Money has always played an important role in American politics - spending on US federal elections increased from just over $3 billion in 2000 to more than $7 billion in 2012, and spending for the 2016 election is likely to be much larger. The importance of money has grown in recent years because of Super PACs (Political Action Committees) - organizations set up specifically to contribute to and influence election campaigns that were legalized in the Supreme Court’s Citizen’s United Case in 2008. Citizens United is a Super PAC founded by Floyd Brown with major funding from the Koch Brothers. Citizens United sued the FEC to gain the right to run a political video attacking Hillary Clinton. In a 5-4 decision, Super PACs were granted the right to run political ads and campaigns. This decision essentially gave corporations the same rights as citizens. They could spend unlimited amounts of money on the candidates they support. As of November, 10, 2015, 1,229 groups have registered as Super PACs. In this paper, we will discuss Super PACs and other financing sources for elections, their impact on election outcomes, and solutions that will limit the influence of money and bring greater equity to the election process.

Most people think that Super PACs have no interest in local elections, like the one that just happened in Philadelphia. This could not be farther from the truth. In the Philadelphia Mayoral Election alone, Super PACs raised and spent over $10 million. And this was only three Super PACs. Some candidates have over 30. While this might not seem like it is all that important, bear in mind that the majority of Super PACs’ funding doesn’t come from normal people, but corporations and multi-million and billionaires. And because they are paying for incredibly large sums of a candidate’s campaign, the candidate will support laws and regulations that help those companies, even if they hurt the people who they are supposed to represent and vote on the behalf of.

In the Electoral Process, dollars often equal votes. This is illustrated well in New York Times graph seen below. The 2012 Presidential Election was one of the most expensive in the United States’s History. What you can’t see in the graph is the $65 million spent by other Super PACs and nonprofits. Almost all of that money was spent on attack ads against Obama or positive ads for Romney. Beneath the key for the graph is a list of outside Super PACs and corporations who donated to the campaign. Their total spending equals 350 million dollars. Imagine how many ads could be run with 350 million dollars. The graph is seen on the page below.

This is an important issue that needs to fixed. As a group, we came up with several ideas that might help the issue, on both national and on a local scale. Our ideas include: repealing the Citizens United decision, making it public knowledge of who is funding the candidate’s Super PACs and what those corporations and people do, making that information public knowledge, making it public knowledge how much money candidates accepted from Super PACs, strengthening the regulations for Super PACs, and creating an independent campaign watchdog group to monitor where the money for the campaigns are coming from.
We recognize that some of these ideas would be hard or nearly impossible to implement, like the first one. Because of this, we chose to focus on the ideas we thought were the most viable. Improving disclosure for campaign finance and Super PACs would be an excellent first step, because it would allow the voters to know exactly who they are voting for and who is
supporting them. After all, the people are the ones who are going to be affected by whomever is to win the election. And all of the information that is disclosed needs to be easily accessible to the public, through an easy-to-navigate website. Doing this will allow voters to make sure that the candidate they might vote for is not being supported by a company or group that holds opposite interests to the voter. For example, if a voter who is concerned with environmental protection could go on the website and see who is funding a certain candidate they are considering. If that candidate is being supported for the Koch Brothers or a fracking company, they can make the informed decision that this candidate doesn’t share their interests.

Creating a campaign watchdog group who would keep track of how much money each candidate is receiving and spending is also an instrumental step in decreasing the influence of money on elections. This will allow the people to see how well the politician and Super PACs budget the money they receive for their campaigns, (ie. how much they spend on ads, speeches and workers). While money is a pivotal part of any election, it needs to be watched and properly monitored, by a nonpartisan party. Strengthening regulations is something that needs to happen. Right now, there are hundreds of loopholes that politicians can hide behind. Though it is incredibly unlikely that the Citizens United decision is will be repealed, the FEC can and should regulate the Super PACs and how they spent their money. There needs to be an accountability system to control Super PACs. While they should be able to support their candidate, they should not be allowed to control the campaign.

The biggest step we can all take is being informed voters. If we know who is supporting candidates we can make a change. The reason money controls the vote is because we have become apathetic towards the issue. In the end, we are the ones who decide who gets put in a position of power. We are the ones voting, not the Super PACs and the corporations that are giving them money. We need to show that candidates that we will not stand or vote for people who are willing to work for the highest bidders. This election system was designed so that the people were making the final decisions in who was ruling them. We need to remember that when we are electing our officials and take back control of our electoral system.
Bibliography


