

Can you buy a president?

Politics after the Tillman Act

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Abstract

Motivated by the 2010 Citizens United ruling and the subsequent birth of “Super PACs”, this paper uses independent expenditures data from the Federal Elections Commission, in conjunction with presidential polling data to analyze the 2012 presidential campaign. Using R, and the packages `XML`, `ggplot2`, `plyr`, `lubridate`, `knitr`, `forecast`, and `zoo`, we scrape data from these sources and analyze them in order to highlight interesting trends in campaign spending. Furthermore, we correlate these trends in spending over time to the changes in the polls. Ultimately, we did not find a clear and direct relationship between increases in spending and changes in public support. However, our analysis does provide evidence for some commonly held views of the candidate’s spending habits and geographical areas of strength and weakness.

1 Introduction

A Political Action Committee (PAC) is defined as any organization that seeks to influence the outcome of an election or policy decision through financial donations. Until recently, there have been strict regulations in place limiting the amount of money that individuals and corporations could donate to PACs.

In 2010, the United States Supreme Court released its decision on *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*. The decision found that it is a violation of the constitutional right to free speech for limits to be placed on money spent by corporations and labor unions to support or oppose political candidates. For the first time since the passage of the Tillman Act in 1907, corporations and unions could spend unlimited amounts of their own money on the presidential election. Such power led to the coining of the term Super PAC, as well as a cloud of uncertainty as to what effect such money could have on the election outcome. Three of the largest Super PACs, American Crossroads, Restore our Future, and Priorities USA Action, spent over \$305M in the 2012 election cycle alone. In 2008, PACs spent over \$151M on the presidential election (not including primaries), or approximately \$0.50 per US citizen. In 2012, PACs and Super PACs spent over \$560M, or approximately \$1.78 per US citizen. With this 350% increase in spending the fear is that a group of individuals or corporations can buy a president.

In this report, we analyze independent expenditures filings from the Federal Election Commission in an attempt to determine the effect of this spending on the 2012 election. We subset these expenditures to analyze only those which were filed after the Republican primary, so that we can focus on those which benefit President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney. We also retrieve data from the NationalPolls.com database of polling results to quantify the effect of this spending. The results of our analysis suggest that the spending may have had a measurable impact on public opinion, but external factors, such as the presidential debates, had much stronger impacts.

2 Data

We are primarily working with two data sources to complete our analysis: independent expenditures (PAC) data and polling data. The Federal Election Commission keeps track of the PAC spending filings and makes the information publicly available. The polling data comes from NationalPolls.com, a site which aggregates national and state polls from multiple polling companies. We are primarily working with the fields `spe_nam`, `exp_amo`, `exp_dat`, and `pur` from the spending data. These provide us with information on the organization filing the expense, the amount, the date, and the purpose of the expense. We also make extensive use of our created field `'beneful_can'`, which describes the candidate benefiting from the expense. A description of the fields used most in the spending data set is provided in Table 1 and a description of the fields used in the polling data set is provided in Table 2. A full description of all fields available from the FEC and NationalPolls.com is available in our supplementary materials.

The majority of the data cleaning had to be performed on the PAC spending data. We made sure all the columns were formatted correctly in regards to data type (dates are date, numbers are

| Tag | Field Name | Description |
|---------------------|-------------------------|--|
| CHARACTER VARIABLES | | |
| can_nam | Candidate Name | Name of candidate for or against whom the expenditure was made. There are 58 unique presidential candidate names in the data set, but they do not identify candidates uniquely. For example, there are eight unique spellings of Mr. Obama’s name. |
| spe_nam | Spender Name | Name of committee, individual or group making expenditure. |
| can_off | Office | Office Sought by Candidate - H=House, S=Senate, P=President. |
| sup_opp | Support or Oppose | Describes whether the expenditure was made to support or oppose the candidate - S=Support, O=Oppose. |
| pur | Purpose of expenditure | Description of the expenditure, e.g. television or radio ad. |
| pay | name of payee | Name of the person or vendor or other entity receiving this payment. |
| CURRENCY VARIABLES | | |
| exp_amo | Expenditure Amount | Dollar amount of specific expenditure. Min: \$0.00 Max: \$17661251.08 Mean: \$11306.42 Median: \$26.61 |
| DATE VARIABLES | | |
| exp_dat | Expenditure date | Date of specific Expenditure MM/DD/YYYY. |
| DERIVED VARIABLES | | |
| bucket | Category of expenditure | Low level categories detailing what the expenditure was for. Examples include television, internet, and radio ads. |
| bucket2 | High level category | High level categories detailing what the expenditure was for. Examples include ads, transport, and swag. |
| oflag | Obama flag | Flag indicating if this record is associated with Obama or Romney - 1 = Obama, 0 = Romney. |
| beneful_can | Benefitting candidate | Name of candidate that benefits from the expenditure. For example, a record with sup_opp = “oppose” and can_nam = “Romney” will benefit Mr. Obama. |

Table 1: Description of spending data fields.

numeric, etc.) before cleaning and reformatting the data more extensively.

One challenge we faced was that the purpose of independent expenditures column is a free text field on the FEC reporting form. For example, the Conservative Super PAC Americans for Prosperity tended to use verbose descriptions of the spending purpose. An entry from mid-August read “oppose advertising-tv production (voted for).” This description lists whether it was an ad in support or opposition, that it was a television ad, and the name of the ad. In contrast, the anti-abortion Women Speak Out PAC preferred short descriptions, such as “ads” for their early-October

| Tag | Field Name | Description |
|---------------------|------------------------|--|
| CHARACTER VARIABLES | | |
| Pollster | Polling Company | Company that conducted the poll. |
| State/US | State | State poll was conducted of. If national poll, then value is “National”. |
| DATE VARIABLES | | |
| Date | Poll Date | Range of dates that the poll was being conducted. |
| NUMERIC VARIABLES | | |
| Obama | Support for Mr. Obama | Integer rounded percent of support in the poll. |
| Romney | Support for Mr. Romney | Integer rounded percent of support in the poll. |

Table 2: Description of polling data fields.

expense. The result was that when trying to explore what PACs spent the majority of their money on, we were unable to group expenditures together. To solve this issue we searched for matches to patterns in the purpose field. We chose these patterns by looking at the expenditure purposes and manually finding common threads among the purposes. From these patterns we were able to create buckets that each expense fell in to, as well as high level buckets that more generally classified the expenditures. The buckets we chose are:

Ads Advertisement spending, including television, radio, and online

Direct Contact Direct voter contact, such as canvassing

Salary Payments made to staff of the organization

Swag Clothing, signs, and other promotional material

Transport Transportation costs, such as taxis or van rentals

Other All expenses that do not fit into the above categories

An additional complication we faced was with the support/oppose column (**sup_opp**). This column in conjunction with the candidate column are used to indicate which candidate benefits from the expenditure. An example would be if the support/oppose value is “oppose” and the candidate name is “Romney”, then Mr. Obama benefits because the money is being spent to “oppose Romney”. Likewise, if the support/oppose column equals “support” and the candidate name is “Romney”, then Mr. Romney benefits. We solved this by adding a new field which simply stores the candidate that benefits from the particular expense. That is, an opposition advertisement expense entered with a candidate name of Obama will benefit Romney.

The polling data did not require much data cleanup. We split the date range and formatted the end date as a date for our use. We also removed some differences in state naming by the different pollsters. One limitation we faced is that a fairly significant number of polls were excluded from the

NationalPolls.com database. Some new national polling outfits, such as the RAND Corporation, were excluded, as were a large number of online polls, including Google Consumer Surveys. We were unable to find a methodology for the inclusion/exclusion of certain polls, but we suspect that polls without a track record in previous presidential elections were likely to be excluded. As it turns out however, online surveys performed more strongly in the 2012 election than did automated phone surveys or live interviewer surveys according to columnist Nate Silver ¹. Unfortunately, we could not find a better source of polling data and therefore chose to perform our analysis without these online surveys.

3 Findings

Our key findings are summarized in the following sections. We begin by analyzing temporal and categorical trends in spending for Super PACs benefiting each of the candidates. We then take a closer look at the organizations which are spending the most on each side. Next, we analyze changes in the polling data with an emphasis on swing states. We conclude by attempting to correlate these changes to spending changes over time.

Figure 1 displays the spending in each of the six categories by independent organizations benefiting Mr. Obama and Mr. Romney for each week since April 25, 2012. The spending amounts are split by whether the goal was to support or oppose the candidate. There are three markers which signify major events in the campaign: the selection of Representative Paul Ryan as Mr. Romney's vice presidential nominee, the Republican National Convention, the Democratic National Convention, the 47% video, and the debates.

Interesting trends can be observed in advertisement spending, and direct contact. Ads in support of both candidates show increases since the end of July. However, ads in opposition of the candidates were airing well before. You can, however, see an increase in negative ads benefiting Mr. Romney. A noticeable increase in spending on direct contact for Obama is also evident beginning in August, while the organizations benefiting Mr. Romney have maintained consistent spending in negative direct contact beginning in mid-May.

¹Which Polls Fared Best (and Worst) in the 2012 Presidential Race

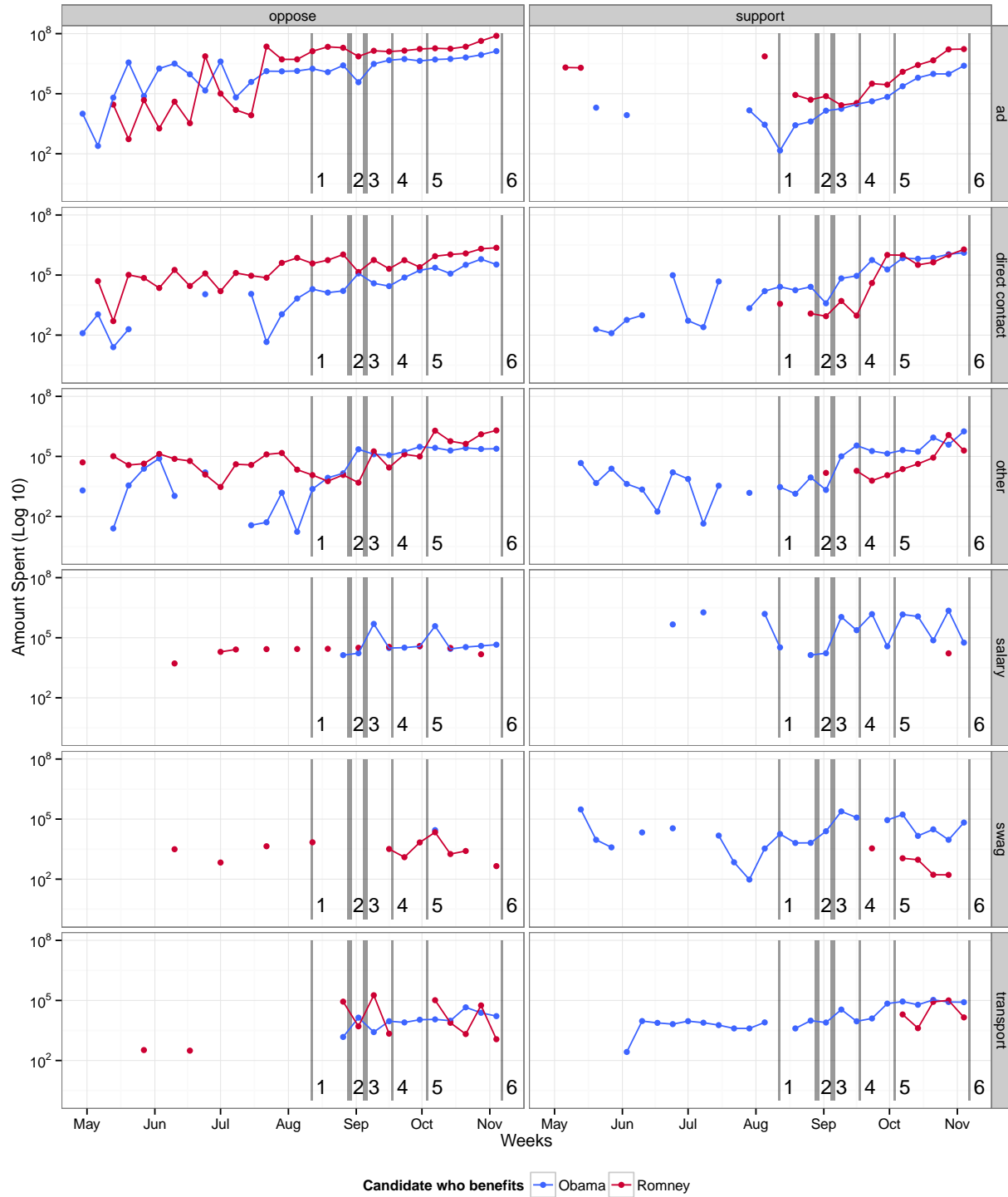


Figure 1: Total Weekly Spending by Super PACs in support or opposition of candidates

Figure 2 displays the total spending by the top independent organizations split by candidate. The cumulative amounts spent are displayed vertically, by the benefiting candidate. The organizations

supporting Mr. Romney have spent significantly more than those supporting Mr. Obama. In fact, two Super PACs supporting Mr. Romney (Restore our Future, Inc and Americans for Prosperity) have spent more than all the organizations supporting Mr. Obama combined.

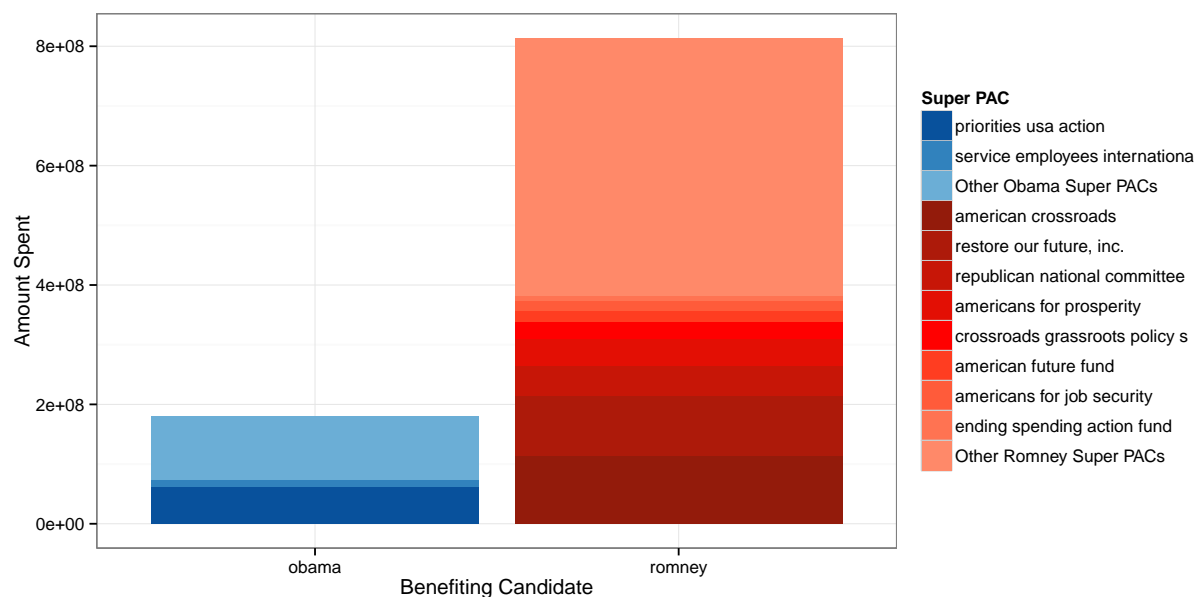


Figure 2: Spending by Super PAC, stacked by candidate

Figure 3 displays the change in polling support for both Mr. Romney and Mr. Obama over time, in 12 swing states. The data includes all polls in the NationalPolls.com database from April 25th to November 6th. Percent support for each candidate is shown for each state with a smoothed line indicating trend. There are five markers which signify major events in the campaign: the selection of Mr. Ryan as Mr. Romney’s vice presidential nominee, the Republican National Convention, the Democratic National Convention, the 47% video and the first presidential debate.

The plots suggest that the reaction to these major campaign events was not consistent state to state. Some states, such as Wisconsin, have produced drastic changes in polling support over time (“bounces”), while others, such as North Carolina, have maintained a consistent margin of support for the two candidates.

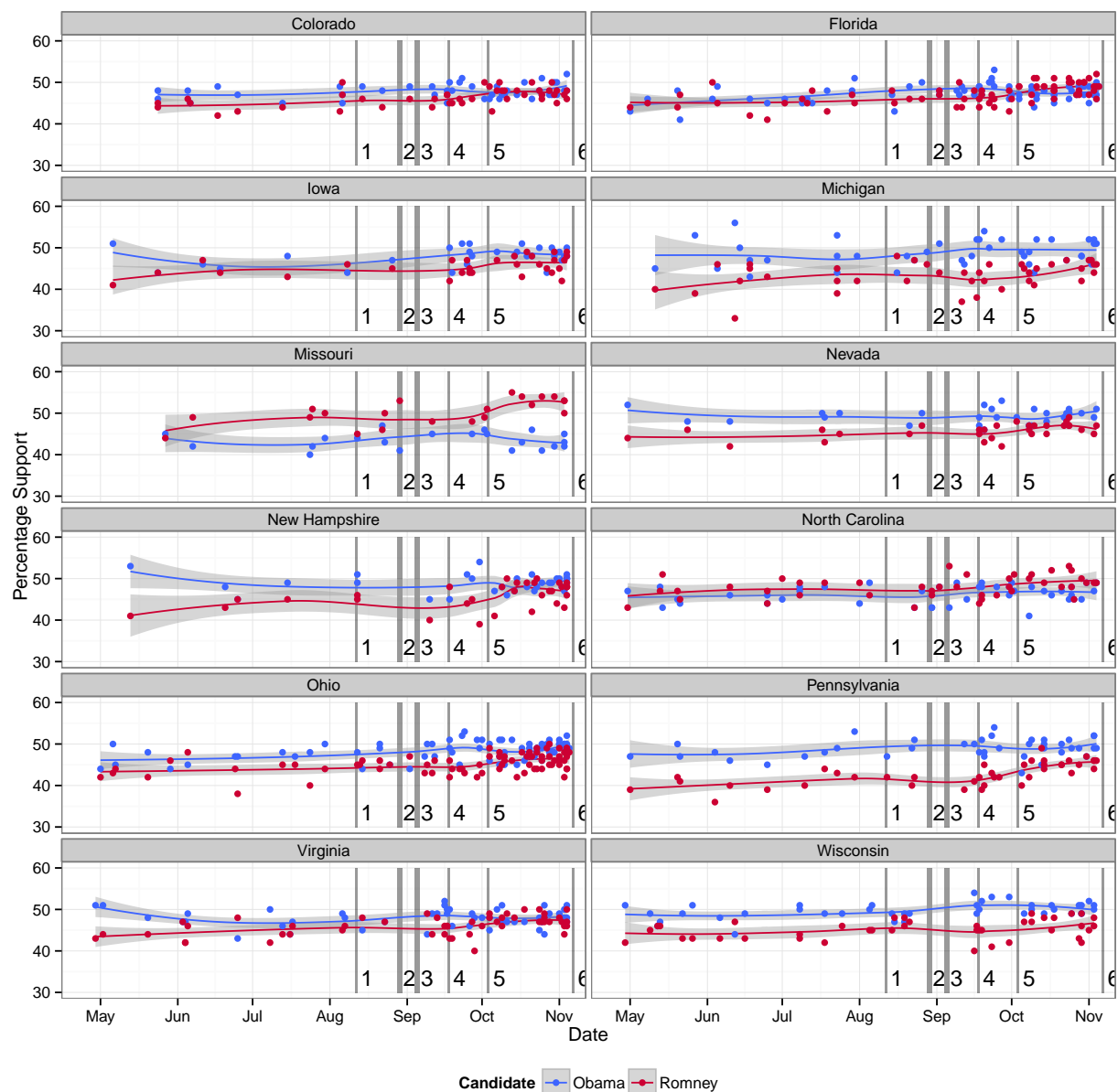


Figure 3: Polling Averages for Obama and Romney by swing state

Figure 4 shows weekly spending by PACs benefiting either candidate. Looking at weekly spending by PACs benefiting Mr. Romney, we can see a sharp increase in spending that occurred during the week of July 18th. We examine at the national and swing state polls to determine if there is any noticeable effect due to these changes in spending in the weeks following.

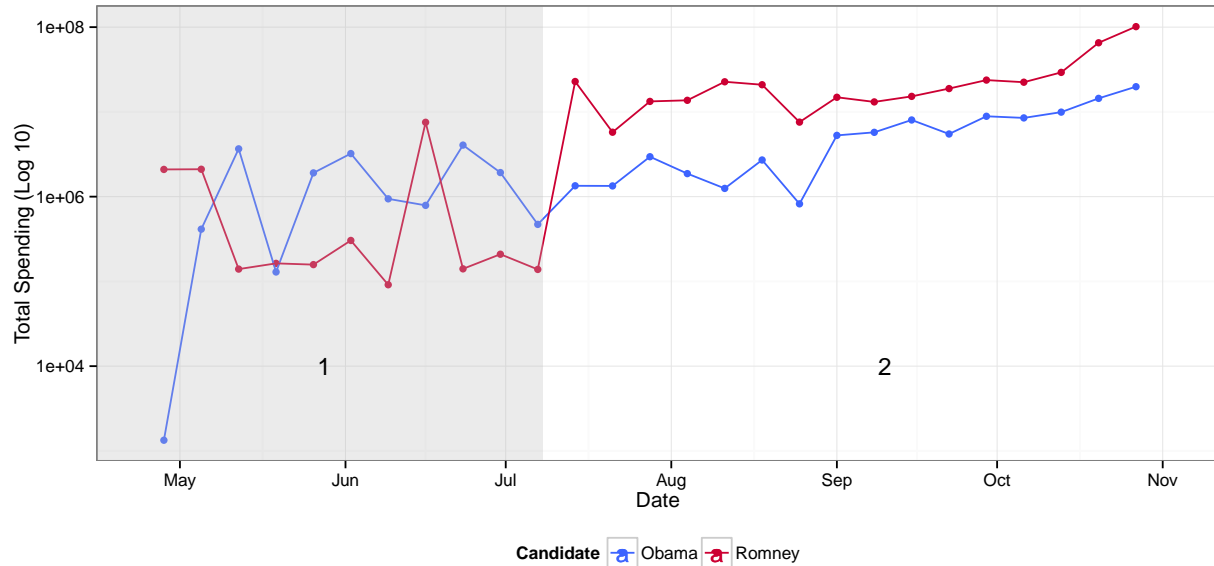


Figure 4: Weekly Spending by Super PACs supporting Obama and Romney

Figure 5 shows the polling margin (Obama - Romney) over time, colored by swing states versus the national polls. It can be seen that Mr. Obama consistently maintained an advantage in swing states relative to his national numbers. A marker is placed on July 18th, corresponding to the sharp increase in spending by PACs supporting Mr. Romney. It does not seem that this spending increase had a measurable effect on the overall trend in the polls at this time.

Note that this plot utilizes exponential smoothing to show the trends in polls over time rather than a LOESS smoother, as we have used previously. When using the LOESS smoother, the future polling numbers were heavily affecting the smoothed trend line, which was undesirable. This is because the LOESS smoother takes points past and future with equal weight into account when showing the trend. However, the exponential smoothing method places importance on past points with exponentially decreasing weights as the points become further from the event, limiting the impact of future polling on the current smoothed trend. We implemented the exponential smoothing method using the `forecast` and `zoo` packages.

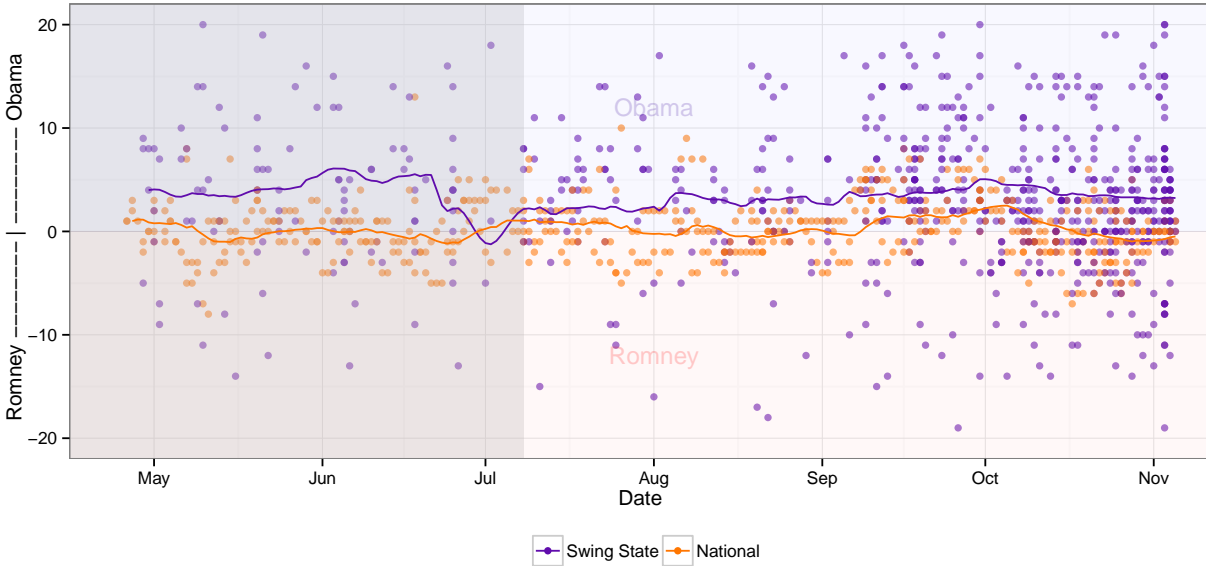


Figure 5: Polling Margin (Obama - Romney) over time, swing states versus national polls

Figure 6 compares the difference in PAC spending by week to the difference in polling between Mr. Romney and Mr. Obama with a one week lag. The points are colored by week and certain weeks are labeled to indicate important events. The goal is to see if there is a relationship between PAC spending and poll results. In PACs supporting both Mr. Obama and Mr. Romney we can see a weak positive relationship between spending and polling.

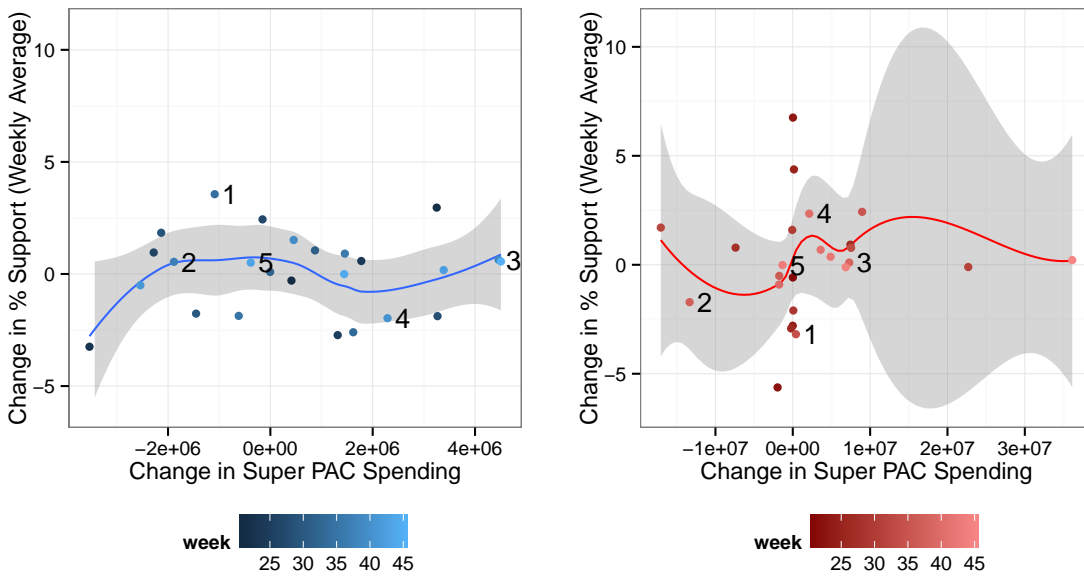


Figure 6: Change in polling over change in spending by candidate

4 Conclusions/Future Work

Ultimately, our findings suggest that while election spending itself was a very significant part of the 2012 elections, it is not clear whether the existence of Super PACs had a measurable impact on the outcome of the presidential race. Instead, the events that garnered large amounts of media coverage, such as the 47% video and the first presidential debate, seem to have had the most noticeable effect on the polling. Furthermore, our analysis did not take into account the spending done by the candidates themselves. It may be that such spending muted the effect of Super PAC spending.

We did discover interesting spending patterns by the Super PACs. Although Super PACs supporting Mr. Romney spent significantly more over the course of the campaign, they spent less than Super PACs supporting Mr. Obama in all but one week from mid-May until mid-July. This is in spite of the fact that the Republican primary was effectively finished by late-April. It will be interesting to see whether large spending begins earlier in the election season in future presidential campaigns.

Our analysis also makes clear that Mr. Obama's polling held up more strongly in the swing states than in the national polling throughout the campaign. This advantage was evident in the election results, as well. According to the current certified vote tally as of December 4th², Mr. Obama won the overall popular vote by 3.6%. But he won Colorado, the state that put him over the 270 electoral votes needed for victory, by 5.4%. This suggests that Mr. Obama could have lost the popular vote by nearly 2% and still have been elected president of the United States.

Another interesting feature of our analysis is the non-uniform effect of the major events in the campaign on the polling. For instance, Mr. Ryan's selection as Mr. Romney's Vice Presidential nominee seemed to have no effect on the polls in his home state of Wisconsin. However, in Missouri, Mr. Ryan's selection coincided with a noticable increase in support for Mr. Romney. A similar trend can be seen with the release of the 47% video. Following the release, Mr. Obama's support seemed to expand in Ohio. But in Colorado, and opposite effect is observed. The only event which seemed to produce a rather uniform change in the polls was the first presidential debate, where Mr. Romney gained support in nearly all swing states.

An extension of this project should take into account spending done by the candidates themselves, in addition to independent expenditures. This would allow for a more informed look at the relative spending difference, and how it may or may not correlate with changes in the polling averages. Another area of exploration would be the purpose field of the independent expenditures data set. Our analysis attempted to categorize spending entries into broad categories, but many of the entries in the database have more specific information. For instance, an ad buy may list the name of the ad, as well as the state the ad is running in. It may also be possible to incorporate another data source in order to link the expenditure entries with ad buys in particular states.

²Wasserman's 2012 National Popular Vote Tracker