

**Independent Expenditures in Congressional Primaries after *Citizens United*:
Implications for Interest Groups, Incumbents, and Political Parties**

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Pre-publication version

Final version published in *Interest Groups & Advocacy*

Int Groups Adv advance online publication, February 9, 2016; doi:10.1057/iga.2016.1

<http://www.palgrave-journals.com/iga/journal/vaop/ncurrent/index.html>

ABSTRACT: This article examines how *Citizens United* affected the balance of power among ‘outside’ groups in congressional primaries through 2014. Contrary to predictions of massive independent expenditures (IEs) by large corporations, the article documents: (1) an increase in the number and diversity of IE groups together with a decreased concentration of effort among them; (2) a relative decrease in the power of factional outsiders; (3) the emergence of ephemeral ‘in-and-out’ groups; and (4) among these, the emergence of single-candidate PACs, with the most significant growth being among those allied with incumbent office holders. The article also speaks to some of the recent literature on political parties. The Super PACs most closely allied with the congressional party leaders, despite unlimited contributions, continued to choose not to invest in contested primaries, raising doubts about recent arguments to the effect that unlimited contributions to the parties would be likely to make a substantial difference in determining who runs under the party’s label in a general election.

KEYWORDS: Campaign Finance, Interest Groups, Political Parties, Primary Elections, Independent Expenditures, Political Action Committees, Campaign Contributions

**Independent Expenditures in Congressional Primaries after *Citizens United*:
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Congressional primary elections and the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision have each been blamed for much of what is allegedly wrong with American politics. For example, some studies have argued that primaries and gerrymandering each has helped increase the level of polarization in Congress (Galston and Nivola, 2006; Hacker and Pierson, 2005; Levendusky, 2009). Others, such as Mann (2006) and Theriault (2008) have also argued that campaign finance laws influence the supposedly polarizing effects of primaries. While these works preceded the *Citizens United* decision, some journalists have contended that the decision exacerbated campaign finance's polarizing impact during the primaries (Blumenthal, 2013).

These arguments alone suggest good reasons for a focus on primaries, but there is a more basic consideration that stems from claims about an imbalance between political parties and advocacy groups. Several recent books and articles have proposed removing limits on contributions to the political parties as well as on the parties' support for candidates. One central claim is that current laws about money and politics encourage polarization by favoring policy-demanding interest groups over political parties. While the authors all see the phenomenon as pre-dating *Citizens United*, they also view the decision as heightening its effects. They predict that loosening restrictions on party contributions would moderate legislative politics because parties tend to concentrate on competitive races in which the need to appeal to swing voters produces more moderate candidates (La Raja and Schaffner, 2015; Persily, 2015; Rauch, 2015.)

We see two problems with this line of reasoning. First, the relationship between district-level competition and policy moderation is by no means settled (Ansolabehere, *et al.*, 2001; Brunell and Grofman 2008). The second is more central to this article. If one anticipates a relationship between party contribution regulations and moderation, then one ought to see traces of its impact during the candidate-selection stage of the process. But the parties do not typically invest their own money in competitive primaries. If the party money is used merely to support candidates who run in competitive general elections, then it is not clear that the rules limiting party contributions have an independent effect on policy moderation.

Accordingly, this article will focus on primaries, with an emphasis on independent spending – the part of the system changed most directly by *Citizens United*. To preview the conclusions: the independent spending that mushroomed in the elections just before *Citizens United* did so by using a fundraising technology and nationalized media context that favored polarized policy goals. By 2014 – the third set of primaries after the Court’s decision – the forces of policy moderation were playing a stronger role during Republican primaries. We should not, however, equate moderation with party control. What happened in 2014 did not support a *party-finance* based thesis, although personal party networks may well have been engaged. Only one multi-candidate organization played a major role in the shift, with much of the rest of the difference flowing from single-candidate PACs that supported incumbents. The implications of this phenomenon could be profound, but not in the ways being predicted.

PARTICIPATION THEORY AND PRIMARY ELECTION SPENDING

Before we examine what actually happened, however, we begin with a theoretical framework to set out our expectations. In the months after *Citizens United*, the decision’s critics

predicted that it would lead to massive independent expenditures by large, for-profit corporations. The decision's supporters, in contrast, expected it to shift the balance toward insurgent outsiders. In contrast, the political science literature on participation suggested that neither outcome was likely.

Previous studies of the behavior of donors and independent spenders have concluded that potential participants are more likely to become engaged in politics if: (1) they have the needed resources (whether money, knowledge or time); (2) their understanding of the costs and benefits of participating motivates them to act; and (3) they are mobilized, or asked to participate by others (Rosentone and Hansen, 1993; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; Schlozman, Verba and Brady, 2012). This theoretical structure was devised to explain participation by individuals, but it also helps one to understand the resources and strategies of organizations. Before *Citizens United*, all contributions to organizations making IEs had to be in amounts of \$5,000 or less. The financial resources anyone could bring to bear on any one race were thus constrained by law. In candidates' campaigns, limiting what any one donor may give heightens the importance of bundlers who reach out to networks of supporters. Among interest groups, the limits similarly increase the value of resources that mobilize and focus the attention of large numbers of donors. In the early years under the Federal Election Campaign Act, this may have worked to the benefit of traditional interest groups. But by the late 1990s or 2000s, Boatright (2013) argues, internet fundraising and the nationalization of campaign media coverage benefitted ideologically motivated, nationalized organizations such as MoveOn.org on the left and the Club for Growth on the right. Accordingly, these groups played an outsized role in encouraging ideological primary battles during the early 2000s.

Citizens United (and related decisions) changed the legal context for wealthy donors or independent spenders again. Nevertheless, changes in legal rules do not automatically increase all potential donors' motivations equally, nor do they eliminate the costs or risks of participating. For that reason we agree with Werner (2011) that it was unrealistic to expect for-profit, publicly held corporations to increase their independent spending even after a change in the law let them do so. Most publicly traded corporations are access-seekers who have more to lose than gain if they attack an incumbent or potential incumbent. If corporations can attack while avoiding disclosure, that would reduce risk but would not increase motivation. After all, this is not the first time in recent history when corporations were able to put unlimited money into politics. During the 'soft money' era before the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA) of 2002, corporations could give unlimited contributions to the 'soft money' accounts of the national political parties. Boatright *et al.* (2003) analyzed the effects of BCRA on organizations that once gave soft money to the political parties. Some sought to stay engaged in politics through vehicles that allowed unlimited spending; others accepted the new contribution limits. These two options suggested to the authors that a distinction could be made between money that was '*pulled*' into politics as opposed to money that was '*pushed*'. Money was pulled into the system when a powerful office holder or agent asked for a contribution and the donor felt an obligation to contribute in order to stay in the office holder's good graces. Most large, publicly held corporations that made soft money contributions fit this latter category. These corporations were not eager to get around BCRA, nor should we have expected them to take advantage of *Citizens United*.

The situation was different for ideological or issue organizations and for politically motivated, wealthy individuals. These were the participants the authors saw as pushing their money into politics. Issue and ideological organizations exist for the singular purpose of

influencing politics and policy; politically or ideologically motivated wealthy individuals may be less singular, but they are pushing their money into the system because they care about the outcome. Many were *not* major soft money donors to the parties, some were making independent expenditures before BCRA, and many were involved in ‘527’ organizations after BCRA (Weissman and Ryan, 2006; Weissman and Ryan 2007). Before *Citizens United*, these organizations and individuals could help organizations pay for issue ads. After *Citizens United* they could support express advocacy, and they would become obvious targets of opportunity for IE organizations to mobilize. At the same time, the priorities of particularly large donors could influence the activities of newly formed IE groups; it is difficult to make ideological claims about such individuals (Page, Bartels, and Seawright, 2013; West, 2014), but some have recently argued that Super PAC donors have different expectations of groups than do traditional large donors (Bauer, 2015).

We can only observe the choices of donors indirectly. We can, however, directly observe the consequences of this shift through an analysis of the choices of groups. Following the older distinction between pushed and pulled money, we expected ideological and issue groups to raise more money. But we also wondered whether elected officials, like those who brought major soft money donors into the system before BCRA, might be handed a new lever to bring back more of the same through independent spending committees clearly identified with those elected officials. While we find it difficult to think that multi-candidate IE organizations can pressure mega-donors in the same way as a party leader before BCRA could pressure a corporate lobbyist, we wondered whether there might be some analogies, to be discussed later.

Before we can analyze organizations, we first must establish an historical context. We therefore begin the next section with a brief review of campaign spending in primaries over time.

Following these discussions of what changed before *Citizens United*, we explore what we see as three of the most noticeable changes since: (1) an increase in the number of independent spending organizations, together with a decrease in their focused concentration of effort; (2) changes in the types of groups that wield power in congressional primaries; and (3) the emergence of single-candidate PACs, with the most significant growth being among those allied with incumbent office holders.

CHANGES IN CONGRESSIONAL PRIMARIES

Congressional primaries changed substantially during the decade preceding *Citizens United*. Building on prior research by Boatright (2013) covering 1970-2010, we can identify three distinct periods of interest group engagement in primary elections over this relatively short time: one, preceding 2006, when direct interest group contributions and spending was rare; a second, from 2006 through 2010, when independent expenditures by a handful of ideological groups piggy-backed on the groups' targeted efforts to assist candidates in their own fundraising; and a third, beginning in 2010 and maturing in 2012 and 2014, during which larger amounts of independent spending by a broader set of organizations became less connected to candidate fundraising .

We consider these periods by looking first at changes in fundraising by the candidates. For simplicity we focus on same-party challengers to incumbents. Scholars conventionally divide congressional primaries into three types – those that feature an incumbent (incumbent primaries), those whose victor expects to face an incumbent in the general election (challenger primaries), and those that take place in a district where the incumbent is not seeking reelection (open seat primaries). If substantial money is spent in an open seat or challenger primary, be it by a

candidate or by outside groups, it is hard to disentangle the potential for partisan gain from other concerns. On the other hand, if substantial money is spent in an incumbent primary, this suggests that a concern other than partisanship is likely to be driving the spending, since the party already holds the seat. Accordingly, since we are setting a baseline to describe the landscape before primary IEs, it is best to begin with incumbent primaries. In these, it is safe to assume that the incumbents in almost all cases are ‘insiders’, while the challengers are de facto outsiders or insurgents.

In *Getting Primaried*, Boatright concluded that primary challenges are no more common than they ever have been. Nevertheless, the fact that primary challenges attract more attention is significant. In every election year during the first decade of the 2000s, ideological interest groups bundled contributions and (less often) engaged in independent spending in support of a small number of primary challengers. The goal was to nationalize these campaigns and present them as a referendum on the alleged moderation of the incumbents. The campaigns did not necessarily yield victory, but they did create a perception that an incumbent could face high costs for straying from ideological orthodoxy. In order to create this impression, however, there had to be a *de facto* concentration of resources behind a small number of campaigns. That is, groups had to have effectively communicated what they were doing to other groups and to their own members – with one group (or a few) typically playing the lead in signaling which candidates to support. This dovetailed with changes in technology that enabled ‘multi-issue’ groups such as MoveOn.org or the Club for Growth to use the internet to communicate with their members and recruit new ones.

The fingerprints of these groups were easy to spot; primaries are usually low-cost affairs that draw little attention from outside of the states or districts in which they are happening. When

they did raise out-of-state or interest group money, this was a clear sign that the campaigns had been nationalized. In the period from 1992 through 2010, the average competitive primary challenger¹ raised less than one-fifth of his or her money from small contributors, from donors who resided outside of his or her state, or from PACs. But a few candidates in each year were able to break the mold, by raising substantially more of their money in small contributions and out-of-state contributions (Gimpel, Lee, and Kaminski, 2006; Bonica, 2011).

These financial distinctions among the sources of challengers' funds make intuitive sense. Each category suggests that some electoral force other than the candidate has taken an interest in the campaign. PACs, for example, may contribute no more than \$5,000 to a candidate in any election cycle. Any instance in which a primary challenger receives more than a handful of PAC contributions provides *prima facie* evidence of communication or cooperation among groups. Similarly, the literature on individual donors has suggested that small contributions tend to flow to high-profile candidates who are either being recommended or recognized for their ideological or issue appeal by an intermediary mobilizer (Johnson, 2010; Malbin, 2013). Finally, out-of-state contributions can be encouraged by groups that bundle contributions or otherwise single out candidates and communicate about these candidates to their members.

Table 1 shows the changes of concern here. Before 2004, there were relatively few primary challenges. Those challengers who emerged generally received little support from groups or from individual donors. In the rare cases where there was such support, it was provided to a tiny number of candidates facing weak incumbent opponents.² In 2006-2008, the number of challengers began to climb, with a small but relatively consistent number of candidates who did well in each of the fundraising categories above. There was also substantial overlap across

categories – that is, the candidates who raised large amounts in small contributions were the same ones who raised large amounts from out-of-state donors.

[Table 1 about here]

What is noteworthy about the next three election years (2010-2014) is that even though there was nearly a doubling in the number of challenges to incumbents, there was not a corresponding increase in the number with strong financial support from the sources we have been describing. That is, there were more challenges, but very few of these challengers raised much. This suggests that ideological groups that had bundled smaller contributions so successfully in earlier years have not seen their roles grow in the past three elections. In the Senate there was a slight increase in the number of well-funded challengers, but the increase was not significant enough to suggest anything other than idiosyncratic reasons.

Each of the categories discussed so far – PACs, small donors and out-of-state donors – pertain to money raised by the candidates. That is because there was very little other money in primary campaigns before 2006. Since then there has been a marked increase in the number of challengers who benefitted from independent expenditures. We take this matter up next.

CHANGES IN INTEREST GROUP ACTIVITY IN PRIMARIES

In the decade preceding *Citizens United*, an organization that wanted to boost the campaigns of a promising challenger would have to find and mobilize small donors and out-of-state donors. If it wanted to spend money independently, it would have to rely on contributions of \$5,000 or less to raise the money. Few organizations had the infrastructure to follow this path. After *Citizens United* and another key court decision, groups could raise unlimited contributions for independent spending. As a result, spending grew and the organizations became more

diverse. Because sorting out organizations is less complicated than sorting the candidates in challenger and open-seat primaries, this section of the article will consider the shifting balance of power among organizations that make independent expenditures (IEs) in all congressional primary elections.³

INDEPENDENT SPENDERS BEFORE AND AFTER *CITIZENS UNITED*

The shift from limited to unlimited money in IEs took place in two legal steps. First, the Supreme Court held in January 2010 in *Citizens United v. FEC* that corporations have a constitutional right to make unlimited IEs. Second, the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia ruled three months later (in *SpeechNow.org v. FEC*) that individuals and organizations could make unlimited contributions to other organizations which only made independent expenditures. Taken together, these decisions set the framework for a clear before-and-after test. In elections before these two decisions, organizations making IEs had to do so with contribution-limited funds. The election of 2010 was a bridging or hybrid election. Because *SpeechNow* was not decided until the end of March, independent spending stayed lower during the primaries and then picked up for the general elections. The elections of 2012 and 2014 were the first in which nonparty groups could receive large contributions to be used for direct advocacy for the full cycle. A brief summary table will highlight the impact.

[Table 2 about here]

As is obvious from Table 2, expenditures by the formal political party committees have held fairly steady since 2006 while ‘non-party’ spending accelerated in 2012. But the tables refer to ‘non-party’ committees as if the term has a clear meaning. In reality, it is misleading to divide spenders into only these two camps. Three of the four largest ‘non-party’ organizations in 2012 and 2014 were Senate Majority PAC, House Majority PAC and American Crossroads /

Crossroads GPS, each of which had close personal ties to the House and Senate party leaderships. The three organizations accounted for more than \$111 million in general election spending in 2014. Because of their ties to the leaders, it seems questionable to think of them as belonging in the same basket as the issue organizations typically considered by ‘party network’ scholars as making up the Republican or Democratic parties’ networks. If one were to think of their money as being party (or quasi-party) money rather than non-party, the general election party column would be larger than the non-party column.

While it is important both to rethink the concept of ‘non-party’ actors and to refine the scholarly notion of ‘party networks’, neither is crucial to a study of primaries. Less than 1% of Crossroads’ independent spending in 2012-2014 was in the primaries. The percentages were higher for the House and Senate Majority PACs (8% and 20% respectively), but almost all of that went into uncontested primaries to affect the general election. For this study, we focus on the organizations that tried to influence the outcomes of contested primaries.

WHO IS MAKING IEs IN PRIMARIES?

As should be expected, the number of organizations making IEs has gone up since 2006. In 2006, there were 91 non-party organizations making IEs in the primaries. The numbers held steady at 85 in 2008 followed by 62 in 2010. After *Citizens United*, the number of organizations active in the primaries more than doubled to 145 in 2012, with more growth to 183 in 2014. (For the five full election cycles of 2006-2014, the numbers of organizations making IEs were 183, 182, 228, 342 and 348.) And the rate of increase in money was even faster, with the bulk concentrated among only a few groups.

Table 3 gives some basic information about the organizations responsible for two-thirds of the independent spending in each of the five primary elections from 2006 through 2014. The

organizations are listed in order of their primary election IEs (second column from the left). In each election cycle, fewer than 10% of the active organizations made two-thirds of the IEs.

[Table 3 about here]

While concentration has remained a consistent factor, there clearly has been an increase in the number of groups, and in the amount the top groups spend, along with a change in the groups' characteristics. The Club for Growth was the top spending organization in both 2006 and 2008 – the last two elections in which IEs had to be financed through limited contributions. It and another one of the top groups, MoveOn.org (liberal) excelled at raising hard money from national constituencies with online fundraising tools, often using the tools to bundle contributions for 'true' conservatives (Club for Growth) or progressives (MoveOn) (Boatright, 2013: 195-202; also see Karpf, 2012). EMILY's list used many of the same bundling tools during these years but has been more of a mainstream party ally. The remaining organizations active in 2006 and 2008 were traditional interest groups and labor unions using IEs to redouble long-standing contribution strategies.

The 2010 election was a transition, as noted earlier. Few organizations had the infrastructure to take advantage quickly of the *SpeechNow* decision. The major labor unions were exceptions, since the larger ones were accustomed to transferring their political money across multiple entities. It was not difficult for their legal staffs to set up non-profit entities to spend money under the new guidelines, or to use treasury money. Unions did so in their effort to defeat Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas in her primary election, and some other progressive groups joined them. No other groups were nearly as prepared to spend money in primaries in that year.

The primary elections of 2012 and 2014 were the breakthrough years for IEs funded by groups that had formed to take advantage of *Citizens United* by accepting unlimited

contributions. With the increased money and legal room to maneuver came a greater diversity of structural formats and political goals. Some familiar organizations remained important in 2010 and 2012 by adopting new legal structures (Club for Growth, League of Conservation Voters and EMILY's List). But there were also new players, including quasi-party organizations (Senate and House Majority PACs); new factional organizations challenging the Republican leadership (Freedomworks and Senate Conservatives Action Fund); organizations promoting the ideological vision of single major funders (Liberty for All and Ending Spending); non-partisan organizations focused on governmental process (Campaign for Primary Accountability and Mayday PAC); and several Super PACs formed for the purpose of supporting only one candidate (Texas Conservatives, Mississippi Conservatives, and Put Alaska First). Removing the prohibition on corporate spending also made it possible for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to become a major player in the 2014 primaries (see below).

One final group type merits discussion in this section – what we shall refer to as ‘in-and-out groups.’ Twelve of the top fifteen IE organizations in 2014 had made IEs in past years, but this low ratio of newcomers is not what one sees further down the spending scale. We will refer to an organization as being ongoing if it made IEs in the primaries or general election in 2012 and 2014.

- Of the 347 organizations making IEs during the full 2014 cycle, only 126 did so during a previous cycle.⁴ The remaining organizations were new in 2014.
- On the opposite side of the ledger, only 126 of the 344 organizations making IEs in 2012 did so again in 2014. The remaining 218 seem to have gone out of business – or at least stopped making IEs.

- To put these two numbers together: 439 organizations made IEs in one of the past two elections; only 126 did so in both elections. Many of them simply closed their doors (or post office boxes). They were addresses of convenience that had no other business than to come into one election cycle and take aim at their opponents.

The ephemeral quality of these in-and-out groups has a clear effect on transparency. The growing role of non-profit organizations after *Citizens United* is well known (see Tokaji and Strause, 2014). These organizations are not required under current law to disclose the sources of their political funds to the Federal Election Commission or Internal Revenue Service. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, 31% of non-party IE spending in 2014 came from groups that did not disclose their funding sources (Center for Responsive Politics, 2015). The prevalence of in-and-out groups adds to the burden of journalists and others who want to track the sources of these campaign funds, thus decreasing the system's already declining transparency.

WHAT THESE CHANGES MEAN

The new mixture of groups has influenced primaries in three ways: the incentives that previously existed for groups to pool their resources behind a small number of prominent, highly ideological challengers have declined; the role of 'establishment' groups in primaries was enhanced in 2014; and the ability of prominent candidates (usually incumbents) to encourage the development of candidate-specific groups has increased. We summarize each of these in turn.

CONCENTRATION AND DISPERSION

One feature of IEs in the years before *Citizens United* was that even though they were less common, and involved less money, they could be effective because typically a few like-minded organizations worked together to support the same candidates through IEs and by

stimulating contributions to the candidates' own campaigns. In the 2008 House primaries, the two challengers whose campaigns featured the most independent spending were also the ones who raised the most overall, the most in small contributions, and the most in out-of-state contributions. In 2006 there was somewhat more variation, but the top beneficiary of independent expenditures was also the candidate who led in each of those categories. In the Senate, the only candidate who received independent expenditure support was Connecticut businessman Ned Lamont, whose campaign against incumbent Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman was easily the best funded primary challenge in either year. By 2010 and 2012, however, there were already signs that this correlation was disappearing. In neither year was the candidate with the most independent spending on his or her behalf also the top beneficiary of contributions from a national pool of small donors. This indicates that different types of groups were becoming active in making independent expenditures. The candidates who appealed to ideologically motivated small donors and the candidates with appeal to the enlarged collection of independent groups were no longer the same.

The story here can be told by looking at correlations between independent expenditures and other types of spending (we use House races only here because there are so few Senate primaries). As Table 4 shows, in the 2006 and 2008 elections IEs were rare but were correlated with other indicators of candidates' strengths – total receipts, small contributions, and out-of-state contributions. That is, the 'standout' candidates shown in Table 1 were the beneficiaries of almost all of the independent spending in the primaries. From 2010 on, however, IEs were not made on behalf of the best fundraisers. The correlation between independent expenditures and vote share also drops. The import of this change is that, depending on how one looks at it, independent expenditures either are taking the place of some candidate fundraising or are being

more broadly spread out. Table 4 can be compared fruitfully with the patterns in Table 1, although we omit the earlier (1994-2004) elections because of the paucity of independent spending and of other group efforts on behalf of primary challengers in those years.

[Table 4 about here]

This table indicates that there is no longer the sort of concentration of effort among independent spending groups and donor-mobilizers as there was in 2006 and 2008. Victories for primary challengers are rare⁵, but it is worth emphasizing that the three victorious House primary challengers in 2014 presented strikingly different campaign finance profiles from each other, as well as from the patterns of 2006 and 2008.

- David Trott, the victorious challenger in Michigan's 11th District, raised over \$3.4 million, of which a negligible amount came from out-of-state donors or in small contributions. No independent expenditures were made on Trott's behalf. Trott's victory was attributed by many to the incompetence and ideological extremism of his incumbent opponent.
- David Brat, who unseated House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in a district near Richmond, Virginia, ranked nineteenth in fundraising among primary challengers, raising barely over \$200,000. A total of \$33,000 in independent expenditures was made on Brat's behalf by Tea Party-affiliated groups and anti-immigration groups.
- Seth Moulton, a Democrat, won a Massachusetts House primary against a scandal-plagued opponent. Moulton raised over \$1.6 million; he was the top recipient of out-of-state contributions and small contributions among House primary challengers, and he was the top beneficiary of independent expenditures. In this respect, Moulton's campaign was

the one still exhibiting the consistency across categories that was common among Republican candidates in past years.

The competitive 2014 Senate primary challenges also show some dispersion of effort. IEs in these races were spread out among four Republicans and one Democrat, instead of being focused on one or two. Each of the four Republicans raised more than \$1 million in total, each raised over \$100,000 from out-of-state donors, and each benefitted from more than \$500,000 in independent expenditures. The largest beneficiary of independent expenditures by far was Mississippi's Chris McDaniel, on whose behalf more than \$7 million was spent. But McDaniel raised only \$1.2 million for his own campaign. Most of his contribution money came from out of state most after large expenditures by outside groups. Two other primary challengers – Matthew Bevan (Kentucky) and Joe Carr (Tennessee) raised more than McDaniel. While the scale of fundraising was greater in Senate races than in House races, the fact that so many Senate candidates had independent expenditures made on their behalf suggests that there were more organizations, more money, and less impulse to concentrate behind one candidate.

These differences suggest the availability of multiple routes to success for primary candidates. The bundling approach is no longer the only obvious way for a group to help candidates. Relatively cash-poor candidates can also benefit from large or well-timed independent expenditures – and it is certainly easier for groups to make independent expenditures than to contact sympathizers to encourage them to give to their preferred candidate. However, the dispersion of group efforts may have the effect of diluting the message that groups seek to send in the election.

POWER SHIFT

It is not surprising that the largest IE groups have different legal structures after *Citizens United* permitted non-profit corporations to make IEs. Nor is it surprising that more groups, a high number of which are in-and-out groups, means a lower level of cohesion within the full universe of groups. The bigger question is whether any of this relates to a shift in political power.

On the surface, this does seem to have happened. As noted, Boatright has argued that the system through 2008 seemed to offer openings for factional organizations. The two columns on right hand side of Table 3 (see above) show the extent to which each organization focused on primaries and the extent to which it used the primaries to challenge incumbents of its normally preferred political party. For instance, the Club for Growth was the organization in 2006 and 2008 that spent the highest percentage of funds targeting Republican incumbents. In 2010 the Club devoted more of its efforts to the general election to help the Republicans gain majority control in the House. The election of 2010 was also an unusual one for organized labor, for reasons discussed above. The first full primary election season after *SpeechNow* looked as if it would continue the pre-2010 story. Three of the top five independent spending groups in 2012 were identified with Republican factions challenging the leadership or establishment. The percentage of funds that Club for Growth and FreedomWorks spent to challenge Republicans in primaries was lower than the Club's for 2006 or 2008, but the absolute dollar amounts were higher. When coupled with the visible (and solitary) defeat of Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) in the 2012 GOP primary, the 2012 elections appeared to be following the decade-long narrative about factional advantage.

But 2014 brought a new media narrative: that the Establishment had beaten back the Tea Party during the primaries, with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce central to the result (Drucker,

2013; Hamby, 2014; Jaffe, 2014; Kraushaar, 2014; Palmer, 2014). In our view the Chamber did play an important role in 2014, but the story was more complicated. The Chamber put \$13.2 million into IEs during the 2014 primaries – nearly doubling the Club for Growth’s \$6.7 million (down from the Club’s \$12.4 million in 2012). In fact, the Chamber’s IEs nearly equaled the \$14.3 million from the three largest factional conservative organizations combined: Club for Growth, Senate Conservatives Action and FreedomWorks. But this was more of a refocusing for the Chamber than a sudden surge of new money. The Chamber did shift toward express advocacy after *Citizens United*, but its political spending in all forms had been growing since 1997 (Weissman and Ryan, 2006 and 2007). What changed sharply in 2014 was not only the legal form but the timing of its spending. The Chamber did not make any reported IEs in 2010. In 2012 its IEs were reported at \$32.3 million, 98% of which were for the general election. In 2014, 39% of its \$34.1 million in IEs were during the primaries. According to one article, the U.S. Chamber decided in 2013 that waiting until late in the cycle was not producing the policy results it wanted (Hamby, 2014).

The Chamber pursued its new primary strategy vigorously, supporting winners in a few early, highly visible races. This fits the dominant narrative for 2014, but the full story was not just about establishment resurgence. In the House and Senate combined, there were only 26 races with significant IEs on behalf of two or more Republican candidates. In only twelve were the Chamber’s IEs airing in the same race as IEs from conservative organizations who were challenging the party’s mainstream. Perhaps adopting the Club for Growth’s tactics, the Chamber selected a few highly visible battles early, went into those races heavily, and won. By winning, it influenced the election’s national media narrative.

However, one should be wary of treating one organization's activity as if it tells the full story. One curious and important fact about those dozen races is how few involved significant spending by other multi-candidate organizations identified with the party's establishment wing. In neither party did the formal party committees become involved in a contested primary. The two Democratic Super PACs closely identified with the party leaders also stayed out of contested primaries. On the Republican side, American Crossroads/Crossroads GPS made significant IEs in only one contested primary. Aside from the Chamber, IEs by multi-candidate pro-Establishment organizations simply were not a big factor in the 2014 primaries.

SINGLE CANDIDATE PACS: PART OF THE INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGE?

The flip side of the thinness of pro-establishment multi-candidate organizations was the importance of single candidate PACs and 501(c)s. Single candidate PACs received their introduction during the presidential primaries of 2012 (Green, Krohler and Schwarber, 2014; Magleby, 2014). They were not major factors in that year's congressional elections but they were in 2014, composing a substantial part of the increase in independent expenditures made in support of incumbents.

We classified every multi-candidate organization that made \$100,000 or more in IEs in the 2014 Republican primaries to determine whether they supported establishment candidates, factional conservatives, or whether they were issue organizations. Single-candidate PACs or 501(c)s were considered 'factional conservative' or 'establishment' based on the orientations of the candidates they supported. (Note that some of the single-candidate entities were not spending in 'establishment' versus 'ideological faction' primaries). After the Chamber, the next five top spending organizations supporting pro-establishment candidates in 2014 were all single-candidate entities.⁶ Twenty-six different single-candidate organizations made IEs of \$100,000 or

more in support of establishment Republican conservatives. They spent \$10.0 million of the \$30.5 million in IEs on the establishment side of the primaries.⁷ By comparison, all of the factional organizations on the right spent a combined \$20.7 million in the GOP primaries, of which *less than \$500,000* came from 16 single-candidate entities. That means that single-candidate entities accounted for almost the entire difference in spending between establishment conservatives and the factional organizations on the right.

A deeper point about the power balance, however, can be seen from the increased use of IEs to support incumbents. Independent expenditures on behalf of incumbents were virtually nonexistent before 2010. They grew much more slowly than IEs for non-incumbents in 2010 and 2012. This may be in part because they were generally unnecessary – incumbents have much larger campaign treasuries upon which to draw. Even in some of the most competitive primary challenges in 2010 and 2012, challengers were the major beneficiaries of IEs.⁸ In 2014, in contrast, twelve different Senate incumbents had more than \$100,000 spent on their behalf.⁹ Similarly, independent expenditures were made in support of 31 different House incumbents, including many who did not ultimately face strong primary opponents.¹⁰

Much of the increase in spending to help incumbents came from single-candidate entities. In the 2014 primaries, 62 single-candidate entities spent \$19.1 million in the primaries. This was 19% of the \$102.5 million of all IEs in the primaries. It was also a 72% increase over the \$11.1 million in single-candidate PAC spending in the 2012 congressional primaries. In House races, spending to support incumbents (or oppose challengers) went from \$731,000 in 2012 to \$2.1 million in 2014. In Senate races, single-candidate organizations' IEs to support incumbents (or oppose challengers) shot up from \$195,000 in 2012 to \$8.5 million in 2014. In percentage terms, pro-incumbent (and anti-challenger) spending went from 25% to 40% of all of the IEs in House

primaries by single-candidate PACs. In Senate races, the percentages went from a minuscule 2% in 2012 (when the bulk went to open-seat races) to 61% in 2014.¹¹ This is a substantial change in favor of incumbents.

CONCLUSIONS

We began this work wondering whether shifts in the mixture and power of organizations influencing congressional primaries after *Citizens United* and *SpeechNow* might speak to some of the larger questions scholars have been asking about the relationships between parties and other political organizations. The general absence of formal party organizational spending in primaries is widely known. While party leaders and staff can play a helpful signaling role, their financial absence from contested primaries left a vacuum. The new century's technology and nationalized media coverage created an opportunity for factional organizations on the right and left to capitalize by focusing attention on a few races each year to advance their preferred narratives. This lasted at least through 2010. The first full primary election season after *SpeechNow* (2012) produced mixed results, but the 2014 results were unambiguous. This was the year most have described as when the establishment fought back.

The interesting question for us is *how* the establishment did this. It was not through spending by the formal party organizations in contested primaries. Nor was it through the quasi-party Super PACs most closely allied with the congressional party leaders. Those Super PACs spent almost nothing in contested primaries. Since they could raise unlimited contributions, and since they had plenty of money in their bank accounts during the primary season, this leaves us dubious about any expectation that doing away with contribution limits for the political parties

will make them more willing to spend money to influence the outcome of contested primaries. They effectively had the opportunity in 2014 and, for the most part, did not take advantage of it.

The organizations most responsible for the change in 2014 included one very large business organization and a series of pro-incumbent, single-candidate Super PACs. Incumbents before 2010 were fighting against factional groups' IEs in primaries with only the money they could raise through hard money (limited) contributions to their campaign committees. By 2014 – having learned by observing single-candidate Super PACs in the presidential primaries of 2012 – incumbents were taking full advantage of the new tool to fight back. This raises additional questions.

We are not prepared to conclude from the congressional primaries of 2014 that single-candidate Super PACs inevitably will favor incumbents, but our earlier foray into participation theory lets us speculate about what to look for in the future. We suspect that in order to draw networks of large donors together behind a single-candidate PAC, the beneficiary must be a candidate who is either a powerful office-holder or one is highly visible for other reasons. This does represent a shift in the balance of political power. Multi-candidate organizations typically rely on networks of supporters drawn together by common interests or causes. Most often, these causes are what organizational theorists would describe as 'purposive' as opposed to 'solidary' or 'material' (Wilson, 1974). When organizations had to raise money within contribution limits, this favored a subset of cause organizations. Doing away with the contribution limits empowered new players. The tools and organizations dominating IEs before *Citizens United* remain relevant, but unlimited money has opened new paths.

One way to approach the implications might be to step away from thinking of the independent spenders as if they are 'interest groups' in any meaningful sense – particularly the

candidate-specific, party-allied, or single-donor groups. Few of the organizations discussed in this article engage in direct lobbying, few are formed with the expectation that they will persist beyond the election at hand, and few provide donors with any of the selective benefits associated with traditional interest groups. We are intrigued by the potential application of a distinction made by Han (2014) between mobilization and activation. Before *Citizens United*, potentially polarizing groups mobilized large numbers of small donors and played an important role in congressional primaries. The relative importance of these groups has diminished. At the same time, Super PACs whose receipts come from a very small number of wealthy donors do not mobilize activists in any meaningful sense. Instead, some of the mega-contributors to such groups have spoken about their desire not simply to be mobilized, but to shape an election: to control how their money is spent to a greater degree than would be possible with contributions to campaign committees or ongoing groups.

Toward the beginning of this article we referred to a distinction between money that was ‘pulled’ into the system from access-seeking donors during the pre-2002 era of political party soft money, versus money ‘pushed’ into the system by highly motivated donors. The empirical research in this article did not let us focus on donors’ motives, but the organizations do provide a basis for suggesting future research. The mega-donors who want to influence a campaign’s agenda strike us as being good examples of people who ‘push’ their resources into the system. But that does not lead us to expect that future Super PACs automatically will be dominated by ‘push’ donors with largely purposive motives. The opposite of ‘push’ is ‘pull’. Over time, and assuming a continuation of current enforcement policies, we suspect there will be more single-candidate Super PACs supporting incumbents. This will create more of an opportunity for office holders to exert a ‘pulling’ effect on access-seeking supporters. There is, of course, an irony to

this. We are, after all, talking about a decline in the mobilization of donors who often are middle or upper-middle class, and an increase through two different mechanisms in the activation of the very wealthy.

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Table 1: Changes in Incumbent Primaries, 1994-2014
(Senate in Parentheses)

	1994- 2002 (avg.)	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014
Number of cases							
Competitive Challenges	27.6 (2.2)	24 (2)	28 (3)	33 (4)	52 (5)	66 (2)	60 (5)
Competitive Dem Challenges	14.6 (.4)	11 (0)	12 (2)	14 (2)	21 (3)	23 (0)	14 (1)
Competitive Rep Challenges	13.0 (1.8)	13 (2)	16 (1)	19 (2)	31 (2)	43 (2)	46 (4)
N of Ideological Challenges	4.6 (.2)	4 (1)	6 (3)	7 (2)	14 (4)	16 (2)	26 (4)
Challenger Raised over \$500,000	1.2 (.6)	2 (1)	8 (3)	6 (1)	4 (4)	6 (2)	10 (5)
Challenger raised over \$100,000 from out-of-state donors	.6 (.4)	1 (1)	5 (3)	3 (1)	0 (4)	3 (2)	7 (5)
Challenger raised over \$100,000 in small contributions	1.2 (.4)	1 (1)	2 (3)	7 (1)	2 (4)	1 (2)	2 (5)
Challenger raised over \$100,000 from PACs	1 (.2)	1 (1)	4 (1)	1 (1)	0 (1)	0 (0)	2 (0)
Over \$100,000 in IEs for challenger	0 (.2)	0 (0)	2 (1)	2 (0)	0 (2)	6 (2)	9 (5)

NOTE: A competitive challenge is defined as a primary in which at least one challenger received 25% of the vote or more.

**Table 2. INDEPENDENT EXPENDITURES IN CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS,
2006-2014**
(\$ millions)

	Primaries		General Elections		Combined	
	Party	Non-Party	Party	Non-Party	Party	Non-Party
2006	5.9	8.7	211.5	30.3	217.4	38.9
2008	3.9	8.5	215.7	32.9	219.6	41.3
2010	0.2	16.6	175.3	170.3	175.5	186.4
2012	0.2	54.8	205.5	402.5	205.7	457.3
2014	0.3	102.0	222.0	418.6	222.2	520.6

SOURCE: Campaign Finance Institute, derived from FEC data.

Table 3. Top IE Organizations in Primaries, 2006-2014
(Cumulating to Two-Thirds of all Primary IEs for Each Cycle)

	Org's Primary IEs	Org's Primary IEs as % of all Non- party Primary IEs	Cumulative % for the cycle of all Orgs' Non- party Primary IEs	Org's Primary IEs as % of Own Total IEs in cycle	IEs Targeting Same-Party Incumbent in Primaries as % of Org's IEs for Full Two- Year Cycle
2006 (62 orgs., \$8.6 million)*					
CLUB FOR GROWTH	1,914,428	22%	22%	77%	42%
MOVEON.ORG POLITICAL ACTION	1,578,362	18%	40%	56%	0%
WOMEN VOTE! (Emily's List)	915,179	11%	51%	27%	2%
LEAGUE OF CONSERVATION VOTERS	709,641	8%	59%	43%	3%
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS	385,600	4%	63%	10%	10%
CULAC THE PAC OF CREDIT UNION NATIONAL ASSOCIATION	310,397	4%	68%	81%	0%
2008 (84 orgs., \$8.5 million)*					
CLUB FOR GROWTH	2,023,844	24%	24%	61%	29%
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS	1,298,766	15%	39%	19%	0%
SEIU COPE (SERVICE EMPLOYEES)	1,115,459	13%	52%	25%	6%
WOMEN VOTE! (Emily's List)	655,529	8%	60%	43%	1%
MOVEON.ORG POLITICAL ACTION	401,361	5%	65%	91%	0%
NEA ADVOCACY FUND	400,000	5%	70%	94%	0%
2010 (62 orgs., \$16.6 million)*					
SEIU COPE (SERVICE EMPLOYEES)	5,051,603	30%	30%	57%	35%
AMER. FEDERATN STATE COUNTY & MUNICIPAL EMPLOYEES	2,099,959	13%	43%	18%	18%
OUR COUNTRY DESERVES BETTER -	1,703,674	10%	53%	81%	26%

TEAPARTYEXPRESS.ORG					
CLUB FOR GROWTH	1,690,265	10%	64%	23%	3%
WORKING AMERICA	1,340,672	8%	72%	60%	56%
2012 (144 orgs., \$54.8 million)*					
CLUB FOR GROWTH	12,440,649	23%	23%	70%	10%
TEXAS CONSERVATIVES FUND	5,511,602	10%	33%	100%	0%
SENATE MAJORITY PAC	3,117,886	6%	38%	8%	0%
SENATE CONSERVATIVES ACTION	2,538,232	5%	43%	53%	0%
FREEDOMWORKS FOR AMERICA	2,437,514	4%	48%	13%	7%
CAMPAIGN FOR PRIMARY ACCOUNTABILITY	1,830,661	3%	51%	97%	77%**
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS	1,810,608	3%	54%	24%	0%
HOUSE MAJORITY PAC	1,737,171	3%	57%	6%	44%
LIBERTY FOR ALL ACTION FUND	1,557,356	3%	50%	100%	53%
WOMEN VOTE! (Emily's List)	1,520,860	3%	63%	20%	0%
PATRIOT MAJORITY USA	1,185,996	2%	65%	16%	0%
LEAGUE OF CONSERVATION VOTERS	1,169,227	2%	67%	10%	0%
2014 (184 orgs., \$102.0 million)*					
SENATE MAJORITY PAC	13,274,981	13%	13%	29%	0%
US CHAMBER OF COMMERCE	13,196,183	13%	26%	39%	0%
CLUB FOR GROWTH	6,760,597	7%	33%	80%	44%
SENATE CONSERVATIVES ACTION	6,077,348	6%	39%	100%	53%
PUT ALASKA FIRST	4,851,730	5%	43%	48%	0%
PATRIOT MAJORITY USA	4,837,324	5%	48%	45%	0%
LEAGUE OF CONSERVATION VOTERS	3,733,442	4%	52%	22%	0%
HOUSE MAJORITY PAC	2,590,189	3%	54%	9%	0%
CITIZENS FOR A WORKING AMERICA PAC	2,162,656	2%	56%	99%	0%
MAYDAY PAC	2,072,491	2%	58%	28%	0%
ENDING SPENDING	1,996,088	2%	60%	7%	3%
MISSISSIPPI CONSERVATIVES	1,812,151	2%	62%	99%	0%
AMERICAN UNITY PAC INC	1,431,003	1%	64%	31%	0%
FREEDOMWORKS FOR AMERICA	1,416,477	1%	65%	86%	54%

WOMEN VOTE! (Emily's List)	1,384,182	1%	66%	18%	6%
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*Total number of organizations making primary IEs in cycle and total amount of primary IEs

** = nonpartisan

SOURCE: Campaign Finance Institute, derived from FEC data.

Table 4: Correlations between Independent Expenditures and Primary Challengers' Finances

Correlation between total Nonparty Independent Expenditures and . . .	2006-2008	2010-2014	2014 only
Total Receipts	.349*	.161	.133
Out-of-State Contributions	.620**	.619**	.642**
Small Contributions	.519**	.219*	.336*
PAC Contributions	.126	.065	.112
Primary Vote Percentage	.446**	.259**	.291*
N	46	123	47

NOTE: Includes only primary challengers who received at least 25% of the vote.

** p < .01

* p < .05

Endnotes

¹ We categorize ‘competitive’ challengers here, and throughout the paper, as those who received at least 25 percent of the primary vote.

² See Boatright 2013, ch. 3 for discussion.

³ While it is difficult to show how the changes we documented above with respect to incumbent primaries would apply to primaries within the opposition party or in open seat primaries, it is plausible to expect that they do. (See Boatright 2014: 130-34 and 157-62 for efforts to identify similar patterns over time for opposition party and open-seat primaries.) Independent expenditures, however, can easily be measured across all primary types.

⁴ Of the 184 entities spending money in the 2014 primaries, only 49 did so in the 2012 primaries and 79 in the full 2012 cycle.

⁵ For a summary of successful primary challenges, see Boatright 2013, 196.

⁶ Mississippi Conservatives supported Thad Cochran, spending more on his behalf (\$1.8 million) than any organization, including the Chamber. Texans for a Conservative Majority supported Sen. John Cornyn. Government Integrity Fund Action Network supported Arkansas Representative Tom Cotton; Cotton had no primary opponent but the group spent in preparation for Cotton’s general election race against Sen. Mark Pryor. Southern Conservatives supported Jack Kingston in his Georgia Senate race. Americans for Common Sense supported George Demos (NY-1) in a primary in which neither candidate was a factional conservative.

⁷ This does not include the Kentucky Opportunity Coalition [501(c)4] and Kentuckians for Strong Leadership [Super PAC] – two organizations supporting Sen. Mitch McConnell that reported its \$8 million spent during the primary season as being general election expenditures.

⁸ In the three highest-spending Senate primary challenges in 2010 and 2012 – the challenges to Blanche Lambert Lincoln (D-AR), Orrin Hatch (R-UT) and Richard Lugar (R-IN), over three-fourths of the independent expenditures were made on behalf of the challengers.

⁹ In some of these instances these appear to have been expenditures made during the primary cycle but with the intention of helping the incumbent in the general election. Some of these incumbents faced competitive primary challengers, however, and still others, such as South Carolina’s Lindsey Graham, had reason to expect to face competitive primary challengers but ultimately such challenges did not materialize.

¹⁰ This figure includes four incumbents running in California; three of these incumbents faced primary opponents of the other party. California uses a ‘top-two’ primary system in which the

candidates of all parties run against each other in the first round and the top two advance to the general election.

¹¹ As in footnote 6 above, the 61% figure does not include \$8 million in single-candidate IEs favoring Sen. McConnell; if they had been included, the pro-incumbent portion for the Senate would be 75%.