



How Super PACs Shape U.S. Elections with Advertisements that Portray Candidates in Ways Publicly Identified Campaign Ads Often Avoid

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Super Political Action Committees — called super PACs for short — are one of the largest new players in American politics. Super PACs are able to raise unlimited funds to promote candidates to whom they are loosely tied. With those funds, super PACs often pay for political advertisements promoting a favored candidate or attacking his or her opponents. Legally, super PACs are supposed to be independent from candidates, but in practice their directors often have close personal connections to the candidate and campaign they support.

To better understand these organizations and their growing role in U.S. politics, I examine political advertisements created with super PAC support and identify key tactics deployed in those anonymously funded advertisements.

Alter-Egos and Performances

Political advertisements help candidates disseminate the messages they want voters to see. These ads can also help voters learn about candidates and their positions. Some of the most important questions voters have are: What sort of person is the candidate? Is this a strong leader with moral convictions? Are they focused on policies that could impact my own life?

Political advertisements can offer answers to these questions, but voters may be suspicious of information that comes directly from the candidates themselves. At the same time, “mudslinging” — advertisements that include negative information about opponents — can be effective, but have the potential to backfire on the candidate they are supposed to help if the negative messages get an unfavorable reception. Super PACs have risen to such challenges by, in effect, becoming alter-egos for candidates. The messages super PACs spread can build a positive image of the candidate and tear down the candidate’s opponents — without being attributed to the candidate directly.

With such considerations in mind, I analyzed the messages and impressions contained in advertisements in the 2012 Republican primary, comparing those used in candidate-sponsored ads to those used in candidate-specific super PAC advertisements. This primary was the first federal election with the involvement of super PACs, which essentially made it the testing ground for many further super PAC deployed in the elections to follow.

My research uncovered five main performance types, or thematic characters, used in these advertisements — with candidates and Super PAC ads often complementing one another.

- **The True Conservative and the Working Conservative.** Candidates often presented themselves as True Conservatives by focusing on abstract policies, while ads by super PACs often portrayed the candidate as the Working Conservative, presenting data and examples to the public. What is the difference? The True Conservative character is ideologically pure and holds to core principles. These hero-like figures emphasize the idea that they could lead the country to a better future, and such candidates are often portrayed as one-upping other candidates by proving they are more conservative. Meanwhile, the Working Conservative is a pragmatist who focuses on political successes and strong successful policies.
- **The Flawed Conservative.** This figure stands in contrast to the True and Working Conservatives. While their goals may be lofty and policy efforts may seem ideal, in reality they are not as perfect as they like

to make themselves out to be. Flawed conservatives were portrayed through their seemingly non-conservative policy positions or their supposed lack of political knowledge all together.

- **The Saint and the Traitor.** No political campaign is complete without moral grandstanding. Like the True Conservative, the Saint is a moral figure. However the morality of the Saint comes from good deeds and empathy, rather than conservative values. The Saint is an overwhelmingly positive figure, usually appearing in a candidate's own ads. By contrast, PACS might describe opponents as **The Traitor** – not just flawed, but not a real conservative at all. As portrayed in ads, Traitors may claim to hold values but are quick to turn against them, may have liberal values, and are even occasionally willing to compromise. While the Saint — the most pure of all the characters — was primarily used by candidates, the most impure character, the traitor, was most often presented in ads sponsored by Super PACs.

The contrasts among characters and the sponsors of the ads highlight the “alter-ego” aspects of super PAC advertisements. The more positive portrayals are used by candidates and the more negative by super PACs.

The Future of Messaging

This typology offers a framework for understanding how candidates and their supporters engage with the public. Understanding these advertising portrayals of characters and who uses which ones reveals what political figures and major political spenders want the public to see on television. Just as importantly, understanding these tropes can help researchers untangle the motivations of funders behind these messages.

Although this research project focused on the 2012 Republican primary, these advertising characters will likely reappear in future elections, and there may very well be similar processes unfolding in Democratic campaigns. Additionally, while this research by no means proves the existence of coordination between candidates and super PACs, it does show that these candidate-specific super PACs have some sort of understanding of what candidates want and need to present to the public. And PAC funders also understand what themes — the candidate can and cannot present through his or her own campaign. By complementing what the candidates' public campaigns can do through secretly funded ads that do other helpful things, the Super PAC funders have figured out how best to support their preferred candidate without public visibility.

Read more in Nathan Katz, “Impression Management, Super PACs, and the 2012 Republican Primary” *Symbolic Interaction* 30, no. 2 (2016): 175-95.