

BRENNAN

CENTER

FOR JUSTICE

National Survey: Super PACs, Corruption, and Democracy

*Americans' Attitudes about the Influence of Super PAC Spending
on Government and the Implications for our Democracy*

SUMMARY

A recent national survey conducted on behalf of the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law demonstrates that the spending of Super PACs in this year's election cycle has given rise to a large, bipartisan consensus that such outsized spending is dangerous for our democracy. Historical polling has repeatedly shown that Americans believe elected officials favor the interests of large contributors to their own campaign war-chests. This new poll reveals for the first time that Americans have similar fears of elected officials favoring big donors to nominally independent Super PACs — and also that many are less likely to vote because of Super PAC spending.

From April 12-15, 2012, the independent Opinion Research Corporation conducted a national telephone survey of 1,015 adults living in the continental United States.¹ A summary of responses to each polling question is provided below. A detailed Appendix, including the poll's script, methodology, and responses broken down by demographics, is available on the Brennan Center's website at http://www.brennancenter.org/Super_PAC_Poll_Appendix.

The poll reveals that nearly 70 percent of Americans believe Super PAC spending will lead to corruption and that three in four Americans believe limiting how much corporations, unions, and individuals can donate to Super PACs would curb corruption. Of those who expressed an opinion, more than 80 percent believe that, compared with past elections, the money being spent by political groups this year is more likely to lead to corruption. And, most alarmingly, the poll revealed that concerns about the influence Super PACs have over elected officials undermine Americans' faith in democracy: one in four respondents — and even larger numbers of low-income people, African Americans, and Latinos — reported that they are less likely to vote because big donors to Super PACs have so much more sway than average Americans.

SUPER PAC SPENDING HAS PRODUCED WIDESPREAD PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION

By significant margins, Americans believe new rules that allow individuals, corporations, and unions to donate unlimited amounts to Super PACs will lead to corruption. These beliefs are held equally by both Republicans and Democrats.

- **69% of respondents agreed that “new rules that let corporations, unions and people give unlimited money to Super PACs will lead to corruption.”** Only 15% disagreed.² Notably, 74% of Republicans and 73% of Democrats agreed with this statement.³
- **73% of respondents agreed that “there would be less corruption if there were limits on how much could be given to Super PACs.”** Only 14% disagreed. Here, 75% of Republicans and 78% of Democrats agreed.
- Only about 1 in 5 Americans agree that average voters have the same access to candidates (and influence on candidates) as big donors to Super PACs. Two-thirds of Americans disagree.

OF THOSE EXPRESSING AN OPINION, MORE THAN FOUR IN FIVE BELIEVE SPENDING IN THIS ELECTION CYCLE IS MORE LIKELY TO LEAD TO CORRUPTION

- Half of respondents — and 85% of those expressing an opinion — agreed that spending in this election is more likely to lead to corruption than in previous elections. Only 9% of respondents thought that, compared to previous elections, it was less likely that the money spent by political groups in this election will lead to corruption. Republicans (51%) and Democrats (54%) both agreed that spending in this election is more likely to lead to corruption.

BROAD BIPARTISAN MAJORITIES BELIEVE ELECTED OFFICIALS FAVOR THE INTERESTS OF SUPER PAC DONORS OVER THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Large majorities of Americans believe that members of Congress will favor the interests of those who donate to Super PACs over those who do not — and that Super PAC donors can pressure elected officials to alter their votes.

- More than two-thirds of all respondents (68%) — including 71% of Democrats and Republicans — agreed that a company that spent \$100,000 to help elect a member of Congress could successfully pressure him or her to change a vote on proposed legislation. Only one in five respondents disagreed.
- More than three-quarters of all respondents — 77% — agreed that members of Congress are more likely to act in the interest of a group that spent millions to elect them than to act in the public interest. Similar numbers of Republicans (81%) and Democrats (79%) agreed. Only 10% disagreed.

THE PERCEPTION THAT SUPER PACS HAVE EXCESSIVE INFLUENCE OVER GOVERNMENT THREATENS GRAVE CONSEQUENCES FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

An alarming number of Americans report that their concerns about the influence of donors to outside political groups make them less likely to engage in democracy. Communities of color, those with lower incomes, and individuals with less formal education are more likely to disengage due to concerns about how much influence is wielded by Super PAC donors.

- **Two in three Americans — 65% — say that they trust government less because big donors to Super PACs have more influence than regular voters.** Republicans (67%) and Democrats (69%) uniformly agree.
- **One in four Americans — 26% — say that they are less likely to vote because big donors to Super PACs have so much more influence over elected officials than average Americans.**
 - Less wealthy and less educated Americans were significantly more likely to say they would be less likely to vote because of Super PAC influence: 34% of respondents with no more than a high school education, and 34% of those in households with an annual income less than \$35,000, said they would be less likely to vote.⁴
 - A higher number of African-American and Hispanic voters also stated that the disproportionate influence of Super PAC donors will discourage them from voting: 29% of African Americans and 34% of Hispanics said they were less likely to vote because of Super PAC influence.⁵
- 41% of respondents – including 49% of those who have no more than a high school education and 48% of those with household incomes under \$35,000 – believe that their votes don't matter very much because big donors to Super PACs have so much more influence.⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ The survey included 764 landline interviews and 251 cell phone interviews, and was weighted to account for geographic, demographic, and socioeconomic underrepresentation.

² Unless otherwise indicated, the margin of error for reported survey results is $\pm 3.1\%$.

³ The margin of error for all reported results for Republicans is $\pm 4.9\%$, and the margin of error for all reported results for Democrats is $\pm 4.6\%$. Smaller numbers of independent voters agreed with the statements in the survey; this was largely because independent voters were more likely to report having no feeling about whether they agreed or disagreed.

⁴ The margin of error for all reported results for those with a high school education or less is $\pm 5.1\%$, and the margin of error for all reported results for those with household incomes less than \$35,000 is $\pm 5.3\%$.

⁵ The margins of error for this particular result for African-Americans and Hispanics are $\pm 9.6\%$ and $\pm 13.0\%$, respectively. Because of low sample sizes, we were not able to conclude that these results were statistically significant.

⁶ Respondents with a high school education or less, and respondents with household incomes under \$35,000, were significantly more likely to believe that their votes don't matter very much because big donors to Super PACs have so much more influence.