

The Influence of PACs and Super PACs on the Democratic Process

1. Are Americans aware of the level of influence super PACs and PACs have on elections?
 - a. Super PACs have only existed since 2010 so there is no generational knowledge of their rules and scope of influence.
 - b. In terms of voter concerns, campaign finance never polls in the top three yet it is the mechanisms of campaign finance which contribute to the inability for bipartisan solution-finding.
 - c. 84% of Americans think money has too much influence in politics but only 30% know what a super PAC is.
2. Are Americans harmed by not understanding the rules of campaign finance?
 - a. There are multiple channels for people, corporations and unions to funnel money into an election, making it difficult to understand. Americans may confuse contributing to a super PAC with contributing directly to a candidate.
 - b. Obfuscating who is behind a message or advertisement is misleading and will only become a larger problem with the prevalence of advertising in widely adopted social media platforms.
 - c. Not understanding campaign finance limits an individual's full participation in our democracy
3. Does the invention of Super PACs erode the original framework of laws put in place to limit campaign influence?
 - a. Super PACs essentially create a limitless arm for a campaign and therefore destroy the framework of rules put in place to govern campaign-specific finances.
 - b. Unlimited giving to super PACs erodes the framework for criminal bribery prosecution
 - c. Allowing corporations to make limitless donations complicates criminal prosecution of individuals.
4. Can we be aware of the motivations of the people who are funding election expenditures via PACs and Super PACs?
 - a. As corporations are allowed to make limitless donations, it's possible that decision makers within the corporation are using the corporate gift as a vehicle for their own political interests.
 - b. While the names of individual donors to a super PAC are listed,
 - c. While the FEC website lists names and employers of PAC and super PAC donors, there's no further biographical context for which to ascertain motivations.

5. Can we make it easier for people to understand who is funding PACs and super PACs?
 - a. PACs and Super PACs must report funding on a monthly basis during election years (every two yrs) but this information portal presents text-only findings and is not easily accessible for someone with a limited understanding of PAC\superPAC terminology.
 - b. Most people don't think to go to the FEC website.
 - c. Corporations can be used as a vehicle for giving (and some "corporations" are created with the sole purposes of masking donor identities).
6. Super PACs are not allowed to coordinate with campaigns, but does this "rule" actually limit anything?
 - a. Outside of paying campaign staff, the line dividing expenditures funded by a campaign vs PAC or Super Pac is non-existent.
 - b. In the absence of a surveillance operation, it's impossible to prove coordination between a super PAC and a campaign.
 - c. Candidates are even allowed to attend events hosted by superPACs.
 - d. Former campaign staff often work for superPACs and vice versa.

Social Media Bots and Political Influence

1. Can bots be identified (in nearly real time) during the browsing experience?
 - a. Bots can be difficult to spot due to a multifaceted ruleset.
 - b. API calling limits would throttle the amount of requests needed to sustain real-time lookup.
 - c. Separate standalone dashboards exist for end users to determine whether an account is "fake" but this requires the user to track back and forth between the dashboard and the social media interface.
2. Do bots harm people?
 - a. Bots limit social media platforms as a venue for political discourse.
 - b. Amplification bots are often used to spread propaganda.
 - c. Bots are falsely given credibility by interacting with other bots (high follow counts)
3. How are we harmed by hashtag inflation?
 - a. Hashtag trends can become newsworthy events on their own which distort or detract from other actual news.
 - b. Limited information literacy keeps average social media users from understanding that trending hashtags are under the influence of bot accounts, so they are lead to believe there is an actual interest in some topic.
 - c. Hashtag trends feature prominently on the landing page of most social media platforms and cable news which cause them to be adopted by real accounts.
4. How can bots corrupt democratic norms and civic society?

- a. Bots can circumnavigate traditional political advertising mechanisms.
 - b. Bots can be inflammatory and encourage conflict.
 - c. Bots can saturate online polling.
- 5. Can bots encroach into the physical world?
 - a. Bot accounts have been created using actual (or composite) identities mined online.
 - b. Using fake identities, bots could be used to frame or defame someone.
 - c. Bot accounts have been used to organize targeted harassment and stage rival demonstrations.
- 6. Could a physical identity verification requirement clean social media platforms from bots?
 - a. Social media platforms would resist this move due to a drop in perceived usage.
 - b. Social media platforms would resist this move due to administrative overhead.
 - c. People could be unintentionally omitted from the platform simply because they don't have access to a verification method.