



HOW PHILLY WORKS Super PACs Are Coming to Town

What are the chances of Stephen Colbert and Karl Rove belling up for cheese steaks at Pat's?

Slim.

But some lesser-known creators of money-raising machines called Super PACs, the largely unrestricted committees that mushroomed during the recent presidential election, are widely believed to be eyeing their opportunities in the next Philadelphia's mayor's race. Jockeying for the seat has already started.

The nearly \$642 million poured into Super PACs in 2012, often by secret donors, was alarming enough to raise the specter of Super PACs overpowering future contests – especially in places like Philadelphia where campaign finance laws limit what candidates can raise on their own.

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I know PACs raise money for candidates. Do Super PACs just raise more money?

A Super PAC (PAC stands for political action committee) can raise unlimited funds from individuals, corporations and unions and spend unlimited funds to advocate for or against candidates for elected office. Unlike traditional PACs, Super PACs are not allowed to contribute directly to a campaign. And they are not supposed to coordinate with the candidates. But since many people who control Super PACs have close ties to the candidates they support, and may even share consultants, does anyone really believe “coordination” of some sort doesn't occur?

Are Super PACS new?

Super PACs emerged in the wake of a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that overturned a 63-year-old law prohibiting corporations and unions from using money from their own treasuries to support or oppose candidates for president and Congress. We told you all about this case – *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* – when it was decided in January 2010. You can read what we said [here](#).

Who is behind the Super PACs?

Super PACs have to file regular financial disclosure forms with the Federal Election Commission. But they are allowed to accept contributions from tax-exempt 501(c)(4) groups -- “social welfare organizations” that are allowed to spend some of their money on political purposes and do not have to publicly name their donors. So it's possible – and entirely legal – for many contributors to Super PACs to remain completely anonymous.



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Did Super PACs decide the 2012 presidential race?

It doesn't look like it, but according to OpenSecrets.org, 240 Super PACs spent \$641,836,709 in the 2012 election cycle.

No one in their right mind would spend that kind of money in Philadelphia.

Of course not. Super PACs may not be able to control the outcome of presidential races, where the candidates can raise billions on their own. But they could easily outspend candidates in smaller contests – especially in states or cities where candidates don't or can't raise as much money. Candidates for elected office in Philly have to live under a campaign finance law that limits donations from individuals to \$2,900 per year and from PACs (regular PACs, not Super PACs), partnerships, or sole proprietorships to \$11,500 per year.

Could a Republican-leaning Super PAC even elect a GOP mayor in Philly?

It would still be tough to overcome the city's 6-1 Democratic voter registration edge. But significant Super PAC backing could lift a candidate – Republican or Democrat – out of obscurity into the mayor's seat or at least make her or him a viable contender. (Remember Tom Knox? Nutter beat him in the 2007 Democratic mayoral primary, but the then unknown businessman outpaced three popular elected officials by pouring \$11 million of his own money into the campaign.)

What about Democratic-leaning Super PACs?

A political committee headed by International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 98's boss John Dougherty (better known as "Johnny Doc") already spent money on ads to try to defeat David Oh in the 2011 City Council At-Large race. (Oh won.) You can probably count on IBEW and other local unions to play a big role in the 2015 mayor's race. What about the three pro-school voucher executives who gave state Senator Anthony Williams \$5.4 million for his 2010 Democratic primary race for Governor. Will they form a Super PAC if he decides to run for mayor in 2015?

Are Super PACs showing up in other cities?

More and more. Super PAC dollars helped elect only the second Democrat in 40 years as San Diego's mayor in November 2012. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently put over \$10 million into a Super PAC to support federal, state and local candidates around the country who favor same sex marriage and gun control. He isn't ruling out spending money to help his preferred successor for mayor of New York.

Would doing away with campaign contribution limits counteract Super PACs?

Not necessarily, but the pressure on candidates to raise money would go through the roof. The non-partisan Committee of Seventy strongly supports limiting campaign donations. By all accounts, campaign limits have diminished Philadelphia's dirty tradition known as "play-to-play." We'd like to see stronger controls on Super PACs, such as faster and fuller disclosure of donors. But if the U.S. Supreme Court has the final say-so, this isn't likely to happen anytime soon. The U.S. Congress has turned back efforts to place controls on Super PAC spending too.



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Can anything limit Super PACs here?

The Philadelphia Board of Ethics is proposing regulations aimed at keeping political committees from “coordinating” with a candidate. The proposal is well-intentioned and worth a shot. But the Board of Ethics’ clout is limited. The maximum penalty for most violations is \$2,000.

What can be done to stop Super PACs from controlling the outcome of elections here?

An outcry from city leaders – especially politicians who benefit from Super PACs -- would make a powerful statement. (There is little evidence of that happening last year in Chicago.) Close attention by the media wouldn’t hurt, either.

What about an outcry from me?

You can speak out. The Board of Ethics is meeting on January 23 at 1 p.m. at One Parkway Building, 1515 Arch Street, 18th Floor, Room 18-020. Tell the members what you think about their proposed regulation, which you can read [here](#).

*Since people are already talking about the next mayor’s race, we are too. As interesting stories come up, we’ll pass them along. In the meantime, contact us at futureofthecity@seventy.org with your comments or with suggestions for future **HOW PHILLY WORKS**.*