

The Super Women and the Super Men behind Super PACs: The
Emergence of a New Source of Inequality in Campaign Financing

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Abstract

Women have become more influential in virtually every aspect of American politics. However, the emergence of super PACs has the potential to affect this trend. Using a new dataset comprising all itemized contributions from individuals to super PACs participating in the 2010 through 2016 congressional elections, we conduct the first systematic study of the impact of gender on super PAC donations. We demonstrate that women constitute 35% of all super PAC donors, but account for only 17% of the super PAC dollars individuals contribute. Women are most likely to contribute to super PACs committed to electing women. They make most of their contributions to multicandidate groups that support female candidates who run for different offices, but reserve their largest contributions for super PACs that support only one female candidate. Women favor liberal-leaning super PACs, while men prefer conservative groups. The implications of our findings

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Women have made tremendous strides in American politics and society in recent decades. They constitute almost 27% of all House members in the 117th Congress (2021-2022), a 9-percentage point increase from the 112th Congress (2011-2012). Their numbers in the Senate grew from 17 to 24 during this period. Women provided more than 36% of the contributions of \$200 or more that individuals donated to

Code, trade associations registered as 501(c)(6) organizations, limited liability corporations (LLCs), and other entities previously prohibited from participating in federal elections. Some contribute amounts thousands of times larger than the maximum allowable contribution to a candidate campaign organization or other conventional political committee.

2014 and then disbanded.² Groups that support women constitute 11% of congressional super PACs

Lynch 2016; Barnes and Cassese 2017). Women vote at a higher rate than men (e.g., Center for American Women and Politics 2019). Fewer women make contributions, and those who do typically contribute smaller sums. Women donors also possess somewhat different motivations than men (Brown, et al. 1995; Burns, Schlozman and Verba 2001; Francia et al. 2003; Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman 2018). Women target their contributions to presidential and Senate candidates and ideological PACs, and men favor House candidates and industry-linked PACs (Heerwig and Gordon 2018).

Donor mobilization strategies likely contribute to the gender gaps in campaign finance. The efforts of -U @ 'O and groups to bundle or otherwise channel campaign contributions to candidates spurred an increase in Democratic women donors, led to the formation . This has been particularly helpful to pro-choice Democratic female candidates (Crespin and Deitz 2010; Crowder-Meyer and Cooperman 2018), who raise as much if not more than male Democrats, including in primaries. Republican women enjoy no such advantages (Pearson and McGhee 2013; Burrell 2014; Kitchens and Swers 2016). Whether the gender gap among donors to conventional political committees extends to super PACs is an important question, in part, because while there is no limit to the size of a contribution that a super PAC can accept, conventional groups are limited to relatively modest contributions.

Expectations

Generalizations about gender differences derived from studies of the financing of traditional political committees form the basis for most of our expectations about the impact of gender and organizational characteristics on contributions to congressional super PACs. Some expectations and interpretations draw from semi-structured interviews with the leaders of a

diverse group of super PACs.³

Our first set of hypotheses focuses on the impact of donor gender on contributions. We expect women to demonstrate less support for super PACs than men, both in terms of the numbers who make a contribution and the amounts they contribute. The interplay between donor gender and super PAC characteristics inform our next set of hypotheses. We anticipate women provide more support for ideological causes and high-profile candidates implies they favor liberal super PACs and super PACs that participate in Senate elections or a combination of races. By contrast, women's greater interest in political access implies they focus on business super PACs, House contests, and SCSPs.

Nonetheless, there are reasons not to set expectations too high. The literature on regulated contributions establishes donors tend to be wealthy, educated, older, and drawn from the business community, and wealthy individuals usually make the largest donations (e.g., McElwee, Schaffner, and Rhodes 2016). On the one hand, the link between education and the adoption of feminist attitudes (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Davis and Greenstein 2009; Crowder-Meyer and Lauderdale 2014) could combine with the propensity of women donors to support

³ The interviewees include the founders, presidents, chief strategists, communications directors, treasurers and legal councils of super PACs sponsored by a variety of organizations, ideological MCSPs and SCSPs. Some participated in one election cycle and others participated in every election since 2010. The amounts the groups spent in a single congressional election range from less than \$150,000 to almost \$25 million. Some groups sought to elect women, men, or both. Some sought to elect incumbents, challengers, or open-seat candidates; House, Senate, or presidential candidates; Democrats or Republicans; or liberals, moderates, or conservatives.

individuals. It includes information on the number of women on the ballot, the number of women candidates and other aspects of its mission; its sponsorship (or affiliation); the offices it focuses on; its major economic or political association (based primarily on employer or profession), and the amount contributed to each super PAC.

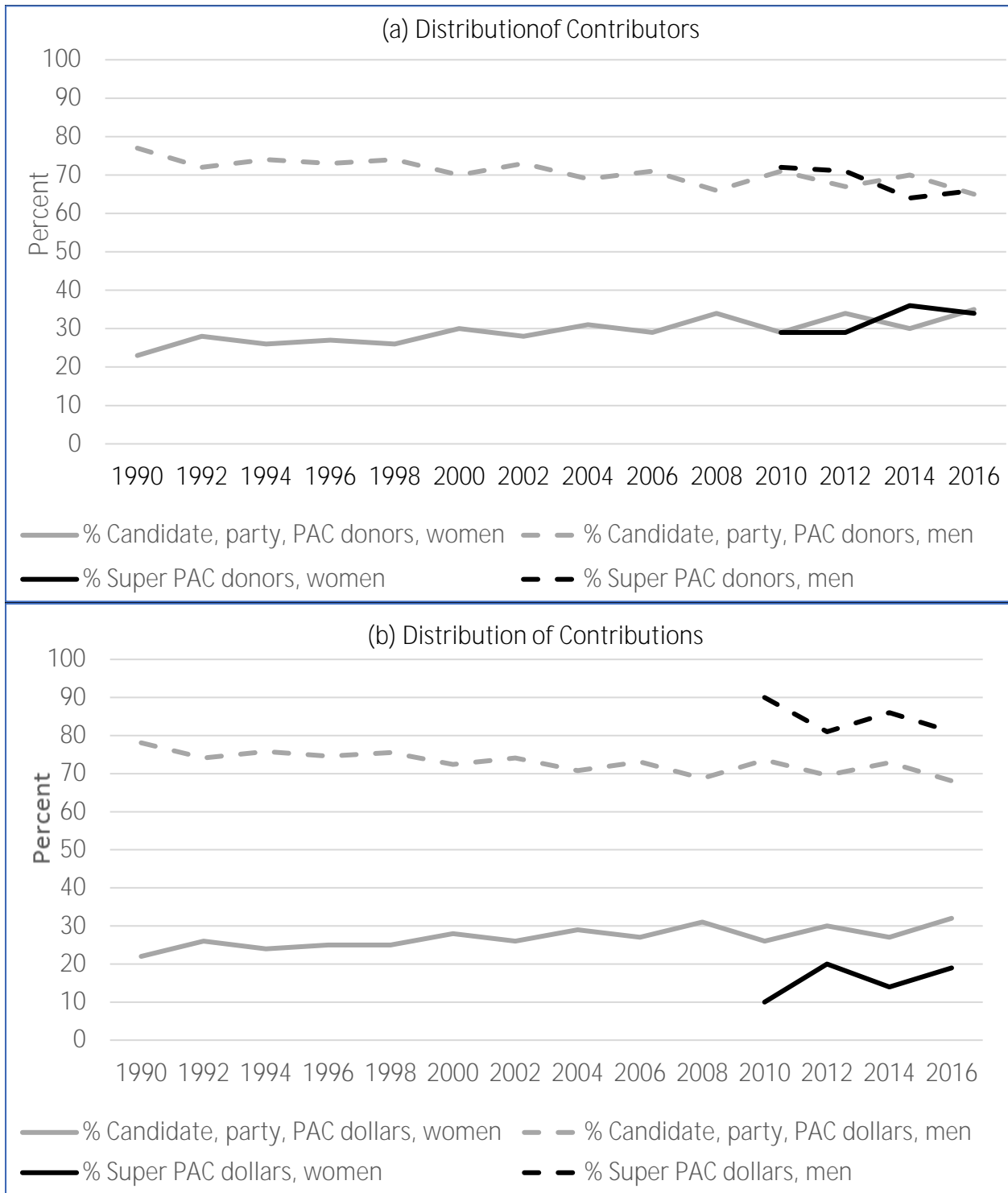
Next, we created a dataset for a multivariate analysis of congressional super PACs that is an expansion of the first. The extended dataset includes a record for each contribution (from the first dataset) and a record for each contribution each donor could have made to GOP or each

observed contributions an individual makes to a group. Because the amounts contributed to super PACs are positively skewed,

Results

How do the women who contribute to super PACs differ from the men? To begin with, there are fewer of them (see Figure 2, panel a). Women account for 35% of the individuals who contribute to a congressional super PAC, similar to their representation among the larger set of individuals that contributes to candidates, party committees, or traditional PACs that participate in congressional elections.⁹ Moreover, the increased participation of women contributors helped

Figure 2. Women and Men Contributors to Super PACs and Candidates, Party Committees, and Traditional PACs



Source: Compiled from data from the Center for Responsive Politics.

Table 1: Overview of Women's and Men's Contributions to Different Types of Super PACs

Donors

gap in

Figure 6. The Impact of Gender on the Allocation of Contributions to Women's Super PACs

Sources: Center for Responsive Politics, Federal Election Commission, data collected by authors.
Notes: The percentages are for contributions to women's super PACs, and the remainder of the funds were contributed to mixed gender super PACs, and when combined they sum to 100%.

Conclusion

Men have long dominated most aspects of American politics, but women have made substantial strides.

gaps in campaign finance and other realms of politics. The overview of super PAC financing demonstrates fewer women than men donate to congressional super PACs, women donors contribute smaller amounts, and [redacted] contributions account for a fraction of super PAC receipts. The multivariate analyses demonstrate that super PAC characteristics combine with donor gender to structure the flow of super PAC contributions. They confirm there is a gender gap in contribution strategies. One component of this gender [redacted] propensity to contribute to [redacted] # , which is largely a product of their support for MCSPs that seek to elect women to a combination of offices. A second component is female [redacted] strong preference for Democratic-leaning [redacted]

likely to be considerable given members of Congress respond to voting and financial constituencies, and turnover in just a few seats can lead to a change in partisan control of one or both chambers. Moreover, partisan polarization and slim congressional majorities add to the potential for super PACs to have an outsized impact on policy outcomes. The overall impact of the gender gap in super PAC contributions is likely to benefit conservative candidates and causes. As such, the emergence of super PACs may pose new obstacles to the advancement of workplace equality, gun control, and other policies that divide most women and men and most liberals and conservatives. The gendered disparities resulting from the rise of super PACs will continue unless there is marked growth both in the number of women who donate to super PACs and the amounts they contribute. Whether the gender gap among super PAC contributors persists remains an open question.

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Appendix

Data Coding and Cleaning

This research uses a dataset based on data first collected by the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and then enhanced by the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP). The earliest steps in this project consisted of extensively cleaning the data, addressing inconsistencies in the coding of some variables, and recoding variables so they would better suit our research question. We also supplemented the dataset with new variables and data.

The data required extensive cleaning because of significant data entry and coding errors that result largely from faulty data entry by those filing disclosure reports with the FEC. Many contributions in a given election cycle. In addition, there was a substantial amount of missing or miscoded information for variables recording the characteristics of super PACs and donors. These were addressed by reviewing super PAC and donor websites, the media coverage the groups and donors received, and other sources, including anonymous interviews. Early explorations revealed some shortcomings in the data concerned transactions of millions of dollars; many involved individ

logistic regression analyses that form the basis for Figure 4. The models estimate the likelihood an individual will contribute to a super PAC. Wald Tests to determine whether women and men were

Table A2. The Impact Super PAC and Donor Characteristics on the Amount Contributed to a Super PAC

		All		One Chamber Only		Combination		Single Candidate	
		Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
‡	8	0.26***	0.40***	0.33**					

	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.07)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.18)	(0.06)
2010	0.02 (0.05)	0.14*** (0.04)	-0.13 (0.14)	-0.29*** (0.08)	-0.07 (0.06)	0.20*** (0.05)	0.69 (0.47)	0.54*** (0.21)
2012	0.31*** (0.04)	0.38*** (0.03)	0.37*** (0.14)	0.19*** (0.07)	0.26*** (0.05)	0.39*** (0.04)	0.51** (0.24)	0.13 (0.10)
2014	0.12*** (0.04)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.20* (0.12)	-0.42*** (0.06)	0.06 (0.05)	0.01 (0.04)	0.40* (0.24)	0.34*** (0.10)
Constant	5.90*** (0.14)	6.09*** (0.10)	4.07*** (0.41)	6.00*** (0.23)	6.04*** (0.15)	6.11*** (0.12)	0.46 (1.01)	4.07*** (0.46)
N	15,740	30,633	2,527	7,762	13,213	22,871	338	1,977

Sources: Center for Responsive Politics, Federal Election Commission, data collected by authors.

Notes: Coefficients are from regression models with the logged donation amount as the dependent variable. Standard errors are in parentheses. Omitted categories are: mixed gender group, conservative, House only (Spending strategy), ideology (Group affiliation), non-hybrid (Financing), ideology (Donor sector), Northeast (Donor region), and 2016 (Election). Coefficients for labor-affiliated super PACs are not estimated in Column 2 because there were no House-only or Senate-only labor-affiliated super PACs that made independent expenditures exclusively on behalf of women candidates. In and 2016