

Are Super PACs Super-Efficient?  
Independent Expenditures in House Races

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relationships'. Within these coalitions, 'party allies', such as PACs, super PACs, and other organizations, sit outside the core of the formal party leadership and the organizations under their control. Party allies, however, undertake partisan actions just as the inner core of the political party does, and normally support only one party in the two-party system. The support of party allies, however, is not as ironclad as that of the formal party core. Party allies exert less influence on party 'goals, strategies, and tactics', are 'less likely to coordinate' their activity with core party organizations, and do not possess the same authority to act in the name of the party. Nonetheless, party allies often carry out actions, such as financing and advertising, that the party does not have the ability to execute. The party allies are connected to the core by 'extensive networks within and between them'. (Also see Bawn et al., 2012; Koger et al., 2009; Skinner, Masket and Dulio 2013)

Super PACs are not the first example of the purported "outsourcing" of activities traditionally conducted by political parties. Two decades ago, for example, the rise of political consultants was thought to weaken the importance of political parties for candidates. Upon closer examination, however, scholars discovered that political parties actually had consciously brought consultants on board in order to satisfy candidates' needs (Kolodny and Dulio 2003).

Exactly how closely these party allies are integrated into the political party network is a matter of scholarly debate. On the one hand, interest groups 'seek control to enact favorable policy; party leaders may see control as an end in itself'; nonetheless, there is ample evidence that interest groups have become firmly embedded in partisan networks (Skinner, 2005; Skinner,

2007). During election season, interest groups tend to support the candidates of one party only, rather than cross partisan lines (Grossmann and Dominguez, 2009). In an examination of 527 committees, Skinner, Masket and Dulio (2012) analyze the employment histories of staff members to prove that 'through their personnel connections, 527s are far from being fringe groups; they are in a position to facilitate collective action among virtually all key party actors'. Further, they argue that the 527 networks 'mirror the architecture' of the parties to which they are allied. The Republican 527 network is more hierarchical than its Democratic counterpart, in keeping with the organizational style of the GOP itself.

'Super PACs' are now major players in political campaigns for federal office, after a pair of 2010 decisions by the federal courts, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* and *Speechnow.org v. Federal Election Commission*. Donors may make unlimited contributions to super PACs, provided that these 'independent expenditure-only' committees avoid coordination of their activities with candidates or political parties. Nonetheless, super PACs may well find ways to coordinate their activities with allies while staying within the bounds of the law. (Farrar-Myers and Skinner, 2012; on coordination in presidential nomination contests, see Christenson and Smidt 2014). Findings based on expenditure data from 2012 U. S. Senate contests present a mixed picture: Coordination between super PACs and the two major political parties is apparent, but much more so among the Democratic Party and its super PAC allies. The Republican Party and its super PAC associates show much more evidence of acting at cross-purposes. (Scala, 2014).

One may better understand how well party allies facilitate or disrupt their home party's goals by comparing their spending habits to those of national party committees. `Hill committees', or national party congressional campaign committees, are known for the efficiency

strong organization for congressional elections that possessed better methods for making decisions than their opponents, based more strongly on campaign quality and overall competitiveness. Nokken (2003), for instance, argued that party committees put little priority on



## Table 1: Democratic-allied independent-expenditure groups

### The Super Super PACs

In this paper, I examine the spending strategies of every group that made independent expenditures of (a) at least a total of \$1 million, (b) in more than one House races. These criteria intentionally left out independent-expenditure groups that only supported a single candidate, under the assumption that such groups are mere extensions of a candidate's campaign under the guise of an "independent" organization. Instead, this paper focuses on groups that were making choices in spending, allocating expenditures among at least some subset of House races, if not all 435 contests. All told, 40 groups met these criteria. Together, they made independent expenditures on House races totaling \$677.4 million, 94 percent of the \$717.5 million in independent expenditures tallied by the FEC.



Even among these highest-spending organizations, just a few dominated all others. For instance, of the 40 independent-expenditure groups examined here, Democratic-allied organization

## Table 2: Republican-allied independent expenditure groups

The concentration of money among these top-spending groups is similar on the Republican side, albeit to a slightly lesser degree. Of the 16 that spent at least \$1 million, two towered above the rest. Congressional Leadership, formed in 2011 as the conservative counterpart to House Majority PAC and dedicated to the goal of a GOP House majority (FactCheck, 2020), spent more than \$138 m

Three groups – the National Association of Realtors, With Honor, and the UA Union – were non-partisan in their orientation. Combined, they were minor players in independent expenditures, with total spending of \$11 million, or less than 2 percent.

#### Efficiency of independent expenditures

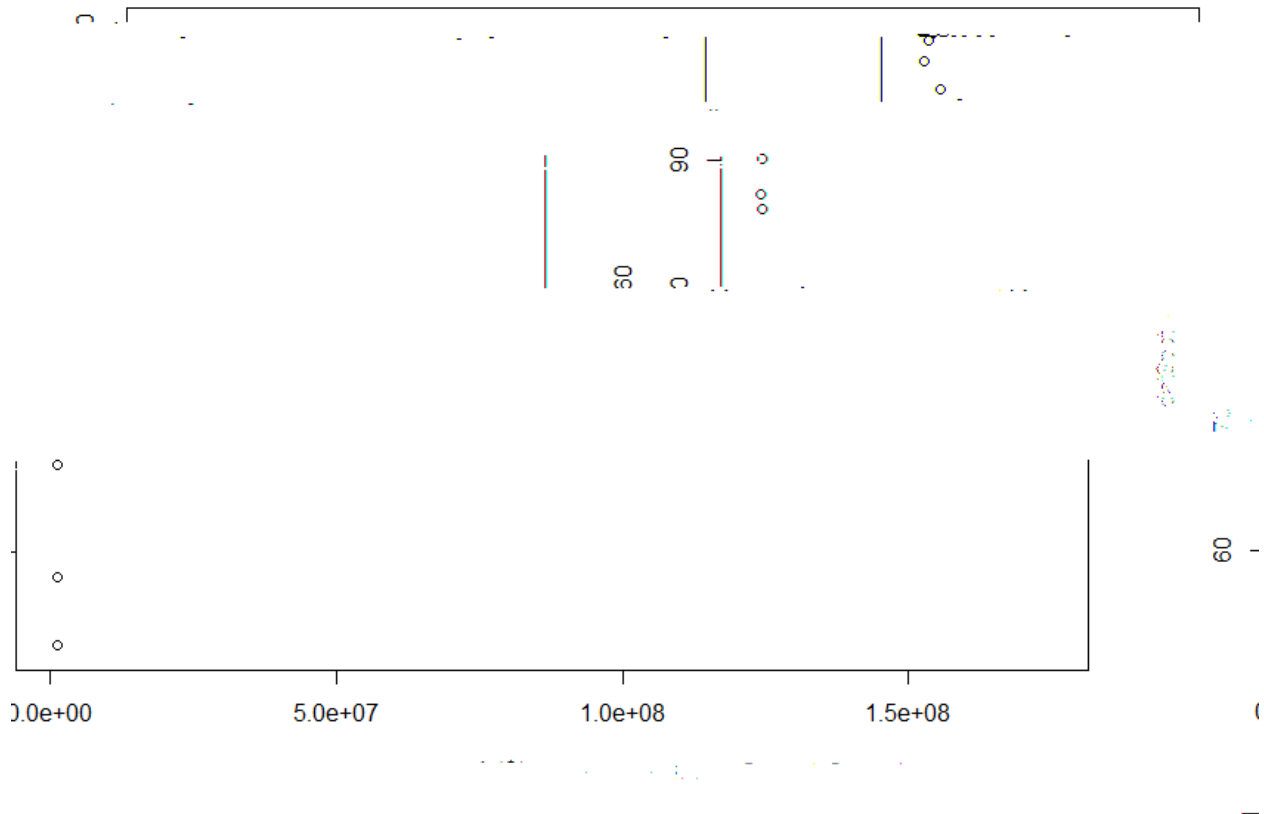
Next, I examined the pattern of expenditures for each of the 40 groups that made independent expenditures, to determine the efficiency of their spending. In other words, how much of a group's spending was focused on the most competitive House contests, versus others that were relatively less competitive? Again, following Glasgow's methodology, I calculated the percentage of each group's expenditures on races that fell within these three tiers of competitiveness. These tiers ranged from the broadest measure of competitiveness to the most stringent measure: (a) contests in which the Democratic candidate received 40 percent to 60 percent of the two-party vote, (b) contests in which the Democratic candidate received 45 percent to 55 percent of the two-party vote, (c) the 25 most marginal districts of all House races.

#### Independent expenditures in competitive races (broadly speaking)

The groups examined here made the great majority of their independent expenditures in competitive races most broadly defined, in which the Democratic candidate carried 40 to 60 percent of the two-party vote. The average portion of total expenditures made in these races was 96 percent, and the median group made the entirety of its expenditures on these races. As one

might suspect, partisan differences in expenditures were slight. The median Democratic group and the median Republican group both made 100 percent of their spending in this broadest category of competitive races. Practically the same was true, in fact, for three-quarters of both Democratic and Republican groups. Only a few groups made considerably less than 90 percent of their expenditures on this category of competitive races. These included the National Rifle Association Political Victory Fund (66.7 percent) and American Liberty (52.9 percent) among Republican groups, and Democratic Majority for Israel's hybrid PAC / super PAC, DMFI (58.1 percent), among Democratic-allied groups. (See Figure 1.)

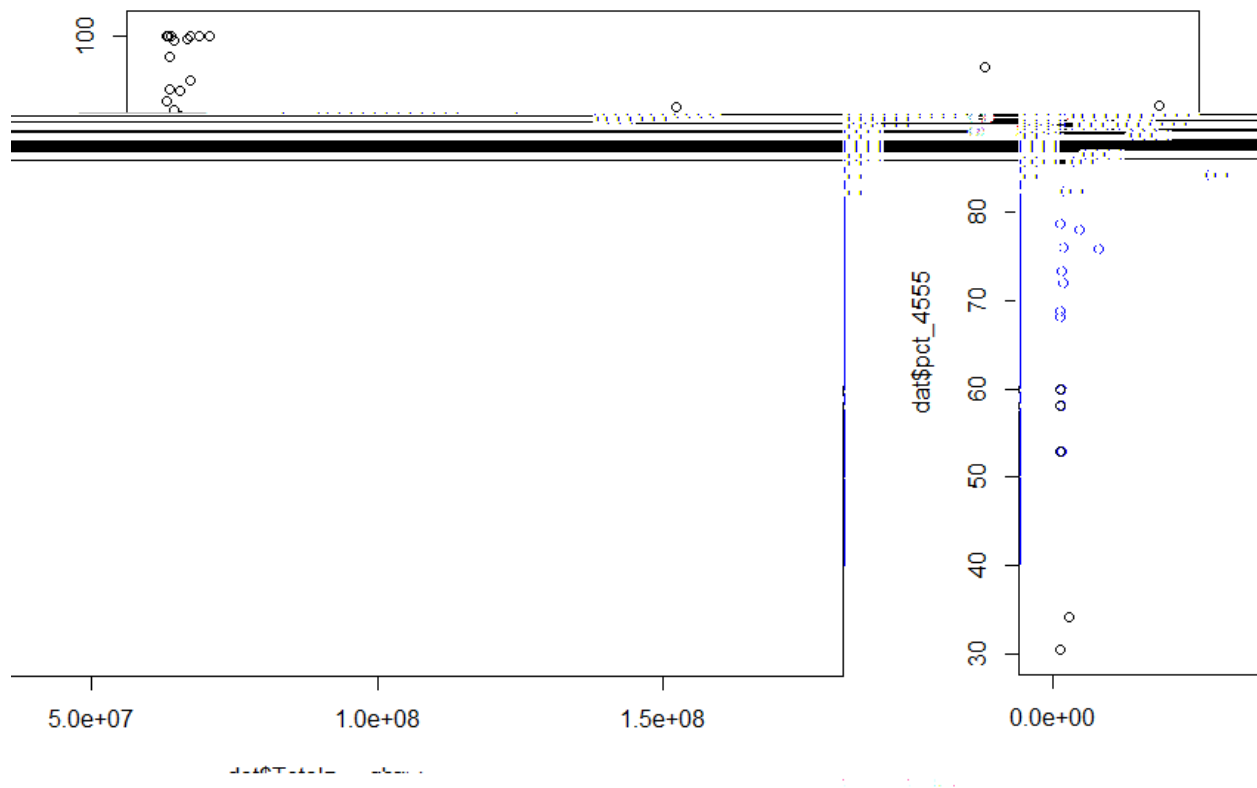
Figure 1: Independent-expenditure group allocations to (broadly) competitive races





expenditures outside of this group of contests, compared to their Democratic-allied peers. While the least efficient Democratic group still spent almost 60 percent of their expenditures in this group of races, the least efficient Republican group (NRA Political Victory) allocated roughly half that much (30.5 percent). The least efficient Republican-allied quartile was less efficient than the same Democratic-allied quartile. That said, only the “tail” of the Republican groups showed dissimilar levels of efficiency. The median Republican group allocated 90 percent of its independent expenditures to this group of competitive House seats, a portion virtually identical to the median Democratic group’s allocation of 92 percent.

Figure 2: Independent-expenditure group allocations to more competitive races



## Independent expenditures in the 25 most competitive House seats

The third, most restrictive tier of competitive House seats was the group of 25 closest contests (again, measured by the Democratic candidate's share of the two-party vote). On average, these groups spent almost one-third of their expenditures on these races; the median group spent 29 percent. The lower quartile of allocations ranged from zero to 19 percent, while the highest quartile allocated anywhere from 44 percent to 87 percent.

Once again, the four giant independent-expenditure groups in House races – the DCCC and House Majority for Democrats, the NRCC and Congressional Leadership Fund for Republicans – pursued similar allocation strategies of above-

Figure 3: Independent-expenditure group allocations to 25 most competitive races

### Conclusions and next steps

How did multicandidate super PACs change the campaign environment in 2020 House races? First and foremost, I note the great consolidation and centralization of independent-expenditure resources in the hands of just a couple organizations (Congressional Leadership, House Majority) outside the Hill committees. Second, these twin giants executed spending strategies





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