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Super PACs are making their rich presence felt in 2012 campaigns

By **David Goldstein** - McClatchy Newspapers

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WASHINGTON — Super PACs are living up to their early billing as potential game-changers in the 2012 elections.

Free to flood a campaign with as much money as they can, these souped-up political action committees have already impacted the Republican presidential contest.

Newt Gingrich saw his sudden surge in Iowa squashed when super PAC allies of Mitt Romney spent millions on negative ads against the former speaker of the House of Representatives. Gingrich finished fourth in both the Iowa caucuses and in the New Hampshire primary.

But a \$5 million pledge from a Las Vegas casino mogul and friend of Gingrich to a super PAC run by his supporters could help him make a stand in South Carolina's Republican primary on Jan. 21.

That PAC, Winning Our Future, intends to spend \$3.4 million on an ad campaign attacking Romney's role in eliminating jobs when the private investment group he once led — Bain Capital — bought and sold companies. Gingrich backers hope that will hit home in a state where unemployment is nearly 10 percent.

"It goes back to politics before we had campaign finance reform and Watergate," said David Woodard, a professor of political science at Clemson University and a South Carolina Republican strategist. "It's just a complete reversal that has brought us full circle to where it's rich guys playing politics."

Their sandbox won't be just the presidential race, either. Since the 2010 election, super PACs have more than tripled in number, and their largesse could shape some pivotal contests for the House and Senate, as well.

"It will have huge impact," said Jeff Roe, a Kansas City, Mo.-based Republican strategist who works on races around the country. "The balance of power in the Senate will be decided in three or four fairly affordable states. Politically, you will see a huge influx of money going into those states — Missouri, Nebraska and Montana — like I don't think you've ever seen before."

The money raised by the candidates' own committees, as opposed to independent super PACs, is still important. Though donors are limited to giving \$2,500 to those committees in each election during a cycle — primary and general — or \$5,000 overall, it adds up.

Romney raised \$24 million during the last quarter of 2011, according to his campaign. President Barack Obama's re-election campaign and the Democratic National Committee together amassed \$68 million in the same period.

So super PACs are not indispensable _not yet, anyway. Former Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania basically tied Romney for first place in Iowa without a tidal wave of cash from the Red, White and Blue Fund super PAC that backs him.

But they do have the potential to exert considerable influence.

Some Democrats worry that their super PACs won't be able to keep pace with the Republicans' easy access to wealthy corporate coffers — although Democrats have had no trouble raising money in recent national elections.

Obama's chief campaign strategist, David Axelrod, told reporters last month that super PACs are "uncharted territory" and that the Democrats' campaign won't be able to match it dollar for dollar.

"We're going to combat it door to door, contact to contact, person to person," he said.

In a recent New York Daily News column, John Samples, director of the Center for Representative Government at the CATO Institute, a libertarian policy-research group, defended super PACs, saying they "enhance democratic decision-making. ... Voters need to hear the worst about candidates to make the best choice on Election Day."

The new terrain was shaped by a landmark 2010 Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*. The court said that corporations and unions have a First Amendment right to try to persuade voters about candidates.

In a separate case, a lower court ruled that those groups could spend as much money as they wanted, as long as they remained independent of the candidates they were aiding.

How independent they are is often questionable. For some super PACs — like those aiding Romney, Texas Gov. Rick Perry, and Obama — the wall dividing them appears to be more silk than cement, because the PACs are run by friends and former associates.

"Given that super PACs can legally be set up by a close friend and associate of the candidate, they are by no means independent in any meaningful sense of that word," said Paul Ryan, an associate legal counsel at the nonpartisan Campaign Legal Center.

The ground the courts have seeded has produced a bumper crop. As of this month, 276 groups have organized as super PACs, compared with 84 during the 2010 election, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics, a campaign-spending watchdog group.

Two years ago, they raised \$85 million and spent \$65 million. So far in this election cycle, super PACs have collected \$32 million and spent more than \$20 million, according to the center. The actual amounts are certainly higher than that, because expenses can change daily, while receipts have not been updated since June. More current totals will be disclosed at the end of this month.

"Prior to Citizens United, it was a lot more difficult for an organization to go out and raise \$5 million," said the center's Michael Beckel. "They had to raise it incrementally. Now the group only needs to go find one donor who can write one \$5 million check."