

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

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ABSTRACT

The 2010 Supreme Court decision on Citizens United was a watershed moment in campaign finance regulation. The ruling did away with nearly all limits on donations made to outside groups supporting candidates or issues while at the same time allowing donors to remain anonymous. The decision led to the creation of so-called “Super PACs” (political action committees) and, not surprisingly, a surge in political advertising and, as research since 2010 has shown, much of it negative.

The 2012 election was the first presidential contest since the new rules were put into place, and this study reviewed not only the frequency of negative vs. positive advertising, but also the type of negative advertising created by the candidates’ campaigns as opposed to their outside PACs. Did the advertising attack the opponent on a personal level or did the attack focus on issues?

A database of political ads leading up to the election was coded, and 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.