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Influence of big-money 'SuperPACs' not so clear

By: Aaron Deslatte – April 12, 2013

There's a scary bedtime story on money in politics about how the U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United ruling unleashed a tidal wave of corporate cash into politics and drowned out the voices of the little people.

But as researchers this week hashed out heady questions of war, voter participation, trade and environmental degradation at the annual Midwest Political Science Association conference, it was clear that even the brightest policy minds are struggling to grapple with the evolving campaign-finance world.

The Citizens United ruling allowed independent groups such as Karl Rove's American Crossroads, the Club for Growth, Planned Parenthood and labor organizations to pour unlimited sums of cash into swinging elections.

The Center for Responsive Politics reports that so-called "Super PACs" spent $133 million on U.S. Senate campaigns during the 2010 elections and $251 million in 2012 — compared with a total of $141 million spent by independent groups in the three prior election cycles.

And the court challenge has been cited ad nauseam in places such as Florida to help sell sweeping campaign-finance reforms to clamp down on third-party spending and weaken contribution caps.

Florida's push might be stalled now that Gov. Rick Scott has threatened to veto any bill that raises the current $500 candidate-contribution limit.

But researchers looking into the effects of these Super PAC dollars are coming up empty so far. The money doesn't seem to be affecting voter turnout — or tilting the scales from unions to businesses or vice versa.

Michael Malbin, with the University at Albany-SUNY, looked at independent expenditures in states from 2006 to 2010 and found spending by political parties and party-affiliated groups showed the biggest increases. Corporate and labor spending went up, but mainly in states such as Florida that didn't restrict it prior to the ruling.

"Whatever is going on here, this is not a simple story about corporate prohibitions," Malbin said.

"Publicly held for-profit corporations don't like political controversy and don't give more than they have to," said political scientist Richard Skinner, with New College of Florida.

Rob B. Mellen Jr., a researcher from Mississippi State University, analyzed data on the impact of independent expenditures on turnout nationally in last year's elections and found no evidence that the huge dollars spent on negative advertising had any significant effect on voter turnout.

That sort of flies in the face of much previous research that indicates negativity dissuades less-engaged or "low-information" voters from casting ballots.

"There's no evidence to support the idea that all this negativity has depressed voter turnout," Mellen said.

Dante J. Scala, with the University of New Hampshire, found evidence that Democrat-affiliated Super PACs coordinated more closely than Republican ones when it came to deciding between spending on ideologically attractive candidates versus electable ones.

But Scala questioned whether the Super PACs were much more than "a few wealthy guys trying to play fantasy politics."

Bottom line: It's going to take years to assess how the campaign-spending landscape is changing.

Meanwhile, the billionaire-oil-magnate Koch brothers — whom Malbin called "long-term investors in infrastructure" who "are not concerned with single elections but want to change the party" — are pouring cash into FreedomWorks, the Cato Institute and "free market" economics centers across the country.

And there's a high probability they will have a better handle on how to effectively spend their Super PAC dollars in 2016.