting President Obama.

Furthermore, according to the Washington Post analysis, which looked at the top spenders in the election, Mitt Romney and the RNC (controlled by Romney) spent just over \$200-million on advertising while the five largest Romney/GOP affiliated PACs spent about \$260-million. In fact, of the top 10 commercial sponsors, seven supported Romney. That fact was highlighted by the difference in the support for the campaign of

Barack Obama. The incumbent (and the DNC, which he controlled) spent \$356-million, and the one democratic PAC among the top 10 sponsors during the election spent just \$39-million. Clearly Mitt Romney had much more outside support and, assuming PACs spend more on negative advertising (supported by the research), in theory the Romney campaign had the opportunity to focus more on positive advertisements.

***Hypothesis 2: Because Republican candidate Mitt Romney’s campaign had more outside super PAC advertising support in total dollars, and super PAC advertising has historically been more negative, the Romney campaign was able to use more of its money on positive advertising.***

Research completed following the 2012 campaign showed that the Romney campaign had more outside (PAC) support than the Obama campaign, and that support (presumably highly negative) allowed Romney to “go positive.” Did a lower level of PAC support affect how the Obama campaign spent its money? Would that campaign be forced to take a more balanced approach to advertising tone, and if so how would that affect decisions made by future candidates on positive/negative ratios?

***Hypothesis 3: Because his campaign did not have the same amount of outside support from PACs, Barack Obama’s campaign had to use an equal amount of its advertising budget on negative advertising as it did on positive advertising.***

Determining whether hypotheses 3 and 4 are supported can be crucial to future advertising decisions made by candidates and outside groups. If a strategy used by the winning campaign (in this case Barack Obama’s) following Citizens United worked in 2012 that could lead to similar strategies in future campaigns. However, that study will need more extensive analysis and it may be necessary to include qualitative analysis if

interviews are conducted with voters to determine their perceptions of advertising and whether that had anything to do with their final decision on which candidate to support.

For this project, if it is hypothesized that outside super PACs supporting both candidates focused on negative advertising, this data in this research project could also be used to determine what type of negative advertising was more prevalent: attacking the opponent's character (themes) as opposed to attacking their policies (topics). Data can also be used to confirm if the PACs and candidate campaigns focused on different types of negative advertising:

***Hypothesis 4: It is hypothesized that super PACs supporting Barack Obama and Mitt Romney were not only negative but specifically focused on attacking their opponent's character as opposed to attacking the opponent's stand on issues.***

Past research also suggests that people often rely disproportionately on negative references as opposed to positives (Aragones, 1997; Bunker, 1996; Lau, 1982). Theoretically, that would give sponsors of political ads more reason to be as negative as possible in order to reinforce the negative impression.

A similar approach was used in a study and corresponding system of analysis completed by Benoit (1999). Instead of cataloging complete commercials, as to whether they were positive or negative, Benoit looked for themes. His reasoning revolved around the opinion that ads now contain multiple topics, not just one:

“...in my opinion it is time to abandon the practice of classifying entire spots with a method that characterizes by themes. The traditional approach worked better when spots tended to focus on a single theme. However, candidates are likely to string together six or eight diverse topics in a single ad, combining acclaims and attacks as well as policy and character appeals (Benoit, 1999, Kindle DX version, location 2264).”

To use Benoit's approach, this study needed to add up the number of negative vs. positive mentions in a single ad. The ad was determined to be negative if it had more negative mentions, and similarly it was be considered positive if there are more positive mentions. In cases where it is difficult to quantify, or where the positive and negative mentions appear to be equal, it was up to the coder to make a final determination on the overall tone in the ad, positive or negative. Finally, in some cases it was necessary to code the overall commercial as neutral.

Therefore, along with coding the ads in this study as positive or negative, the coders reviewed each ad for every the total amount of positive and negative references in each ad. The number of negative references was tallied for each ad considered negative, the results totaled, and an average determined.

***Hypothesis 5: Super PAC advertisements considered negative used a greater number of negative references in each commercial than candidate/party-sponsored ads considered negative.***

This proposal's hypotheses came after a thorough review of the literature on this subject. The methods proposed (a quantitative content analysis using computer software) will be also discussed in detail followed by a final discussion of why this study was important and how it is able to contribute to the literature.

The information gathered for the above hypotheses should give us answers to how candidates and outside supporters tried to frame the incumbent and the challenger in 2012, but to get a better idea of if and how the Citizens United decision, and it's loosening of financing restrictions, changed the thinking among decision makers we need to compare the positive/negative data from another election. This will be discussed

further in the limitations section of this proposal and in the conclusion section of the proposed thesis project.

## METHOD

The goal of this research was to determine if the presidential candidates in 2012 (more specifically, their political operations, a combination of their personal and party campaigns because the candidates have control over both) and the outside groups supporting them (PACs) used similar or different strategies in framing the candidate and his opponent in video advertising following changes in campaign finance law, and more specifically whether the advertising focused on the opponent's policies or his personal qualities. Whether the claims in the advertising are true will not be considered (however, that could also be another potential future study). Only the fact that the advertising made the claim is what will be considered in this research.

This research project used content analysis to determine whether advertisements produced by the campaigns and PACs could be considered negative or positive, and from there whether the themes of the negative advertisements produced by the campaigns differed from those produced by the candidates' supporting PACs. Not all commercials produced by the campaigns and PACs were used in the sample and not all outside groups that produced commercials were among those chosen for this project. Only the super PACs with the greatest amount of money spent on advertising were used in this study.

A sample of video commercials produced and aired during the general election campaigns (following both party conventions) was used for this research. Those commercials were located using the database created by researchers at Stanford University leading up to the elections in November 2012. The database is part of the political communication lab at Stanford where video advertisements from recent

presidential elections, including 2012, are cataloged. The ads were sponsored by the campaigns of the candidates, by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Republican National Committee (RNC), and by PACs supporting both candidates. In total, there were six potential categories of sponsors for this project (multiple PACs for each candidate were combined into the PAC category).

The Stanford site cataloged 210 advertisements produced by all parties between Sept. 6, 2012 (following the conclusion of both the Republican and Democratic conventions) until Nov. 5, 2012, the day before the election. Those commercials were produced by the official campaigns, the national parties and super PACs. The last 100 commercials cataloged prior to Election Day (other than Spanish language) were reviewed and coded for this project. Of the 100 commercials reviewed, 36 were produced by the Romney campaign/Republican National Committee, 30 were produced by super PACs supporting Romney, 28 were produced by the Obama campaign/Democratic National Committee, and six were produced by super PACs supporting Obama.

### **Commercial Coding**

A quantitative content analysis of selected video advertisements collected and cataloged on the Stanford website was conducted using two independent coders. This analysis measured tone (positive, negative or neutral) and the focus of the issues and images in the ads selected, not the length of the ads or number of times the ad aired. In fact, consideration was not given to how many times or whether the ads chosen even aired. Rather, this project is concerned with what types of ads were produced by each of the parties being measured by this research (candidates, political parties or PACs), which

topics or personal qualities were mentioned in the ads and at what frequency. The coders also noted the number of positive and negative references in each ad using specific words, phrases or images. Positive and negative tones were defined by how the candidates or their policies were portrayed in the ad: did the images, music, and words support the candidates and their policies or did they criticize?

Specifically, for these hypotheses, content coding was the preferred measurement tool because the goal was to determine whether the frame of ads was positive, negative or neutral, whether the ad focused on character or issues, and will use certain phrases and images to do so. The most effective way to do that was to code the words and images in the advertisements (who is mentioned or seen, and what type of narrative is used). Are the words or photos negative (black and white, ominous) or upbeat? How are the candidates portrayed on certain issues? How are the candidates' personal traits described? The goal is to then use those codes to analyze and come up with a conclusion.

The first step was to code the content of each commercial as positive or negative, focusing on topics (issues) and themes (personal traits). The coders were instructed to classify ads using several dimensions. One was to look at statements or photos/audio about the personal traits of the sponsoring candidates with no explicit (visual or spoken) challenge or criticism about the opponent. Those could be considered positive. Another focus was to search for negative statements about the opponent's personal traits (themes) including video, pictures or audio. Those could be considered negative. A third dimension looked for mentions of issues inherent in the 2012 campaign, for example immigration, same-sex marriage, the economy, tax policy, and so on. The coders were asked to determine the main theme of the ads and make a judgment as to whether the

overall focus was negative or positive. The belief is that voters would be able to do the same thing, and judge the commercial as either positive or negative.

Two coders coded each ad based on the definitions identified for positive and negative tone and whether the content was about issues or images. The coders each viewed the same commercials which included a sampling of those from the candidates' campaigns, national parties and super PACs. The results were noted on a coding sheet with the results placed into and analyzed using SPSS software. This research looked for correlations between variables, for example whether there is a connection between the producers of the ad, whether it is positive or negative, and if negative did it attack personality or issues.

The unit of analysis for this study was the commercials. The title of the commercial, the content (including words, both spoken and written, images and music). The code sheet was developed before the coding began using prior research as a guide. Both coders viewed the same commercials to confirm reliability.

To gather the necessary data for this study a coding sheet consisting of 77 variables was created to measure who paid for the ad, the main (candidate) focus, the topics (economy, jobs, same sex marriage, health care, etc.), the music used, and other variables including specific words or topics mentioned, and the number of times those were mentioned. In the end, the target was to determine if the entire advertisement, taken as a whole, was considered positive or negative by the coders. From there the data was analyzed to reveal who sponsored the ad, and then to correlate the sponsor with the tone and intent of the ad to determine what type of positive or negative strategy was used by

each sponsor. The coders reviewed each commercial multiple times and afterwards the data collected was analyzed separately and collectively to ensure reliability and validity. The majority of the commercials ran 30 seconds each.

To help ensure reliability, both coders began the process by reviewing two of the same exact commercials, one considered positive by the researcher and one considered negative, and were asked to fill out coder forms. This was done to confirm that both coders understood the parameters set by the researcher in the coding sheet, which included images, music, words and other references. The data was reviewed, and a conclusion confirmed the design and coding instructions were adequate. That is, the coders identified the same patterns in the commercials used for initial reliability.

Following the initial reliability test, the remainder of the commercials targeted for this study were coded and SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software was used to analyze the full data collection. Chi-square tests were used to test the hypotheses. Other conclusions were reached using different mathematical calculations including ratios and percentages which showed a consistent pattern throughout the process.

## RESULTS

The goal of this research project was to determine whether the 2012 election followed similar patterns in relations to positive vs. negative advertising, and whether the Citizens United decision released in 2010 affected the decisions made by both PACs and the candidates' campaigns when it came to what type of advertisements to produce.

Assuming there would be a large percentage of negative ads, this project sought to determine if PACs and the candidates' campaigns focused on different types of negative advertising: attacks on the candidates personally or attacks on the candidates' stance on issues. Did messages sent by the campaigns of the candidates differ from the messages sent by political action committees (PACs), or more specifically whether the campaigns and PACs focused on different attributes within the ads, attacking the opponent's stands on issues or the opponent's character?

Hypotheses 1a and 1b suggested that the candidates would use a different strategy than their supporting super PACs, focusing on positive advertising while allowing the PACs to focus on negative advertising. In other words, this study predicted that the percentage of positive ads produced by the candidates' campaigns would be greater than the percentage of positive ads produced by their PACs.

As can be seen Table 1 below, this hypothesis was supported ( $\chi^2 = .04$ ) and was significant. Though the Romney campaign/RNC produced a greater number of negative ads as compared to his supporting PACs, his percentage of positive ads was much higher (41% positive for the Romney campaign/RNC vs. 23% positive for his supporting super PACs).

Obama’s ads were equally split between negative and positive. His PAC ads, however, were 100% negative, leading to the conclusion that the Obama campaign placed a much greater emphasis on positive advertising. Looking at all advertising produced by both campaigns and their supporting PACs, a smaller percentage of the ads were positive (35%) than were negative (62%).

Table 1: Percent of each source’s positive and negative commercials

*Sponsor combined \* Coder opinion combined Cross tabulation*

Count		Coder opinion combined		Total
		Positive	Negative	
Sponsor combined	Mitt Romney/RNC	14	20	34
	Romney PAC	7	23	30
	Barack Obama/DNC	14	14	28
	Obama PAC	0	6	6
Total		35	63	98

*Chi-Square Tests*

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.267 <sup>a</sup>	3	.041
Likelihood Ratio	14.422	3	.025
Linear-by-Linear Association	.020	1	.888
N of Valid Cases	98		

a. 1 cell (12.5%) has expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .12.

As shown in Table 1, the results were similar when we separated the candidates. Of the 36 ads sponsored by Mitt Romney’s campaign, 20, or 55%, were negative. But the PACs supporting Romney produced 23 negative ads and only 7 positive ads, or 76%

negative. The results were even more definitive for Barack Obama's campaign compared to his PACs. Exactly half of Obama's ads were positive and half negative. His PACs however, were 100% negative (all 6 ads were negative).

Hypothesis 2 suggested that, because of more outside support, and the likelihood that the outside support was predominately negative, the Romney campaign was able to produce a greater percentage of positive ads than his PAC.

Prior research also suggested that, because of greater funding, Republican-leaning super PACs were able to produce and air more ads than Democratic-leaning groups. Therefore, this research project predicted that likelihood allowed Mitt Romney's campaign to focus more on producing positive ads because his super PACs produced more negative ads.

The data confirmed this hypothesis. As Table 1 shows, the Romney campaign had more positive ads (14 out of 36 advertisements, or 38%) than the Republican PACs did, seven out of 30 (23%).

Hypothesis 3 also looked at how the support from super PACs affected the strategy of Barack Obama's campaign, suggesting that if his super PAC support was not as great as Romney's, then he would need to spend more on negative advertising to make up for the difference in super PAC advertising. In other words, Hypothesis 3 said Obama had to use an equal amount of his budget on negative advertising as opposed to positive advertising.

This proved to be the case, with 50% of the Obama-produced ads proving to be positive and 50% negative. In contrast, the PAC ads supporting Obama were 100% negative

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the super PACs supporting Barack Obama and Mitt Romney focused more on attacking their opponent's character as opposed to the opponent's policy on issues. This hypothesis was important to this and future studies because it could influence the type of negative ad produced (the way in which the negative ad attacks the opponent) and whether those strategies were successful.

In other words, Hypothesis 4 suggested that the PAC ads focused more on attacking the opponent personally and not on the opponent's stand on different issues such as the economy, military, taxes, and so on. This data from coding the commercials is the focus of Table 2.

This hypothesis was not supported ( $\chi^2 = .16$ ). The coders determined that the 22 negative ads produced by the Romney campaign either mostly attacked policy/issues (55%) or attacked a combination of both character and issues (45%). His campaign did not have one ad that only attacked Obama's character. Meanwhile, his PAC ads either attacked a combination of both character and issues (61%), or just issues (35%), and there was just one ad that attacked only Obama's character.

For Obama, his campaign ads were mostly a combination of policy and character attacks (73%), with another 27% attacking Romney's policies. All six of the negative ads produced by Obama's supporting PAC ads in this study (100%) were a combination of policy and character attacks. None of the Obama campaign or Obama PAC ads attacked Romney on character-only.

Table 2: Personal vs Policy Attacks Types in the Commercials

*Sponsor combined \* Attack focus combined Cross tabulation*

Count		Attack focus combined			
		Personal attack	Policies attacked	Both	Total
Sponsor combined	Mitt Romney/RNC	0	12	10	22
	Romney PAC	1	8	14	23
	Barack Obama/DNC	0	4	11	15
	Obama PAC	0	0	6	6
Total		1	24	41	66

*Chi-Square Tests*

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.134 <sup>a</sup>	6	.166
Likelihood Ratio	11.193	6	.083
Linear-by-Linear Association	6.002	1	.014
N of Valid Cases	66		

a. 6 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .09.

The pie chart depicted in Figure 1 uses a different visual to illustrate the dilemma faced by both coders (the chart shows the combined results from the commercials) and mentioned above. One of the goals of this study was to determine which sponsors used what tactics in negative advertising. Did the candidate campaigns use advertising to attack their opponents' policies and allow the PACs to attack him personally? As illustrated below in a different format, the data showed that the vast majority of negative commercials attacked the opposition on both fronts. Of 66 negative commercials, the coders determined that only one was a direct personal attack on the opponents' campaign,

while another 24 (or about 36%) attacked policies, and the vast majority, 41 commercials, or 62%, attacked the candidate personally while also attacking his policies.

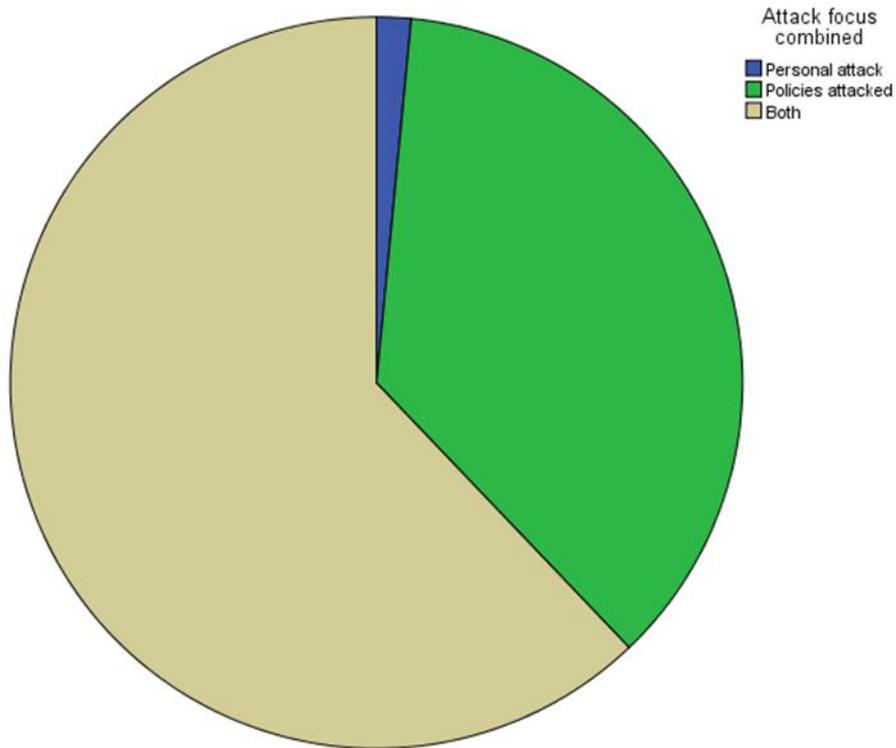


Figure 1: Percent of Attack Types in the Commercials

This hypothesis was perhaps the key question in this study. Because of the unprecedented amount of outside money being poured into the campaign finance system, did it allow the campaigns to focus on issues (and more positive advertising) while allowing the outside groups to do “the dirty work” of going predominantly negative, and not only to go negative but also to directly attack the opponent’s character.

Among the examples of commercials demonstrating how a candidate was attacked both personally and for his policies was this 30-second spot, titled “Small Things” produced by the a Romney super PAC at the tail end of the campaign. It mixed excerpts from Obama speeches while showing the candidate shrinking, his voice changing, the background changing from flags to dark skies and words on the screen contradicting what the president was saying:

*(Obama speaking) America’s a place where all things are possible (flags in background)*

*America I have never been more hopeful (flags in background)*

*Yes we can (flags in background)*

*Their plan, which is let’s have dirtier air, dirtier water (change to dark skies)*

*Kids with disabilities fend for themselves (candidate and candidate’s voice shrinking and continuing to shrink throughout remainder of ad)*

*Somebody is finally getting tough on big bird.*

*I think it’s called Romnesia.*

*We don’t have to collect a bunch of binders.*

*Voting is the best revenge.*

*If you don’t have a record to run on you make a big election about small things.”*

The commercial used the president’s words against him (attacking his policies) while also showing the president and his voice shrinking (in the coder’s opinions, attacking him personally). While there were commercials that attacked either the candidate’s personality or his policies, the majority of these type of attack ads used the same type of strategy as the one highlighted above, which mixed attacks against Obama and Romney personally while also criticizing their policies.

Here's an example of a similar attack on Romney, both personally and his policies.

The commercial is titled "What he'll do" produced by the Obama campaign:

*Which do you believe?*

*What Mitt Romney's TV ads say about women? Or what Mitt Romney himself says:*

*"Do I believe the Supreme Court should overturn Roe v. Wade? Yes (Romney at debate)*

*And it would be my preference that they reverse Roe v. Wade (Romney during interview)*

*Hopefully reverse Roe v. Wade (Romney during interview)*

*Overturn Roe v. Wade (Romney at debate)*

*Planned Parenthood, we're going to get rid of that (Romney during interview)*

*I'll cut off funding to Planned Parenthood (campaign rally)."*

*No matter what Mitt Romney's ads say, we know what he'll do."*

The commercial was coded as an attack on Romney both personally and against his policies because it used his own words (verbal) in criticizing his stance on women's issues and in showing that what he said in advertisements was different than what he said at rallies and during interviews. Romney was shown as not being truthful (which the coders determined was a personal attack) while at the same time the ad criticized some of his policies towards women (an attack on the issues).

Digging deeper into the attack-focus data, the coders determined that, by percentage, the Obama campaign and Obama PACs had a higher rate of attacking Romney both personally and for his policies (see table 2). Of the 21 negative commercials reviewed, 17 (81%) were coded as "both" compared with just 4 that attacked only policy. Furthermore, the Obama PACs *only* attacked Romney on both personality and policies (6 out of 6

commercials). The Romney campaign and PACs had a more even spread because they had a higher rate of attacking just policies as opposed to both.

The one advertisement that both coders agreed was a personal attack *only* was titled “Biden and Ryan: a Heartbeat Away” and was sponsored by a Romney PAC. Ironically, it didn’t attack Barack Obama directly. It attacked the incumbent’s campaign by focusing on Vice-President Joe Biden:

*Announcer: He’s just a heartbeat away from the presidency. Who do you trust to take the helm if needed?*

*(Biden at a rally) With you we can win North Carolina again (screen says “in Virginia”)*

*(Biden at a rally) It’s a three letter word. J-O-B-S. Jobs (screen says “not a numbers guy”)*

*(Biden at a rally) They’re going to put you back in chains again (screen says “fanning racial tensions”)*

*(Commentator during TV interview) He’s sort of that, you know, drunk uncle kind of thing.*

*(Rudy Guilanni during same interview) God forbid he ever had to be entrusted with the presidency, whether he really has the mental capacity to handle. He’s just not very smart.*

*Do you trust Joe Biden to lead? (words on screen with his picture)*

That advertisement simply makes fun of Joe Biden’s mistakes and doesn’t really focus on any issues.

The final analysis for this hypothesis is inconclusive. If the study takes into account personal attacks and personal attacks only, by themselves, there is just one case (as mentioned above). However, if the category “both” is also taken into consideration, then

a much larger proportion is accounted for – 21 out of 29 “attack” ads sponsored by PACs targeted both character and policies, as did 23 out of 37 of the candidates/party campaigns. This may be a result of the candidates not wanting to appear overly abrasive by attacking the person. When including the categories of only character attacks and both character and policies, the percentage is higher for PACs but not by a dramatic margin (72% character and both for PACs vs. 62% for the candidates). Therefore the hypothesis is not supported by the evidence.

Hypothesis 5 drilled down even deeper into ads that were considered negative according to the coders. Could one negative ad be considered “more negative” than another negative ad? Is it possible to measure such a thing?

Hypothesis 5 suggested that not only would it be possible, but that the data would show that negative super PAC ads would prove to be even “more negative” than negative candidate ads by using a greater number of negative references.

To look for those answers the coders were asked to keep track of the number of negative references, whether they were considered negative visuals, negative music, or negative words or phrases spoken or visually indicated on screen during the ads. These negative references are identified in the coding sheet included as an appendix in this study.

The number of negative references was tallied for each ad considered negative, the results totaled, and an average determined (Table 3).

In his book “Seeing Spots,” William Benoit took a similar approach for his study of presidential advertising over the years. He added up the number of acclaims or attacks in

each commercial, saying “to describe this entire spot as either positive or negative clearly ignores or misclassifies about half of what is being said to voters” (Benoit, 1999).

In this study, the coders determined that 63 of 100 ads reviewed were negative: 40 were sponsored by either the Romney campaign or his PACs, and 23 were sponsored by the Barack Obama campaign or his PACs. Breaking it down further, 17 negative ads were sponsored by the Romney campaign/RNC, 23 were sponsored by the Romney PACs, 17 were sponsored by the Obama campaign/DNC and six were sponsored by the Obama PACs. Within those ads there was the possibility of 13 negative references (seven visuals, one for music, and five other words or phrases).

As part of this research, coders watched the commercials, noted the negative references in each ad, and indicated each reference on the coding sheet. Afterwards, the number of negative references in each ad was totaled, and that figure was used to determine the intensity of the attack. Table 3 shows the tabulation of the number of negative references. In the ads considered negative, there were as little as one and as many as 10 negative references in each. The majority of ads (41 out of 63) had either three, four or five negative references.

The results showed that the highest average of negative references was in the ads paid for by the Romney super PACs, lending some support to the stated hypothesis. Romney’s PACs averaged 5.1 negative references per ad as opposed to 4.4 references on average for the Romney campaign/RNC. Interestingly, the vast majority of negative references were either visuals, music or narration and not specific words (which are listed as “mentions” on page 5 of the coding sheet).

Still, is it possible for one negative ad to be “more negative” than another negative ad? The conclusion reached for this hypothesis corresponds with hypothesis 2, which proposed that Mitt Romney’s campaign had more super PAC advertising support and since his PACs would likely “go more negative” his campaign could be more positive, a hypothesis confirmed through statistical analysis. That hypothesis referred to the Romney campaign’s ability to focus more on positive advertising.

For hypothesis 5, it appears Romney’s super PACs used more frequent negative advertising, and within those negative ads more negative references. At the same time, the Obama campaign/DNC and Obama super PACs, which this study proposed would have to be more equally negative, were indeed more alike, averaging 4.2 negative references each.

Table 3: Number of Negative References for Each Type of Ad Source

Count	Sponsor				Total	
	Romney/RNC	Romney PAC	Obama/DNC	Obama PAC		
Total negative references	1	1	0	1	0	2
	2	0	0	2	1	3
	3	6	7	2	2	17
	4	3	5	4	2	14
	5	4	2	4	0	10
	6	1	3	3	0	7
	7	0	3	1	0	4
	8	1	2	0	1	4
	9	1	0	0	0	1
	10	0	1	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>		17	23	17	6	63

## DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

The information gathered during this study confirms several points in other research on political advertising since 2010: the majority of advertising remains negative, and the amount of money spent on political campaigns since the Citizens United decision continues to grow. For this study, at least, the data leads to the conclusion that most super PAC advertising was negative and focused on attacking the opponent (29 out of 36 ads or 81%). It should be noted that our sample determined the candidates and party campaigns were also majority negative (28 positive ads vs. 34 negative and two neutral).

Our analysis also found that, though PAC spending on behalf of the republican candidate in this race was much greater than the opposition, the likelihood of the ad being negative was the same if not more on the democratic side. Of the 100 ads reviewed, only six were produced by pro-Obama groups but all six were negative. The pro-Mitt Romney groups produced 30 out of the 100 ads reviewed and though most were negative some were positive (77% negative vs. 23% positive).

For those reasons, hypotheses 1a and 1b were rejected. They had suggested that the candidates' campaigns would use different framing than the PACs representing each candidate but the results indicated they were more or less the same – negative, and the majority of the time attacking both the opponent's character and his stand on issues.

Another point confirmed in this study was that the more PAC support for a candidate, the more likely that PAC support was even more negative. The super PAC ads considered to be negative contained more negative references than candidate-sponsored ads also considered negative (however the difference in intensity was not overwhelming). Mitt

Romney's campaign had more PAC support, and the results of our coding showed a tendency for those PAC ads to use slightly more negative references as opposed to the candidate's ads.

Though this study was able to determine generally the tone and focus of ads, it was limited by the number of ads and where they were stored. The Stanford University site is well-known however it is but just one of many keeping track of advertisements. For example, the Wesleyan Media Project and the Living Room Candidate are just two others that track political advertising, and samples could have been pulled from their work too, however the expectation is that, because some of the commercials cataloged would be the same by all sites, the tone and strategy of the candidates and PACs would on average remain generally the same.

Using the Stanford site, this study was able to determine some of the advertising strategies of candidates and some of their outside supporters following the Citizens United decision, however it cannot answer whether those strategies actually influenced voters. Despite the majority of super PAC funding on behalf of Mitt Romney, he did not win the election. Was this because voters were turned off by the negative push by both he and his PACs? That would be tough to prove because the Obama campaign and his super PACs also went heavily negative.

That is where this study is limited and might be the most important question for further research. Did the influx of new money have a direct effect on how people voted? Finding those answers would take a more detailed study involving quantitative and qualitative techniques. Researchers would have to determine the tone of ads, ask voters

opinions to confirm the tone, and then ask if the commercials affected their voting decisions, or whether it even persuaded them not to vote at all.

Future research can therefore not only compare the types of framing both sides used in a particular election and then take it a step further by determining the final impact. Did the combined advertising strategies of the candidates and outside groups lead to the desired outcome (for Barack Obama yes, for Mitt Romney no). More specifically, did Barack Obama win a second term because of the way his campaign and outside supporters framed the president and his opponent, or was the victory due to other factors? A *qualitative* study of voters and non-voters (those registered but who didn't vote) and whether their decisions were influenced by advertising tone could help future political campaigns and advertising consultants determine the best, most effective way to spend money. Just as importantly, related to the Citizens United decision and the new money put into the system, political consultants will be able to determine if a barrage of negative advertising, fueled by uncapped amounts of donated money, influences voters more or less than positive advertising, or in other words did all of that money spent even matter.

Other potential research can focus on television vs. internet advertising. Political campaigns increasingly “announce” their intentions using web-based platforms, for example, several of the 2016 presidential campaigns have already had the candidate make their intentions known via their campaign websites, and then followed that with an official live announcement. The point being, all signs suggest internet is now a major (if not the biggest) factor in the strategy of campaigns.

Another crucial subject should be how pre- and post-Citizens United strategies were affected by the decision. In other words, how did 2008 advertising by all sides compare to 2012, after the Supreme Court's decision in 2010. In 2008 there were two non-incumbents, Barack Obama and John McCain, and though there were positive and negative ads, the question for this project is, how did advertising decisions leading up to that election (pre-Citizens United) compare to advertising decisions made in 2012. With less money overall money in the system in 2008, were the candidates and outside supporters more inclined to spend money more broadly on positive and negative advertising as opposed to simply one of the other? Further research can include an investigation of the strategies used in 2008 and juxtapose those findings to 2012.

Future research may also find another area of interest in where the ads were concentrated. With many states now considered safe for one candidate or the other well before Election Day, it is hypothesized that leads to more money being spent in fewer markets. Fowler & Ridout alluded to this in their 2012 study, saying "71 of the country's 210 media markets saw more than 1000 ads aired in the presidential election. The comparable figure for 2008 was 97 media markets" (Fowler & Ridout, 2012, p. 52). Further studies could try to determine where each group (candidate or outside) spent most of its money and how much of that advertising was negative.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt that 2012 not only set records in the amount of money spent on advertising but also continued a trend of negative tones. Several studies, including this one, concluded that attack ads far outweighed positive ones.

The study mentioned earlier completed by Fowler & Ridout found that more than three million spots focusing on the election ran on local, national and cable television between January 1, 2012 and election day (Fowler & Ridout, 2013). The estimated cost of that advertising was just under \$2 billion, nearly double the cost in 2008.

The slant towards negative coverage was on the same trajectory as the amount spent. Fowler & Ridout found that 64 percent of the ads aired in the 2012 presidential race were purely negative (mentioning only the opponent). That was a 13 percent increase over 2008 and a whopping 35 percent increase since the 2000 election (Fowler & Ridout, 2013). When you count the number of ads mentioning both candidates (in the aforementioned study considered “contrast”) then nearly 86 percent of the ads could be considered negative in some manner (for example, if both candidates are mentioned in an ad it is usually to contrast the opponent in a bad light compared to the supported candidate). Drilling down further, Fowler & Ridout found that only 5 percent of PAC ads were positive in the 2012 election, similar to this study’s findings.

That trend continued into 2014, the second non-presidential major election since the 2010 Citizens United decision, with more money being spent by outside groups than ever before.

The Center for Responsive Politics estimates the \$3.67 billion was spent on the 2014 election, just slightly more than 2010 (\$3.6 billion) but a record nonetheless. Plus, that figure only takes into account spending disclosed to the Federal Election Commission and does not include money spend outside the required disclosure period (more than 30 days before a primary or 60 days before the general election on November 4, 2014) by outside groups that don't ask the public to vote for a specific candidate (OpenSecrets.org).

Perhaps more importantly, even though the amounts were not drastically different between 2010 and 2014, who spent the money and how it was spent were.

In 2010, just after Citizens United, the amount spend by outside groups was \$309 million, or about 8.5 percent of the total spent on the election. In 2014 that number jumped to about \$480 million, a 66 percent increase (OpenSecrets.org). One can then reach the conclusion that, even in non-presidential years, the amount of political advertising financed by outside groups will continue to grow. Will the trend towards negative ads continue to also grow, and if so will those ads produce the desired effect, that being the election of the candidate who produces the most negative ads?

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## **Appendix 1: Coding sheet**

***You have been chosen to analyze video commercials created by various parties during the presidential campaign of 2012. As a coder, you will look for and mark down visual and audio references made in a series of advertisements. For many of the questions, your goal is to determine if the references or tones in the advertisements are positive, negative, or neutral.***

***Please circle the answer that is most appropriate. In some cases you will circle more than one answer to a question.***

***Please take your time as you view these advertisements. You may stop and start the commercials as many times as needed.***

***At the end of your session please hand your worksheet to the researcher.***

***Thank you for your assistance.***

**Title of commercial:** \_\_\_\_\_

**COMM\_TITL** In your opinion, does the title of the commercial indicate a positive, negative or neutral emotional tone? Please answer this question before viewing the commercial.

- 1 Positive
- 2 Negative
- 3 Neutral
- 99 Don't know

**SPONSOR** Indicate who the sponsor of the commercial is: that is, who paid for it?

- 1 Mitt Romney/RNC (Republican National Committee)
- 2 Romney PAC/interest group
- 3 Barack Obama/DNC (Democratic National Committee)
- 4 Obama PAC/interest group
- 99 Don't know (DK)

**FOCUS\_ROM** Does the commercial focus mostly on Mitt Romney? If yes, in your judgment:

- 1 The focus on Romney is positive
- 2 The focus on Romney is negative

**FOCUS\_OBA** Does the commercial focus mostly on Barack Obama? If yes, in your judgment:

- 1 The focus on Obama is positive
- 2 The focus on Obama is negative

**CAND\_APPEA** Did the commercial show one or both candidates? If yes, which one(s):

- 1 Romney
- 2 Obama
- 3 Both candidates
- 4 Neither

**CAND\_CON** If **BOTH** candidates appeared in the ad, how were they framed?

- 1 Romney positive/Obama negative
- 2 Obama positive/Romney negative
- 3 Both neutral/both positive/both negative

**ISSUE** Did the commercial focus on particular topics or issues? If yes, circle them below (there can be more than one):

- 1 Economy
- 2 Immigration
- 3 Taxes
- 4 Same-sex marriage
- 5 Abortion
- 6 Health care
- 7 Jobs
- 8 Welfare
- 9 Education
- 10 Deficit
- 11 Medicare
- 12 Social Security
- 13 Military
- 14 Foreign policy
- 15 Other \_\_\_\_\_

**VISUAL\_POS** Did the commercial use **POSITIVE** visual cues to support the message? If yes, what were the positive visuals in the commercial (there can be more than one)?

- 1 Families
- 2 Military members
- 3 Children
- 4 Workers
- 5 Financial sector
- 6 Flags
- 7 Candidate smiling
- 8 Cheering crowds
- 9 Other positive visuals

**VISUAL\_NEG** Did the commercial use **NEGATIVE** visual cues to support the message? If yes, what were the negative visuals in the commercial (there can be more than one)?

- 1 War
- 2 Unemployed
- 3 Closed businesses
- 4 Candidate expressions
- 5 Abandoned real estate
- 6 Pollution
- 7 Other negative visuals

**OBA\_MUSIC** If music plays during the commercial and the commercial focuses on Barack Obama, was the accompanying music:

- 1 Upbeat
- 2 Ominous, tense or serious
- 3 Comedic (makes fun of candidate)
- 4 Other negative tone
- 5 Other positive tone

**ROM\_MUSIC** If music plays during the commercial and the commercial focuses on Mitt Romney, was the accompanying music:

- 1 Upbeat
- 2 Ominous, tense or serious
- 3 Comedic (makes fun of candidate)
- 4 Other negative tone
- 5 Other positive tone

**CAND\_SPEAK** Did either candidate speak during the ad? If yes (you may choose more than one):

- 1 Romney spoke for less than 10 seconds
- 2 Romney spoke between 10 and 20 seconds
- 3 Romney spoke for more than 20 seconds
- 4 Obama spoke for less than 10 seconds
- 5 Obama spoke between 10 and 20 seconds
- 6 Obama spoke for more than 20 seconds

**AD\_TONE** Overall in watching the commercial, would you consider it more positive to promote one candidate or negative to attack one candidate?

- 1 Positive/promoting the candidate it espouses
- 2 Negative/attacking his opponent
- 3 Neither/neutral

**ATTK\_REA** In your judgment, if the commercial attacks a candidate, does it attack the candidate personally (character) or does it attack his policies (themes)?

- 1 Personal attack
- 2 Policies attacked
- 3 Both

**CAND\_APPRO** If the candidate did not pay for the commercial (if a PAC or other outside group did), did that candidate explicitly approve the message?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No

**ACTION** Did the commercial tell the audience to take action?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No

**ACT\_TYPE** If the commercial asked the audience to take action, was it in favor of one candidate or against the opponent?

- 1 Vote for Romney
- 2 Vote for Obama
- 3 Vote against Romney
- 4 Vote against Obama

**PARTY** Does the advertisement mention any political party? If yes:

- 1 Republican
- 2 Democrat
- 3 Both
- 4 Other

**INTENT** In your opinion, does the commercial target the audience using one of these themes?

- 1 Anger (negative)
- 2 Pride (positive)
- 3 Fear (negative)
- 4 Enthusiasm (positive)
- 5 Sadness (negative)
- 6 Other negative
- 7 Other positive

Which of the following words or phrases are included in the commercial? Please circle all that apply:

- |                  |               |                  |                   |
|------------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>MENTION1</b>  | Job Creator   | <b>MENTION15</b> | Corrupt           |
| <b>MENTION2</b>  | God           | <b>MENTION16</b> | Experience        |
| <b>MENTION3</b>  | Family man    | <b>MENTION17</b> | Conservative      |
| <b>MENTION4</b>  | American      | <b>MENTION18</b> | Special interests |
| <b>MENTION5</b>  | Patriot       | <b>MENTION19</b> | Tea party         |
| <b>MENTION6</b>  | Middle class  | <b>MENTION20</b> | Lower taxes       |
| <b>MENTION7</b>  | 47 percent    | <b>MENTION21</b> | Businessman       |
| <b>MENTION8</b>  | Tax and spend | <b>MENTION22</b> | Leader            |
| <b>MENTION9</b>  | Dishonest     | <b>MENTION23</b> | Bipartisan        |
| <b>MENTION10</b> | Fighter       | <b>MENTION24</b> | Military          |
| <b>MENTION11</b> | Liberal       | <b>MENTION25</b> | Debt              |
| <b>MENTION12</b> | Tough         | <b>MENTION26</b> | Auto industry     |
| <b>MENTION13</b> | Honest        | <b>MENTION27</b> | Unemployment      |
| <b>MENTION14</b> | Hope          | <b>MENTION28</b> | Lobbyists         |

**CODER\_OPIN** In your judgment, was this overall commercial positive or negative?

- 1 Positive
- 2 Negative
- 3 Neutral/Don't know