

# What journalists need to know about Super PAC ads

This is the first presidential election in which Americans will be inundated with television advertisements aired by [Super Political Action Committees](#). Often negative, these ads frequently mislead voters, provide little or no information, are often inaccurate and reveal the media's unclean hands when it comes to undermining democracy, observers warn. And it's about to get worse.

The Republican Primary is providing only a preview of what voters and viewers can expect in the presidential race. The involvement of Super PACs in the 2012 Republican primary contest has skyrocketed with a 1,600 percent increase in interest-group sponsored ads aired as compared to 2008, [according to](#) a study released by the Wesleyan Media Project, which tracks advertising in federal elections. The ads include:

- A mini-documentary attack ad against former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney by a Super PAC supportive of rival Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the House of Representatives;
- An ad calling into question Gingrich's relationship with former President Ronald Reagan, as well as another featuring former NBC news anchor Tom Brokaw reporting on Gingrich's ethical problems in 1997, both sponsored by a Super PAC supportive of Romney that is [headed by](#) one of his former campaign managers and bankrolled by wealthy hedge fund managers;
- Political satirist Stephen Colbert has even gotten in on the act by creating his own Super PAC, giving it away to business partner (and fellow comedian) Jon Stewart so that he could run in the South Carolina Republican primary, and also so the Super PAC could run an [calling Romney a serial jobs killer](#).

By law, Super PACs can not coordinate with a candidate's campaign, but likely has past connections to a candidate, his campaign or his party. Gingrich asked that Super PAC Winning Our Future pull a misleading anti-Romney ad, but the organization is under no obligation to do so due to the non-coordination rule. The ease of getting around the law, however, was recently [highlighted](#) — not by a news organization but by Colbert, who announced that his Super PAC (he took it back from Stewart after the South Carolina Primary) has [raised more than \\$1 million](#) since its start over the summer.

## The role of Super PACs

Super PACs operate with very little transparency or regulation, says Dale Emmons, a Democratic strategist and president of the non-partisan American Association of Political Consultants. Unlike with

candidate campaign contributions, most people won't even know who is behind the Super PACs — or major donors who have given money to the Super PACs — until *after* the election, he says.

"It's like having two basketball teams on the court, and all of a sudden, pouring out of the bleachers onto the floor, are other people wanting to take part in this game. But the referee doesn't have the ability to call foul on those people. They are out there creating havoc and chaos," Emmons, a Kentucky native, said in a telephone interview. "That's what's going on here. The people on the court are not just the candidates but a bunch of other interested parties that do not have to play by the same rules the campaigns have to play by."

Ushered in by the 2008 Citizens United v. The Federal Elections Commission Supreme Court decision, Super PACs are a new tool in political arsenals that basically extends an individual's right to free speech to a collective entity's right to free speech, meaning that multiple people can give unlimited amounts of money to an entity created for the sole purpose of espousing a vantage point in the midst of a political election. Before Citizens United, the Bipartisan Campaign Finance Reform Act (also known as McCain-Feingold) had placed limits on the amount of "soft money" national political party committees could raise or spend, even for state and local races or issue discussion.

Since the Supreme Court's decision, [300 Super PACs](#) have registered with the Federal Elections Commission.

Television broadcasters will earn about \$3 billion in political advertising revenue this year, [Reuters reported](#) last month. This means an influx of hundreds of millions of dollars for news conglomerates like Media General, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., and Sinclair Broadcasting Group — all own numerous local television stations across the country.

The media's role in political advertising and its use in undermining elections has already come under fire this election season. After Restore Our Future, a Super PAC supportive of Romney, broadcast its ad containing the NBC News clip, [Brokaw publicly disagreed and the network asked the Super PAC to stop airing it](#).

"Broadcast media, particularly the big networks, have carefully guarded their political neutrality to the extent that when they see some of their material being used to support one candidate at the expense of another, their worries are elevated, and that's fair," Timothy Karr, Senior Director of Strategy at the media reform group Free Press, said in a telephone interview. "But they aren't looking at the other side of the media election problem, which is the media's complicity in the process that often misleads viewers and voters. The complicity is that these media organizations are making millions and millions of dollars in an election year by broadcasting misleading ads without doing much in their news programming to separate political facts from fiction."

## Super PAC ads being used to fight 'friends'

The Republican primary also marks the first time viewers will see candidates of the same political party attacking each other with a ferocity usually reserved for their Democratic rivals.

One example: The anti-Romney ad/documentary entitled "King of Bain: When Mitt Romney Came to Town." The ad was released in the waning days of the South Carolina primary by Winning Our Future, a group with a benevolent-sounding, yet unrevealing name and strong ties to Gingrich ([Rick Tyler](#), a strategist with Winning Our Future, is Gingrich's former communications director).

The 28-minute video has all the markings of a Hollywood-produced straight to DVD movie. Romney is cast as the shadowy villain shot with camera angles that make it look like he looms over his victims, regular people who accuse the former corporate executive of being a job killer for the sake of corporate greed. (The late Republican political strategist and father of the political attack ad, Lee Atwater, is either [beaming with pride](#) at the effectiveness of his creation or [rolling in his grave in utter disbelief](#) that members of his own party are using these ads to attack one another.)

Before the ad ran during the South Carolina primary Romney had been leading in the polls, but Gingrich triumphed in the end. Was it because of the powerful, yet distorted images presented in the ad? Maybe, maybe not, but there is no denying it played a role in upending the primary results, says Charles Bullock, the Richard Russell Professor of Political Science at The University of Georgia.

"Until 2008, primaries were constrained in their spending because there was a reliance on funding from the federal government," Bullock told me. "Now that's changed. President Barack Obama broke the mold on that one. Neither party now is beholden to federal money."

In the past, Bullock says, there were far fewer ads on the airwaves, they were less hard-hitting and candidates did not attack members of their own party. He thinks viewers who are inundated with these ads will "take it all with a grain of salt." He also suggests that citizens be more attentive to fact-checking operations sponsored by various media organizations.

## What news orgs and voters can do

In a recently released report, [Citizens Inundated](#), the Free Press's Karr argues that television stations and networks are getting rich on Super PAC spending, but still cutting newsroom staff and doing little reporting on government and politics that could help cut through the misinformation in attack ads.

With declining political reporting, television ads are how many voters now get their political information,

Karr says. Short of stopping the DVR and freeze-framing the faint disclaimer line at the end of the commercials, there is very little to help consumers differentiate Super PAC ads from those sponsored by candidates, Karr adds. Even if viewers do use freeze-frames, he says, they still won't know who is behind the ads because the names of the organizations don't reveal very much information.

Karr says citizens can help push for more transparency by, among other things, [urging Congress to mandate that FCC-licensed broadcasters make political ad spending information fully available online](#) and by exposing the money behind the front group running the ads by requiring them to list their top donors in the body of Super PAC ads.

Emmons agrees that more disclosure is needed. "Until we have some regulatory process in place that adds to all an element of transparency and accountability," he says, "I just don't understand how we're going to get a good result from it in our democracy."

Here are some tips on [how to watch Super PAC ads](#):

- Look for the faint type at the end of the commercial to ID the Super PAC.
- Look up the Super PAC online to see which candidate or cause it is connected to by going to Web sites such as [opensecrets.org](#). Run by the Center for Responsive Politics, the site [lists](#) the organizations, candidate the group supports or opposes, how much money the group has raised and spent, as well as its political viewpoint.
- Pay close attention to claims made in ads, then check with fact-checking websites. Remember Swift Boat Veterans for Truth? John Kerry's armed services career was redefined, for some, when the organization alleged that his Purple Hearts were earned fraudulently.
- Look at the production values. Are faces darkened? Is the background music ominous? If you minimize those emotion-grabbing elements, what is the ad's message?

Ask yourself whether the ad is positive in support of a candidate or negative in opposition to a candidate. Super PAC ads can be either, in fact the groups can say anything they want, but their ads are usually negative and characterized as "attack ads," though it is difficult to determine who is attacking.