

Participatory Satire? Political Humor, the Colbert Super PAC Project,
and the Colliding Worlds of Late Night Comedy and Modern American Politics

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Brian G. Southwell

September 2012

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Brian Southwell, not only for encouraging me to pursue graduate school, but also for countless hours of invaluable advice and encouragement along the way. Beyond everything I've learned from him, I feel fortunate to count Brian as a friend.

I also would like to thank each of the members of my committee: Drs. Heather LaMarre, John Sullivan, and Dan Wackman. I am grateful for their keen insights and mentorship.

I want to acknowledge the faculty and staff of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, for providing such an open and stimulating academic environment. I especially want to thank Dr. Al Tims for his guidance and support.

I'm also grateful for all the friends I've made along the way in Murphy Hall and at the University of Minnesota. Last I want to thank both of my parents, especially my mother, for pushing me to continue on to graduate school — and for all of their love and support over the years.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Melissa, and our wonderful son, Truman.

Melissa supported me with everlasting patience and encouragement, throughout all of the ups and downs of graduate school, and I am grateful for her belief in me. Thank you.

Abstract

Late night humor and satire is playing an increasingly significant role within our culture and political landscape. Most recently, comedians Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart have gone beyond the role satirists traditionally have played in skewering and making fun of politics — and instead have started becoming prominent participants and activists within the political process itself. This dissertation closely examines the developments of the Colbert Super PAC project and investigates how Colbert’s efforts have transformed the traditional role of political satire into something new and unique within the American political landscape. The research examines this phenomenon to gain an understanding of the motives and intent behind the Colbert Super PAC, as well as perceptions and understanding of this “participatory satire” among those within the journalism and campaign finance reform communities. Additionally the perspectives of several leading campaign election law experts are explored, along with analysis of media coverage focused on the Colbert Super PAC effort. Along with connections to existing theories within mass communication and political psychology, potential implications for this unique form of political humor within our democracy and future national political debates are discussed.

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Introduction

On June 30, 2011, comedian Stephen Colbert stood in front of a crowd of cheering supporters and journalists on the street outside of the building housing the Federal Election Commission (FEC) in Washington, D.C. Moments before, the FEC had issued an advisory opinion regarding Colbert's formation of a "Super PAC" political action committee, titled "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow." Colbert had just filed the necessary legal paperwork required to make the creation of the political organization official. Maintaining his typical persona as an arrogant and ultra-conservative pundit, Colbert stood on a makeshift stage on the sidewalk before the throng of his fans and delivered an intentionally pompous and melodramatic political speech in which he declared, "I am here to represent your voice... so you can all hear what you have to say through my mouth!" Colbert ended the speech declaring, "We won! I AM a Super PAC, and so can you!" and then he immediately began accepting financial donations for the Super PAC via credit card transactions and cash, some of it in the form of wadded up bills thrown at him and his staff by the raucous supporters.

In recent years, late night humor and satire has grown to play an increasingly significant role within our culture and political landscape — and more recently Colbert, and his political comedian peer Jon Stewart, have taken a more active role in advancing beyond just making fun of politics, and instead have started becoming prominent *participants* and *activists* within the political process itself. This dissertation closely examines the developments of the Colbert Super PAC project, from its first origins and throughout more than a year of its evolution, and investigates how Colbert's efforts have transformed the traditional role of political satire into something new and completely different and unique within the American political landscape. The following research examines the phenomenon to gain an understanding of not only the motives and intent behind the Colbert Super PAC, but also the perceptions and understanding of the satire (and any political messages, intended or unintended, within it) held by those within the

journalism and campaign finance reform communities. In addition, this research explores the perspectives of several campaign election law experts, including a recent chairwoman of the FEC, as well as a former FEC commissioner who is also serving as Colbert's personal lawyer for the project. Lastly along with an analysis of media coverage focused on the Colbert Super PAC effort, this dissertation offers a broad discussion of how Colbert's forays into "participatory" satire, and other potential similar efforts, relate to existing theories of mass communication and political psychology — and how this unique form of political humor might continue to evolve in the future, serving a useful role in our democracy and wielding increasing influence within our national political debates.

Literature Review

Significant academic attention has recently been focused on the subject of humor and politics, with a growing number of political communication scholars interested in the topic of political humor and its influence on elections and public opinion. Research within this realm has focused on a variety of areas, ranging from the content of late-night political humor (Niven, Lichter, & Amundson, 2003), to priming effects of late-night political comedy (Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2006), to political humor's influence over audience members' ratings of candidate traits (Young, 2006; Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Research has concluded that the content of political comedy shows like the *Late Show with David Letterman* and *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* has varying effects on political knowledge, and that viewers' age and level of education may serve a moderating role (Cao, 2008). Research has focused on political learning examining the connections between exposure to late-night political humor (and other so-called "soft news" programs) and heightened general political knowledge (Baum, 2003; Hollander, 2005), while other studies have concluded certain forms of political humor may serve to increase viewer cynicism, while also decreasing political efficacy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006).

Additional research has considered the effects of political humor by examining the influence of humorous viral videos, showing that satirical parodies, such as animated Jib Jab cartoons, can reduce viewers' trust in political institutions (Baumgartner, 2007).

Researchers have examined the demographics, political ideologies, and news media consumption patterns of fans of political comedy programs, such as *The Daily Show*, finding that specific programs attract distinct audiences, and that past assumptions that younger viewers had largely replaced traditional news content with late-night comedy were inaccurate; instead, fans of late-night political humor television largely report watching such programs in addition to using more traditional forms of news content (Young & Tisinger, 2006). Many Americans, especially younger voters, report receiving significant amounts of their information about politics through entertainment media. Studies from the Pew Research Center have found that a full 25% of all Americans say they learn about politics from comedy shows, while the figure was 50% for people under the age of 30 (Pew Research Center, 2008).

A major thread running through much of the academic research about political humor is a general interest in the potential for attitude change and persuasion. Serving as a foundation to this research, some existing literature focused on humor and persuasion can be found within the areas of marketing and advertising, where studies have explored topics such as how the use of humor in product advertising influences audience members (Sternthal & Craig, 1973; Spotts, Weinberger, & Parsons, 1997), or whether the use of humor can increase audience attention compared to non-humorous marketing messages (Weinberger and Gulas, 1992). Research within the field of social psychology has examined the impact of mood on the process of persuasion. Experimental studies have shown that subjects in positive moods are less likely to scrutinize persuasive messages or engage in central route systematic elaboration, compared to subjects in a bad mood (Bless, Bohner, Schwarz, & Strack, 1990; Mackie & Worth, 1991), and, alternately, that subjects induced to be in angry moods demonstrate increased central route, analytic processing (Moons & Mackie, 2007). Other research

has also suggested links between positive mood and reduced cognitive processing ability (Mackie & Worth, 1989). Considering the fact that experimental research has also shown that humor, or “perceived funniness,” can by itself increase positive mood (Moran, 1996), the complex connections between humor, mood, and persuasion are especially relevant to the examination of political satire.

Scholars within social psychology and political communication have also conducted experimental research focused on the unique ways in which persuasive messages and political humor may interact. Nabi and colleagues studied the persuasive effects of “funny social issue messages” (comedy monologues from comedians Bill Maher and Chris Rock), and specifically examined the dynamics of processing motivation, counterargument distraction and message discounting linked to humorous messages (Nabi, Moyer-Guse and Byrne, 2007). Nabi and colleagues concluded that, “humor is associated with greater source liking, closer information processing, and reduced counterargument, but also with message discounting.”

In light of these findings, it can be concluded that humor generally helps to increase message processing (paying attention to “get” the joke), but also that humorous political messages might be less likely to promote persuasion because receivers are more prone to *discount* the persuasive message as not being relevant to their own personal attitudes. Another recent study has also explored how political humor is processed and operates within a persuasive message. Conducting experimental research focused on humor within the cognitive processing of political messages, Young found that elaboration (related to a persuasive political message) was higher among subjects in a humorous condition compared to those in a serious condition — but that subjects demonstrated less evidence of argument scrutiny in the humorous condition (2008). A broad conclusion which could be drawn from these lines of research is that some humorous political messages may have a unique ability to grab attention and persuade an audience while simultaneously reducing counterargument (i.e., scrutiny of the message).

Some political humor scholars have recently called for a more nuanced approach within academic research into the effects of political humor and satire. A recently published article focused on the need to distinguish between different *types* of humor and their potential differential effects, specifically examining *The Daily Show*'s use of sarcasm (considered straightforward, or not complex) and irony (considered a complex form of humor) (Polk, Young, & Holbert, 2009). In a similar vein, Holbert and colleagues have published research which distinguishes between different types of satirical humor, specifically either "juvenalian" (typically more mean-spirited and acidic in tone) or "horatian" (light and witty in tone), positing that these different types of satire can serve to produce differing effects linked to the individual message processing abilities of the audience recipient (Holbert, Hmielowski, Jain, Lather & Morey, 2011). Additional research has also examined specific predictor variables related to the viewing audience of the late-night political humor programs, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, along with developing a new "affinity for political humor" scale to measure relevant individual-difference factors (Hmielowski, Holbert & Lee, 2011).

Within the broader realm of political humor research, this effort toward adoption of a better explicated and more narrowly focused approach is arguably especially important in the consideration of the effects of satire, which is a complex and at times ambiguous construct. (A most basic definition of the term satire, itself, is simply any "trenchant wit, irony, or sarcasm used to expose and discredit vice or folly" (Merriam-Webster, 2012), meaning the concept can generally be thought of as a tool to target, or expose, negative elements within society.) Furthermore, the unique nature of the "character-based" political satire performed by Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report* program may serve to create confusion among some viewers, or to produce unexpected audience effects. The best evidence of this phenomenon may be experimental research published by LaMarre, Landreville and Beam (2009) which investigated the dynamics of motivated processing among partisans who viewed the "conservative" political

satire of *The Colbert Report*. LaMarre and colleagues' results showed a general balance across political ideology in perceiving Colbert as funny, but with a surprising finding that many conservative viewers seemed to misinterpret the satire and reported believing that Colbert was actually sincere in his (mock) support for conservative ideology (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). In viewing humorous content from *The Colbert Report*, some viewers seem to fail to pick-up on Colbert's sarcasm and may actually not realize that his character is generally intended to skewer conservative ideology. In a related study with similar findings, Baumgartner and Morris (2008) also conducted research focused on *The Colbert Report* and found that instead of becoming more critical of conservative political perspectives, young adults who watched the show actually showed an increase in their support for the same Republican politicians and conservative policies that Colbert typically satirizes on the program.

Considering this body of literature, a significant amount of the existing communication research that has focused on the influence of political humor has been conducted either from a media effects perspective, or has concentrated on aspects of audience analysis, using quantitative research methodologies. Looking at the topic from a more macro level, where it seems there is a gap within the literature is in scholarly examination of the motives and intent of the political satire — and a more qualitative exploration into how audiences, especially policy experts and those within the media itself, perceive and understand complex political satire. The research presented within this dissertation generally adopts this type of in-depth, qualitative approach in considering the unique role that Colbert and the ongoing Colbert Super PAC project are playing within today's political landscape.

There are some examples of past scholars who have adopted similar, primarily qualitative, approaches in the examination of political humor and satire. Researching the journalistic role that modern late-night political satire plays within society, Geoffrey Baym's recent book, titled *From Cronkite to Colbert* (2010), provides an historical perspective on the

shift in U.S. news and journalism professional norms, from a strictly “hard news” approach to the more entertainment hard-news/soft-news blend seen today. Baym argues that programs like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* frequently provide viewers with both critical social critique and commentary functions as well as sometimes even the equivalent of “hard-news” style journalism. Often through edited video clips showing the juxtaposition of political leaders’ conflicting statements and hypocritical actions, Baym argues such forms of satire frequently play a critical and positive journalistic role in educating viewers.

From a humanities-focused and critical studies perspective, work by English professor and rhetorician Paul Cantor (1999) has considered the topic of political satire by specifically examining *The Simpsons* animated television series. Cantor found that the humor in *The Simpsons* operated on multiple levels, both as humorous “farce” — and as “intellectual satire” which often included implicit messages about the traditional American family and the state of modern popular culture. Cantor concluded that these different levels of humor within the program allowed for audience members to process the political messages inherent to the entertainment, and likely influenced individual level attitudes and opinions, to a varying degree — meaning that different individuals watching the complex political satire of *The Simpsons* come away with significantly different perspectives as to its meaning.

Research from a journalism history perspective has examined the program *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* and its popular “Weekend Update” segment, exploring the inspiration and motivations for the program’s politically focused humor through historical research and interviews with many of the show’s early comedy writers (Reinheld, 2006). Reinheld found that the writers of *SNL*’s comedy skits were conscious of the fact that their writing provided a sort of journalistic function, in that the program’s humor served as a source of news for many viewers. Reinheld noted that the *SNL* writers he interviewed reported feeling the need to maintain a certain “balance” or neutrality in their comedy writing, in an effort to foster credibility with the

audience and not to appear overly biased toward certain candidates or political parties. This sought after perception of producer neutrality, which Reinheld discusses in his research, conjures up professional norms of journalism and thus also the journalistic function of political satire, which is argued for in the previously mentioned work by Baym.

Considering the aforementioned body of research, a broad question currently being asked by many political communication scholars could be stated as, “What impact is political humor and satire having on modern American politics?” While that question could be examined from a variety of interesting and worthwhile perspectives, it is also arguably far too wide-ranging even for a dissertation effort. Somewhat more specific, and relevant to the earlier discussed examples of recent political participation by Colbert and Stewart, another expansive question might be “How is political satire evolving beyond its traditional role of that of observation, critique and commentary — into what could now, especially with the Colbert Super PAC phenomenon, be described as evolving into an active *part* of the political process itself?”

Stephen Colbert’s short lived Presidential campaign during the fall of 2007, in which he campaigned and attempted to have his name added to the presidential ballot for the South Carolina Democratic Party’s primary election, was an early example of Colbert’s character blurring and arguably crossing the line from entertainer to that of politician. Certainly the 2010 “*Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear*” on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. — which was scheduled less than two weeks before Election Day and by almost any definition would qualify as a major political rally (and to which Stewart and Colbert attracted a crowd of nearly a quarter of a million participants) — was another significant milestone within this evolution.

Similarly Colbert’s “expert” testimony about migrant farm labor before the U.S. House Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and Border Security on September 24, 2010, in which Colbert maintained his comedic persona for the majority of the hearing, also

certainly serves as a noteworthy moment within this realm. Colbert's participation in the committee hearing at least appeared to be intended as more than just a self-serving publicity stunt — and instead, though indeed peppered with humor and sarcastic jabs about partisanship and political ineptitude, seemed to also be a sincere effort by Colbert to draw attention to issues of migrant labor and promote immigration law reform. As was evident in the bemused expressions on many lawmakers' faces during that Congressional committee hearing, often Colbert's unique style of satire leaves people uncertain of exactly how to interpret his humor — or of the *meaning* behind his sarcastic messages. As was concluded in the earlier discussed studies by LaMarre et. al (2009) and Baumgartner and Morris (2008), the ambiguity of Stephen Colbert's particular brand of satire can, at least for some individuals, result in biased processing and, arguably, misinterpretation regarding the perceived message (or intent) of the humor.

The exceptional form of political satire Colbert has introduced — transitioning himself from that of a satirist, with the traditional role of providing sarcastic commentary and critique, into his new function as an active participant within the political process — seems to be relatively unique in American political history. The closest historical parallel appears to be the political activities of Pat Paulsen, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* comedian who first began staging faux-candidacies for the President of the United States in the late 1960s. Using deadpan and sardonic humor to critique government ineptitude and the insincerity of politicians, Paulsen appeared in a series of sketches on the television program as the official candidate representing the “STAG” (Straight Talking American Government) party, and expanded the gag to appearances around the country (Browne, 2012). While Paulsen became a well-known comedy cult figure and staged a number of semi-successful write-in campaigns for president throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, his activities were always more peripheral and never reached the level of Colbert's participation, with its significant fundraising and actual engagement with

government agencies. No significant academic scholarship focused on Paulsen's satirical efforts as a political candidate seems to exist.

Some recent political communication research has begun to specifically examine this new evolution of political satire as activism. A new book titled, "Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate," written by Amber Day, a professor of performance studies, examines satire from a number of perspectives within the current media and political landscape. Noting the recent explosion of online videos using satire to promote various political causes, Day discusses in the book what she labels "ironic authenticity" — and argues that there has been "a flowering of irony wielded for earnest political aims" (Day, 2011, p.24). Describing various examples of recent political activism through satire, Day maintains that those she examined "aim not just to dissent, but to shift the topics and terms of the debate," and are often successful in changing the public discourse.

Similarly, as included in a recent special issue of the journal *Social Research* focused specifically on Politics and Comedy (*Vol. 79, 1*), other academic research has explored the phenomenon by focusing on the protest activities of a group called "Billionaires for Bush," which uses satire to focus attention on the influence of money in politics and the issue of growing wealth inequality (Haugerud, 2012). In another recent book, titled "Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement," communication scholar Jeffrey Jones devotes a chapter to Colbert's style of character-based satire, and maintains that "Stephen Colbert has created one of the most complex characters of politically satiric comedy in American television history," (Jones, 2010, p. 224). Exploring the unique and interactive dynamic Colbert has with his audience, Jones argues that it is partially the comedian's parody persona that fosters this strong connection with viewers and encourages them to engage with Colbert and happily participate in his various high jinx efforts.

Due primarily to its recency, just one published academic article, written by several of the aforementioned scholars, is known to have focused specifically on Colbert's efforts with the Colbert Super PAC. In a piece highly relevant to this research, titled "Mr. Stewart and Mr. Colbert Go to Washington: Television Satirists Outside the Box," Jones, Baym, and Day discuss the Super PAC project as part of a larger analysis of the recent political activities staged by Colbert and his fellow satirist, Jon Stewart (2012). Jones and his colleagues examine what they describe as the "clearly border-crossing political satire" of Colbert and Stewart, as the two comedians have recently engaged their fans in various causes and activities. Describing the Colbert Super PAC as "an extended civics lesson," the article goes on to argue how, in forming and operating within his own political action committee, "Colbert is literally performing the debate" (regarding the influence of money in politics), and has essentially forced a reaction from journalists and political leaders:

By performing the process (of the Super PAC), therefore, Colbert has been able to spark wider interest and reaction from the political and journalistic establishment, constructing a spectacle that licenses journalistic attention and provokes response.

In serving to alter the focus of the broader political establishment, Colbert has used his satire to not only critique the debate, but to participate and *engage* within the debate. Jones and colleagues argue that what Stewart and Colbert have created is "a different way of *doing* politics," and that the comedians are both leveraging their popularity and authority positions (with their fans) to influence the political process:

Utilizing their own star power and respect as political commentators, they (Colbert and Stewart) employ the political stage to extend their critiques in ways that garner significant attention from news media and demand public response.

Jones, Baym, and Day also examine how many traditional authorities within the political and journalistic establishment have responded critically to the activities of Colbert and Stewart, and argue that these dismissive efforts are a form of "boundary maintenance" within the media and

political environment, and are often attempts “to delegitimize such alternative modes of political engagement.”

What seems to make Colbert’s efforts with the Colbert Super PAC a new and unique form of political satire is really its depth and complexity, and shift away from simple humorous satirical critique or commentary, toward what could instead be considered true political advocacy or activism. Beyond just an attempt to expose and shine a light on a particular political issue (in this case, campaign finance laws), this research explores whether Colbert’s humor crosses a boundary, past the realm of typical satire. Advocacy is simply defined as “the act or process of advocating or supporting a cause or proposal” — while its stronger cousin, activism, is defined as a “practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue” (Merriam-Webster, 2012). Colbert’s personal motivation for the project is arguably a key factor in determining intent; asking the comedian himself what his true goals are with the Colbert Super PAC would be the most illuminating. Unfortunately, however, multiple requests for interviews with Colbert (as well as with producers and writers on his staff) were repeatedly declined. Instead of directly exploring Colbert’s personal motivation and perspective on the project, the following research adopts a largely journalistic approach, with a focus on examining experts’ perceptions of the Colbert Super PAC effort, their understanding of Colbert’s motivation and intent for the project, and the range of views on its relevance to the debate over campaign finance laws and the role of money within our American political system.

Research Questions

Using the Colbert Super PAC project to specifically examine this broader phenomenon of modern and complex political satire, and the effects of Colbert's recent foray into politics, this dissertation explores the topic from several perspectives. Considering the ongoing campaign of the "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow" political action committee, currently being promoted both via *The Colbert Report* television program and online, the following questions are explored within this research:

RQ1: What has been the progression of the Colbert Super PAC project, and what political messages and social critiques have been conveyed by the satire?

RQ2: What is the perspective of the journalism community toward Colbert's efforts? How do journalists perceive his intent, and has the project been viewed as impacting the volume and tone of media coverage focused on campaign finance issues? How has it been covered by the media?

RQ3: What are the perspectives of members of the "pro-reform" and "free-speech" communities toward Colbert's efforts? How do campaign finance policy advocates (on both sides) perceive Colbert's satire, and what do they view as being Colbert's intent with the Super PAC project?

RQ4: What is the perspective of campaign finance law experts and government regulators toward the Colbert Super PAC project? How is Colbert's effort viewed by the FEC?

RQ5: Has the phenomenon influenced the debate about money and politics? Has Colbert created a new form of satire? Does it cross a line from satirical commentary into political advocacy?

Several approaches were used in order to address these various research questions. A comprehensive timeline was created, outlining the origins and evolution of the Colbert Super PAC (primarily as it appeared online and on *The Colbert Report* program) and discussing the

major events and elements that were important to the project's progression. Presented in Chapter 2, this effort includes both a condensed timeline and a lengthy narrative format, which provides a full understanding of the scope of the Super PAC project as well as analysis and commentary throughout regarding the major developments and messages within Colbert's humor. Chapter 2 thus focuses on the inquiries of RQ1.

In order to address the topics presented in the remaining research questions (RQ2 through RQ5), a series of in-depth interviews was arranged with key informants and experts, from the journalism, public policy, and legal realms — each offering a unique perspective on the value and effects of the Colbert Super PAC effort. This interview based research was conducted with the adoption of a journalistic lens approach, as part of an attempt to capture the unfolding history of the Colbert Super PAC project, as it evolved and interacted in the larger political and media spheres. Interviews allowed for an understanding of the “real time” influence that Colbert's satire had on experts' viewpoints, and a nuanced insight into the impact of the Super PAC project within the day to day political debate.

Chapter 3 is focused on the news media, and includes qualitative analysis of noteworthy media coverage of the Colbert Super PAC project — as well as summaries of the phone interviews which were conducted with 11 national political journalists regarding their perspectives and understanding of Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC. (A full listing of the interviews conducted for this dissertation — including dates — is included in Appendix A, and a document breaking down the interviewees into research categories is available in Appendix B.) Interviews were conducted with multiple journalists from national news outlets including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *NPR*, as well as writers with noteworthy political and online news organizations such as *The Huffington Post*, *Slate*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *Politico*. A full summary and discussion of comments made by the journalists interviewed is included. Additionally, Chapter 3 also includes a quantitative media analysis and discussion of

the categories of major newspaper coverage that has focused on the Colbert Super PAC. The entirety of Chapter 3 is intended to address the inquiries presented in RQ2.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 both present summaries from phone interviews conducted with leading members of the campaign finance advocacy community. Included in Chapter 4 are interviews with three different individuals within the so-called “pro-reform” community, including the founder and president of Democracy 21, Fred Wertheimer, who is considered one of the nation’s foremost advocates for campaign finance reform. Chapter 5 includes summaries of three interviews conducted with members of the so-called “free-speech” advocacy community. Included in this group is Brad Smith, the founder of the Center for Competitive Politics, considered the leading advocacy organization in Washington, D.C. opposing restrictions on campaign contributions — and James Bopp, a leading conservative lawyer who helped to bring the Citizens United case before the U.S. Supreme Court. The information presented in Chapters 4 and 5 is intended to address RQ3.

The content of Chapter 6 is intended to address RQ4 and includes interview summaries from three different campaign finance law experts, including Cynthia Bauerly, the 2011 chairwoman of the FEC. Along with Bauerly, interviews presented in Chapter 6 were also conducted with Rick Hasen, a leading academic expert in the area of campaign finance law, and Trevor Potter, who along with having previously served as a commissioner and chairman of the FEC, has been Colbert’s personal lawyer throughout the Colbert Super PAC project. Finally Chapter 7 provides a discussion of the overall impact of Colbert’s Super PAC satire, as well as a summary of the specific findings of this research — and several general conclusions regarding Colbert’s advocacy role and influence related to the national debate over campaign finance laws. Along with a discussion of connections between this research, existing literature, and important theories of political psychology, potential directions for future research efforts exploring this

unique form of political satire are also discussed. Thus this final chapter, along with the entirety of the research presented, aims to address the broad inquiries of RQ5.

Methodology

Timelines

Both the condensed and detailed timelines presented were compiled primarily using the video archive tool available on *The Colbert Report* web site, <http://www.colbertnation.com/video>. Extensive searches were done on the site for videos tagged with “Colbert PAC” and “Colbert Super PAC.” In addition, media coverage of the project was closely monitored — and a “Google Alert” was created to capture online news references to Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC. Online news video archives were used to access the two major television interviews that Colbert participated in during the progression of the Super PAC effort. In addition, a small, \$10, online donation was also made to the Colbert Super PAC organization in late October of 2011, in order to gain full access to the organization’s web site, www.colbertsuperpac.com, and to receive regular “Supporter” email updates regarding ongoing developments in the project.

Content Analysis

News coverage of the Colbert Super PAC project was examined using the LexisNexis Academic search engine (www.lexisnexis.com). Multiple relevant search terms were combined to search for and identify articles appearing in major U.S. newspapers which specifically focused on the Colbert Super PAC effort — and a coding system was then established to classify the articles into four major coverage categories. Following development of the coding system, to ensure general accuracy a second coder was trained and completed an independent parallel categorization of each of the newspaper articles considered. Dominant patterns and themes found within articles from each of the four coverage categories are discussed, and relevant headlines and exemplar quotes from key articles are presented. Noteworthy excerpts from several articles are highlighted to illustrate key findings of the broader analysis.

Interviews

Of the twenty interviews which were conducted for this research, one interview (with Cynthia Bauerly) was done in person, in Washington, D.C., while the rest were all completed over the phone. Interviewees were asked to participate via email and phone call requests. Most of the journalists interviewed were approached because they had written significant news articles about the Colbert Super PAC for their respective media outlets. A list of questions was prepared before each session, with the focus of the interview typically somewhat customized depending on the identity and affiliation of the individual interviewee. Research interviews generally ranged from approximately 25 minutes to more than an hour in length.

The interview conducted with Bauerly was digitally recorded using a handheld device, while all of the phone interviews were also digitally recorded and saved using an online, subscription-based service, RecordMyCalls.com. Each of the twenty research interviews was then professionally transcribed, by a small team of transcriptionists hired through an online administrative contractor service, oDesk.com. Following delivery of each interview transcript, the document was “spot-checked” (by the author) against the original audio recording to ensure the accuracy of the transcription process. Interview transcripts were closely analyzed, and when necessary the original recordings were referenced to determine the message and nuance of specific responses. Transcripts for each individual interview were then referenced in describing and summarizing each interviewee’s comments, and for the excerpts which are presented throughout in Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Condensed Timeline: Colbert Super PAC Events

March 10, 2011 — Colbert PAC first discussed on *The Colbert Report*

March 30, 2011 — Former FEC Chairman Trevor Potter first interviewed, Colbert declares: “Colbert PAC is going to be real, we’re going to do it!”

April 14, 2011 — Potter returns for 2nd interview, Colbert Super PAC forms are filed with FEC

April 28, 2011 — “How to Form a Super PAC” segment, interview with Senator Russ Feingold

May 11, 2011 — PAC vs. Super PAC discussion, Potter returns for 3rd interview, discussion of Viacom legal concerns and “media exemptions”

May 13, 2011 — Colbert first appears at FEC, files media exemption request paperwork and addresses fans outside FEC

May 16, 2011 — Colbert shows audience video montage segment of news coverage regarding FEC filing

May 31, 2011 — Potter returns for 4th interview appearance, discusses FEC’s letter and legal questions

June 30, 2011 — Colbert makes 2nd FEC appearance, granted partial media exemption. That night’s program includes video of speech outside FEC and Colbert’s “I can has Super PAC” celebration

July 11, 2011 — Colbert discusses media attention for Colbert Super PAC, calls for viewer contributions

July 18, 2011 — Colbert introduces “Cash Crawl” with names of contributors, interviews Sheila Krumholz (Center for Responsive Politics) and Sean Parnell (Center for Competitive Politics)

July 28, 2011 — Colbert reads letter from “Charlie and Grace,” then interviews Ham Rove character and journalist Matthew Dowd. Later, interviews former Louisiana Governor Buddy Roemer and uses “Colbert Super PAC Isolation Zone” to mock FEC rules against coordination

August 8, 2011 — Colbert discusses Ames Straw Poll, urges viewers to contribute to Colbert Super PAC

August 11, 2011 — Introduction of TV ads: “Episode IV: A New Hope” and “Behind the Green Corn.” Colbert explains “Rick Parry with an ‘A’” write-in campaign, and WOI-TV’s refusal to run ads

August 15, 2011 — Colbert discusses results of previous weekend’s Iowa Straw Poll

August 16, 2011 — Supporter suggestions for what Colbert Super PAC should stand for discussed, Colbert introduces “Word Cloud” submissions, interviews Frank Luntz about message framing

August 17, 2011 — Colbert discusses loss of Colbert Super PAC’s treasurer to the Perry campaign

August 18, 2011 — Ames Straw Poll is revisited, Colbert interviews WOI-TV news regarding “Perry-with-an-A-GATE!”

September 6, 2011 — Colbert interviews former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, discusses how Pawlenty helped inspire Colbert Super PAC

September 29, 2011 — Segment starts with focus on Karl Rove and fundraising practices of American Crossroads and Crossroads GPS, Potter returns for 5th interview to discuss potential anonymous “money laundering” practices of 501 (c) 4 organizations. Colbert announces formation of “Colbert Super PAC SHH!” and introduces “The Donating Game” with billionaire Mark Cuban

October 6, 2011 — Colbert discusses letter from Karl Rove’s lawyer regarding insinuations of money laundering and illegal coordination

October 17, 2011 — Colbert introduces new Colbert Super PAC TV ad, about the NBA lock-out, highlighting potential for anonymous contributions from 501 (c) 4 groups

October 24, 2011 — Colbert declares that Colbert Super PAC should stand for the notion that “Corporations are People” and interviews political strategist Frank Luntz on effective messaging

October 27, 2011 — Colbert introduces new, 2nd TV ad about the NBA lock-out, and specifically player salary cap issues, again highlighting potential for anonymous 501 (c) 4 support for Super PACs

October 31, 2011 — Interview with “Occupy Wall Street” protesters, Colbert proposes “co-optportunity”

November 7, 2011 — Colbert discusses issue of “coordination” between PAC entities and campaigns, interviews Potter in his 6th show appearance regarding American Crossroads’ recent FEC request, and then introduces new “Undaunted Non-Coordination” TV ad with Governor Buddy Roemer

December 7, 2011 — Colbert discusses media coverage of his proposed “Corporations are People” referendum on South Carolina primary ballot, then interviews state Democratic Party chairman

January 4, 2012 — Colbert discusses Republican presidential primary candidates and coordination

January 12, 2012 — Potter appears for a 7th interview to discuss issues of coordination, Jon Stewart is introduced to take over control of the PAC, which upon transfer is dubbed: “The Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC!”

January 12, 2012 — Interview with Ted Koppel on NBC’s *Rock Center* program airs

January 15, 2012 — Interview with George Stephanopoulos on ABC's *This Week* program airs

January 16, 2012 — Colbert discusses newest TV ad, titled "Attack in B Minor for Strings," attacking Mitt Romney. Colbert claims ignorance, due to Stewart's control of Colbert Super PAC

January 17, 2012 — Colbert shows newest TV ad, titled "Not Abel," with a call to South Carolina primary voters to support a Stephen Colbert candidacy by voting for Herman Cain

January 18, 2012 — The newest TV ad, titled "Double Negative," is shown, conveying an "arms race" message of the dangers of Super PACs and unbridled political spending. Colbert makes plea for support (for Herman Cain) in the South Carolina primary

January 19, 2012 — Colbert shows viewers another attack ad, called "Modern Stage Combat," which is ostensibly outside his control (and orchestrated by Jon Stewart) and advocates for voters to support Cain (i.e., Colbert) in the South Carolina primary. Later, Colbert interviews former U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens regarding the Citizens United decision

January 20, 2012 — Colbert and Herman Cain participate in a political rally at the University of Charleston, with Colbert delivering a significant and enlightening speech to the crowd

January 23, 2012 — Colbert provides a South Carolina primary election recap and declares he is "Re-suspending Herman Cain's suspended campaign." Colbert now wants control of Colbert Super PAC back, but Stewart refuses to relinquish power. Footage from the SC rally is shown

January 24, 2012 — Colbert delivers fundraising pitch to viewers, hints about hitting \$1 million amount

January 30, 2012 — Colbert discusses issue of FEC disclosures and quarterly filing deadlines, then shows montage of hunting down Stewart and re-gaining control over Colbert Super PAC

February 2, 2012 — Colbert patriotically salutes 22 billionaires for their political contributions of \$67 million to political action committees and publicly "thanks" them for buying the election

February 9, 2012 — Former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi releases YouTube video titled "Stop Colbert"

February 22, 2012 — Nancy Pelosi appears for an interview to promote the DISCLOSE Act

March 29, 2012 — Colbert discusses media coverage about how more Texas citizens had donated to Colbert's PAC than Romney's. Colbert then announces the launch of "The Colbert Super PAC Super FUN Pack" promotion

April 3, 2012 — Colbert interviews Potter in his 8th visit to the show regarding tax and reporting issues and other legal distinctions between Super PAC organizations and 501 (c) 4 groups

April 4, 2012 — Colbert announces that the show received a Peabody Award for its Super PAC segments

April 26, 2012 — Colbert focuses attention on the college campus Super PAC effort, discusses “treasure hunt” prize and his offer to visit the campus of the winners

June 28, 2012 — Colbert announces winner of college campus treasure hunt, who appears on the show

Detailed Timeline: Colbert Super PAC Events

The March 10, 2011 episode of *The Colbert Report* appears to mark the origins of the Colbert Super PAC project. In this episode, Colbert shows his audience a “movie trailer” style television ad, titled “Courage to Stand,” which was produced by former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty’s Freedom First PAC. The one minute and twenty-six second ad features high end movie-quality production values and is intentionally dramatic, with footage of Pawlenty delivering a policy speech edited amongst a montage of gripping and patriotic images and soaring background music. After watching the ad, Colbert expresses mock admiration for Pawlenty, sarcastically describing his PAC’s ad as “epic.” Colbert then shows a portion of another ad produced by the Freedom First PAC, this one conveying Pawlenty’s support for Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker.

Referencing the videos, Colbert declares that he was “so moved” by Pawlenty’s dramatic political ads that he decided to create one of his own, which is then played for the audience. At the end of the ad, which is a humorous and extremely similar parody of Pawlenty’s “Courage to Stand” ad (complete with spliced footage of dramatic movie scenes, including the likes of David Hasselhoff on a speedboat and Charlton Heston parting the Red Sea), Colbert’s voice-over says, “Join me, Stephen Colbert... at ColbertPAC.com,” after which a logo for “Stephen Colbert’s Colbert Pac – Making a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow” appears on the screen — a nearly identical graphic to the logo Pawlenty had used for his own PAC. Following the ad, Colbert instructs viewers to go to sign up at the ColbertPAC.com web site. (However, at this point, he does not provide any additional explanation of the goals or likely activities of the organization, only joking that the PAC *might* be used to either support Tim Pawlenty’s candidacy, or Colbert’s — “if [he] decides to run.”)

The next significant reference on the program to Colbert’s desire for a PAC appears to come during the March 30, 2011 episode, when the comedian hosts Washington, D.C. lawyer and

former Federal Election Commission Chairman Trevor Potter on the show, to help explain the legal background and spending limitations of political action committees. Leading up to the interview Colbert reveals that following his earlier call for viewers to sign-up at ColbertPAC.com, over 25,000 fans registered on the site within the first 12 hours. Colbert jokes that while some viewers have been wondering, “What *is* Colbert PAC?” — even he doesn’t know what it’s for. Continuing on, Colbert says “All I know is being a pundit these days is not enough anymore. If you want to be a political player in 2012, you need a PAC.” From here, Colbert discusses how Fox News political pundits Mike Huckabee and Sarah Palin both have their own PAC organizations, HuckPAC and SarahPAC respectively.

Transitioning the segment to the interview, Potter then outlines to the audience the strategic advantages to soliciting and spending political money through a PAC entity, and explains to Colbert that any individual is able to form their own PAC through the filing of the proper, relatively simple forms with the FEC. Potter explains to Colbert that by forming a “non-connected” PAC, the organization is able to solicit contributions and use those funds for things like private jet travel and political advertising, even for other candidates. An excited Colbert asks Potter if there might be any reason *not* to have a PAC, to which Potter warns that if Colbert formed a PAC, he would want to be careful to follow all of the rules and to comply with the FEC’s filing regulations — otherwise Colbert would be breaking the law. Hearing this warning, Colbert asks Potter, “Do a lot of people go to jail for breaking a law with their PAC?” and Potter responds that he isn’t aware of anyone ever going to jail for that reason. Here an enthusiastic Colbert exclaims, “Aha! That’s my kind of law!” and then proceeds to whip up a cheering studio audience, asking them, “Do you, the Colbert Nation, want to be players in the 2012 campaign?!” before declaring, “Colbert PAC is going to be real, we’re going to do it!”

During the April 14, 2011 episode, Colbert provides his viewers with a relatively detailed and educational-in-tone explanation of what a “political action committee” is, explaining how

PACs can be used to “buy exposure” for political candidates. Referencing his own desire to create a PAC, and saying he intended “to use Colbert PAC to raise awareness of issues, endorse candidates, and run political ads...,” Colbert again asks his screaming studio audience if they are “ready to be a force in the 2012 election?” At this point, however, Colbert explains to his audience that lawyers within Viacom, the corporate parent of Comedy Central (the network on which *The Colbert Report* appears), had recently informed the program’s producers that, due to legal concerns regarding how the Federal Election Commission would treat Colbert’s formation of a PAC — and the possibility that it would result in Viacom being viewed as an illegal political donor to the PAC, and in potential violation of FEC reporting and disclosure regulations — they would not be allowed to create the Colbert PAC entity. In the segment, Colbert displays an iPad and, showing the text on screen, reads aloud to the audience an email from a Viacom lawyer:

At this point, Stephen has used enough of Viacom’s resources in promoting the as-yet-unformed PAC... that the FEC would likely see an in-kind donation from Viacom in the event the PAC is ever actually formed. That means you can’t form it.

Continuing the segment, as the mournful “Taps” musical piece is played, Colbert dramatically salutes the Colbert PAC logo (as though it were a fallen soldier) telling a disappointed audience that unfortunately the show’s PAC project is over.

At this point, however, Colbert announces the return of former FEC Chairman Trevor Potter (now also Colbert’s personal lawyer) as a guest on that night’s show. In the interview, Potter provides a general legal tutorial regarding Viacom’s lawyers’ concerns related to Colbert’s desired PAC and the issue of in-kind donations (via use of the program’s air time, staff resources, etc.). Potter explains that because Viacom is a corporation, it is prevented by election law from giving money (or in-kind donations) to a PAC. In reaction to Colbert’s feigned disappointment about the loss of his hoped-for PAC, Potter then theatrically suggests to Colbert the possibility of an *alternative* option: the formation of a “Super” PAC instead. Intrigued, Colbert asks Potter to

explain what a Super PAC is, to which Potter outlines how the designation of such organizations originated from the Supreme Court's decision in the 2010 Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission case. Here, Colbert jumps in and exclaims, "Oh, [the decision] that said that corporations are people, and people have free speech, therefore money is speech and corporations can give unlimited money to political issues?" Affirming that Colbert's summary of the case is generally accurate, Potter then goes on to provide the audience with further detail regarding the Federal Election Commission's treatment of the Citizens United ruling and the agency's decision to create a new form of independent expenditure-only committee known as a "Super PAC."

In the segment, Potter explains to an excited Colbert that in order to form a Super PAC, the only necessary addition to his earlier application forms to the FEC (to request formation of a standard PAC) is to include a single page "cover letter" designating the organization as a *Super* PAC instead. Provided then by Potter with the necessary cover letter, Colbert enthusiastically reads how it describes that such an organization intends to raise "corporate and labor funds in unlimited amounts." At this point, by dramatically placing the new cover letter on top of the existing FEC forms, Colbert visually illustrates to an amused audience how, at least from an administrative paperwork perspective, the only difference between a traditional PAC and a less regulated Super PAC is the inclusion of a single sheet of paper. The segment ends with Colbert instructing an intern, dressed in "Pony Express" style garb, to rush the Super PAC forms to the FEC in Washington D.C.

In a later episode on April 28, 2011, before interviewing former U.S. Senator Russ Feingold, Colbert takes a moment out of the show to stand next to a large video screen, dubbed the "Loophole-ulator 6400" — and instructs the audience on "How to Form a Super PAC," with the (sarcastic) instructions being to first, fill out the application for a regular PAC, and then, to simply "add a cover letter saying it's a Super PAC... then, that's it!" During this segment, especially with the use of the term "loophole," Colbert is arguably signaling to viewers his

sincere perspective on the issue of Super PACs, while also poking fun at the FEC's interpretation and enforcement of the law through such a seemingly simplistic process. Before beginning the interview with Senator Feingold, Colbert again takes time to discuss the judicial rationale of the Citizens United ruling, saying:

Super PACs can take all the corporate money they want, and that's legal thanks to last year's Supreme Court case, Citizens United, which said that because corporations are people, and people have the right to free speech, and in politics money equals speech, restricting corporate political donations would violate the corporation's rights. It's all based on the landmark precedent, "Money Talks v. Bulls*%t Walks."

Colbert then introduces Senator Feingold and discusses Feingold's PAC, titled Progressives United, which Colbert describes as being "dedicated to overturning Citizens United."

During the interview, Feingold tells Colbert that he supports a return to limited campaign contributions, and that the political system is making a huge mistake "to get in bed with these corporate contributions..." Bringing up the legal argument that corporations should be allowed the same speech rights as individuals, Colbert jokes with Feingold, asking him whether he would let his daughter date a corporation, and then — in an allusion to the 1960s civil rights struggle — accuses him of being prejudiced toward "corporate people" and wanting to "muzzle" the speech rights of minority corporations. Colbert ends the interview asking Feingold to tell his audience where they should go to sign up for his PAC. In keeping with the trademark irreverent humor of the show, however, when Feingold provides direction for supporters to go to the web site ProgressivesUnited.org, Colbert points to a graphic that is put up on the screen — but instead of the correct URL, it is a web address for "CatsWearingThongs.org." (It should also be noted that although the URL CatsWearingThongs.org does direct users to a splash page showing two cats, wearing thongs, a click anywhere on that page immediately directs the visitor to the ProgressivesUnited.org home page — a humorous online quirk no doubt the result of *The Colbert Report's* humor writers.)

The May 11, 2011 episode of *The Colbert Report* is significant in that it focused heavily on the distinction between a PAC and a Super PAC, and the legal issues brought up by Viacom's legal staff related to the perception of "in-kind" political donations to the Colbert Super PAC (via the use of airtime in which Colbert talked about and promoted the PAC). During the segment, Colbert again takes considerable time to explain to his audience that while corporate donations to PACs are illegal under long standing campaign finance law, the Supreme Court's decision in the 2010 Citizens United case allowed for unlimited corporate donations to Super PAC entities. Colbert goes on to facetiously explain that "there is a crucial legal distinction between a PAC and a Super PAC.... One has the word 'super' in its name" — again conveying the notion that Colbert views the legal distinction between the two as flimsy. Noting that even after having filed the necessary paperwork with the FEC (to form a Super PAC, instead of a traditional PAC), the Viacom legal staff was still concerned about Colbert's discussion of the Super PAC project during the show, Colbert points out to his audience that other media outlets — specifically Fox News — frequently allow paid employees to talk about and promote their own Super PACs on the air. Colbert then shows a video montage of former President George W. Bush's senior advisor Karl Rove discussing his "American Crossroads" Super PAC and Republican political operative Dick Morris repeatedly promoting his conservative group "Super PAC USA" during political discussion on various Fox News programs.

At this point, introducing Trevor Potter as a return guest to the show, Colbert asks Potter to explain the specific legal concerns held by Viacom's lawyers. Here, Potter details that Viacom's issue is centered on a potential FEC judgment that Viacom would be making corporate contributions to Colbert's Super PAC in allowing Colbert to utilize corporate resources and staff from his show in promoting and creating Super PAC related content. Potter explains that Viacom's motivation for wanting to avoid making corporate donations relates to the company's desire to avoid being required to share internal corporate financial information with FEC

regulators and the public. Responding to Colbert's question regarding how "the guys on Fox get away with it," Potter then explains that Fox News, and its paid contributors, are covered under the "famous media exemption" — and therefore are not required to treat on-air discussion of political topics and candidates as in-kind donations to a political entity. Potter goes on to explain details related to the media exemption, specifically how it applies to news media outlets that are ostensibly reporting the news. Confirming his own understanding of Potter's explanation of the media exemption, Colbert asks:

So I couldn't *talk* about my PAC, but if I *reported* on my PAC, or made commentary on my PAC, or did analysis of my PAC, then it would be covered by the news exemption?

Continuing along with this rationale, Colbert puts on an old-fashioned bowler-style hat with a paper "PRESS" sign attached, and asks Potter if he and the program would qualify for the media exemption if he were to constantly wear the hat signifying himself as a journalist during the show. Potter explains that in order to receive a media exemption from the FEC, Colbert would need to request an "advisory opinion" from the commission by sending a letter to the FEC. Potter tells Colbert that if he were to be granted a media exemption from the FEC, he would then be "bulletproof" in regards to any limits about what he could say on the show about the Colbert Super PAC. Next, pulling out a \$5-dollar bill, an excited Colbert shows Potter that along with his application for the media exemption to the FEC, he plans to include a financial bribe. Noting that Potter will be representing him in front of the FEC, Colbert says:

...you know what, you can argue for me, in front of the FEC, but you know who *else* might argue for me? Mr. Lincoln.... Because remember, according to Citizens United, that's not a bribe, that's free speech.

Here, with the backdrop of a cheering studio audience, Colbert ends the interview segment with Potter by offering what is clearly a pointed commentary about the actuality and implications of the Supreme Court's controversial decision, and how the law has allowed money to influence the political process.

During the May 16, 2011 episode, Colbert showed viewers a video montage of the major media coverage of his filing of Super PAC legal request paperwork at the FEC the previous Friday. Sheepishly, a smiling Colbert says, “That is so embarrassing, *I’m* the big news.” Later in the segment, video footage is shown of Colbert delivering a speech to media and fans from the doorway of the FEC building in Washington D.C. During the speech, an intentionally pompous send-up of the typical politician’s insincere stump speech, Colbert incorporates a string of satirical humor — including references to standing in the same place where, 250 years before, George Washington had “filed *his* papers, to form his independent expenditures, non-connected political action committee” (a possible jab at the overly complex bureaucracy within modern campaign law) and to Karl Rove’s Super PAC “American Crossroads” (a frequent and ongoing target of Colbert’s satire). Turning the focus of the speech to campaign spending by politicians, and joking that with all of his new Super PAC money he’d soon be riding in a private jet, Colbert then tells the cheering fans in the crowd, “I will now shake your hand for \$1 a piece” as he makes his way to a waiting vehicle. Before driving away, waving from the car window Colbert yells to the crowd, “God Bless You, and God Bless Citizens United!”

Back in the studio, Colbert brags to his audience that he “raked in a total of \$31 dollars!” following the FEC filing event the previous Friday, and then explains to his audience that although the paperwork had been filed at the FEC, they now had to wait potentially up to sixty days, until the FEC responded to the advisory opinion regarding the legality of using the show to promote the Super PAC. (While serving some comedic purpose throughout, it could also be argued that simply the level of detail in which Colbert discusses specific campaign finance regulatory issues during these parts of the show is noteworthy in its contrast to typical television entertainment shows, and even news programming.)

A couple of weeks later in the May 31, 2011 episode, Colbert begins a segment discussing recent news coverage of Sarah Palin’s cross-country “bus tour,” a political activity the

former Alaska governor and vice-presidential candidate had been funding through her SarahPAC organization. Making fun of the fact that the SarahPAC organization's web site asserts the purpose of the bus tours is "to promote the fundamental restoration of America," Colbert draws attention to the fact that a "Donate" page soliciting contributions is what people first encounter when visiting the site. Colbert also reads from a page on the site where Palin discusses reflections made by her daughter, Piper, during a stop the bus tour made at Mount Vernon. Sarcastically, Colbert goes on to say that, like Governor Palin, "I want to use my PAC, Colbert Super PAC, to take my kids on a 'for profit' vacation." Lamenting that he can't yet form his own Super PAC until getting permission from the FEC, Colbert then shows viewers a letter he had received from the regulatory body asking a number of legal question about the operations of his show and how it would interact with the PAC he is requesting to form.

At this point in the segment, Colbert reintroduces Trevor Potter as a guest on the show. Colbert begins the interview by asking the lawyer if it is legal for Sarah Palin to be using money from her PAC to take what essentially appears to be a family vacation. Potter explains that because Palin isn't officially registered as a "federal candidate," she's legally able to use her PAC funds for "personal use" — something that wouldn't be allowed if she were a declared candidate. Colbert points out that Palin is primarily receiving contributions for her PAC from people who believe that she *might* become a candidate, but Potter confirms that Palin's activities are technically allowed under the current regulatory system.

Colbert then turns the discussion to the letter he received from the FEC, and asks Potter if it is likely that staff from the FEC have been watching his show. Potter confirms to Colbert that it is likely that someone from the FEC is watching, as "They're very interested in your PAC at this moment..." Colbert then jokes that he thinks members of the FEC work too hard already and that they shouldn't be spending their free time staying up late to watch his show. Emphasizing that he thinks members of the FEC aren't paid enough for what they do, a grinning Colbert deviously

says, “If we get the answers we want, I promise the number one objective of my PAC is to get raises for every member of the FEC!” An amused Potter then warns Colbert that, “attempted bribery could get you into trouble...” to which Colbert wittily responds, “Well I thought attempted bribery was officially free speech now?”

The segment then continues as Colbert asks Potter to help him review the individual items listed in the letter from the FEC, which included questions about whether *The Colbert Report* typically produced videos and shared them with other groups — and whether Colbert typically faced a review and approval process, from Comedy Central and its parent company Viacom, related to what he said on his show. Responding to this last question Colbert retorts to Potter that no approval process exists in regards to what he says on the show, and just to prove it he wisecracks that Viacom Chairman Sumner Redstone “is a demon spawn who feasts on the flesh of children.” The segment ends with Colbert thanking Potter for his help in preparing his responses to the FEC’s questions.

About a month later, during the June 29, 2011 episode, Colbert again begins a segment providing viewers with a brief primer on the Supreme Court’s Citizens United case — describing the ruling as allowing for the creation of Super PACs, “Political action committees that can take unlimited corporate and union cash to create political ads.” Colbert goes on to describe his own quest for a Super PAC, highlighting the fact that in a recent Google search of the phrase “Super PAC,” references to Colbert’s project appeared as the first five results shown. Using his typically arrogant and pompous persona, here Colbert boasts to his audience that he personally brought Super PACs to the nation’s attention in April. Colbert then focuses attention on a particularly offensive, racist, and reprehensible political ad, attacking California Democratic Congressional candidate Janice Hahn, which was produced by a conservative political action committee called Turn Right USA. Showing a clip of the egregious ad, Colbert jokes that it serves as an example of the kind of ad he hopes to create if he is allowed to form his own Super PAC. Explaining then

to the audience that he will learn the fate of his Super PAC the very next day, when members of the Federal Election Commission are scheduled to rule on the filed advisory opinion request, Colbert urges fans of the show to come to the FEC building tomorrow morning to hear him speak following the hearing.

The June 30, 2011 episode was taped the same day as Colbert's second appearance, earlier that day, in front of the FEC — during which the Commission issued a ruling regarding whether Colbert (and his ultimate employer, Comedy Central's parent company Viacom) would be allowed a "media exemption" related to Colbert's formation of the Colbert Super PAC. In the opening segment, Colbert again explains to viewers why Viacom would want such an exemption, explaining how without it Colbert's own discussion of the Super PAC could be treated as an "in-kind" donation to the organization from Viacom, meaning the parent company could be required to provide "sensitive financial secrets" in campaign finance reporting documentation required by the FEC. Dramatically telling his audience that his appearance that morning in front of the FEC changed the course of American history, Colbert then showed a humorous montage of mundane footage from the hearing (including a moment in which a bored Colbert briefly fakes having fallen asleep). Joking that, "If only there had been more arcane bureaucratic jargon, we might have been carried on C-span 3," Colbert then shows video of the FEC Chairwoman Cynthia Bauerly announcing the Commission's 5-1 ruling that Colbert would be allowed to form his Super PAC.

At this point in the show, screaming "I can has Super PAC!" in celebration (a humorous reference to the popular "lolcats" internet meme), Colbert shows dramatic slow-motion footage of himself submitting the required Super PAC paperwork to the Secretary of the FEC. (At the exact moment the forms are handed to the Secretary, flashing video game style graphics surround Colbert's image and sound effects imply that with the transfer of papers he'd suddenly received super powers, like a character in a video game.) The segment continues showing Colbert,

following the FEC hearing, delivering a speech on the street to cheering fans in front of a large stand of news media microphones. During the speech, Colbert melodramatically describes how, 60 days before, he had stood at that very spot to petition the FEC to “to raise unlimited moneys, and use them moneys to determine the winners of the 2012 elections...” Colbert’s speech to the crowd then humorously touches on the media’s curiosity regarding his actual intent with the Super PAC project:

Now some people have cynically asked, “Is this some kind of joke?” Well, I for one don’t think that participating in democracy is a joke. I don’t think that wanting to know what the rules are is a joke. But I do have one federal election law joke, if you’d like to hear it. “Knock-knock.” (Crowd responds: “Who’s there?”) “Unlimited union and corporate campaign contributions...” (Crowd responds...) “That’s the thing... I don’t think I should have to tell you!”

With this joke, Colbert is acknowledging the media’s interest and uncertainty regarding his actual motivation behind the Super PAC project — and is arguably also hinting strongly that his true motivation is linked to a negative sentiment regarding the lack of transparency required in campaign contributions and the disproportionate influence of money within elections.

As the speech continues, Colbert jokes with the crowd that he doesn’t yet know what he’ll do with the money he’s now able to raise through his Super PAC organization. Continuing his faux-dramatic speech, Colbert exclaims, “I don’t know about you, but I do not accept limits on my free speech. I don’t know about you, but I do not accept the status quo... But I do accept VISA, MasterCard and American Express.” With the speech complete, patriotic music is then played against a montage of Colbert working his way through the cheering crowd, catching money being tossed at him and using an iPad equipped with a credit card scanner to instantly take political donations from fans on the street. Back in the studio, the segment ends with Colbert urging viewers to go to ColbertSuperPAC.com to sign up and donate — and Colbert declaring to an excited studio audience, “We are going to fix America! Together we will build a better tomorrow, tomorrow!”

During the July 11, 2011 episode, Colbert begins the show with a recap reminding viewers of the recent FEC ruling granting him permission to form his own Super PAC organization and boasting that the Colbert Super PAC project had already become the focus of significant media coverage, including articles with headlines such as “Colbert Super PAC Pushes the Limits of Election Law” (Good, 2011) and “Colbert’s Super PAC: Good for Government and Good for Us.” (Kleinsmith, 2011). Colbert urges any viewers who haven’t already to sign up at Colbert Super PAC, and exclaims that over 94,000 supporters have already become members and donated money to the organization. Noting that the Citizens United ruling allows for *unlimited* political donations, Colbert displays a large board showing the PAC’s “fundraising goal” — with the top end of the monetary goal marked with the mathematical symbol for infinity. Colbert then ends the segment making a final push for donations to the PAC, urging viewers to contribute money “...because there are countless conservative issues and candidates that deserve the kind of support that only we can provide.”

The next day, as part of the July 12, 2011 episode, after announcing that Republican Presidential candidate Herman Cain had agreed to a future interview on the program, Colbert jokes that, as head of the Colbert Super PAC, he would consider endorsing Cain’s candidacy — but that an endorsement would need to be contingent upon Cain signing his Super PAC’s “Candidates Pledge” (currently only a blank document). Colbert goes on to explain that he wants his PAC to have a pledge for candidates because “anyone who is anyone in Republican circles has a pledge now,” including Grover Norquist (founder of the conservative organization Americans for Tax Reform) with his “anti-tax” pledge and Senator Jim DeMint, with his “anti-earmark” pledge. Although not overly significant to the rest of the Colbert Super PAC effort, this particular segment serves as yet another example of Colbert using the PAC project — almost in the same educational manner as might be expected within a public affairs or civics class — as an opportunity to highlight to viewers the intricate mechanisms that influence the political process.

During the July 18, 2011 episode, Colbert provides the audience with a brief summary of the status of the Super PAC project and fundraising effort, and then announces that the actual names of all individuals who have donated to the Colbert Super PAC will be appearing during the show at the bottom of the screen (similar to a stock-market ticker), in what the show has dubbed the “Cash Crawl.” Alluding to the fact that supporters were not warned about the possibility of such a public form of name disclosure before donating to the Colbert Super PAC, Colbert jokes that “...according to the FEC, this is 100% legal and at least 10% ethical.” Commenting that *some people* believe that too much money in politics is a problem, Colbert then goes on to explain to the audience that he recently “spoke to people on both sides of this issue,” including Sheila Krumholz, the executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics (described by Colbert as “a group that advocates transparency in campaign finance”), and Sean Parnell, the (then) President of the Center for Competitive Politics (described as “support[ing] unlimited and untrackable money in politics”).

The segment continues with clips from the two recorded interviews Colbert conducted, edited against each other, starting with Parnell from the conservative group advocating against campaign finance regulations. Colbert begins the interview with Parnell by asking, “Should there be any limit in how much money corporations can give to influence our elections or to give directly to campaigns?” Parnell responds saying that there shouldn’t be any limit imposed, because “money enables free speech” — and by limiting campaign contributions, “you are necessarily limiting political speech.” Continuing his conversation with Colbert, Parnell argues, “If you look at the First amendment, it says *freedom* of speech ... so [we should] work to ensure that the first five words of the first amendment, ‘Congress shall make no law...’ is in fact the way that things go.” Abruptly stopping Parnell at this point of the conversation, Colbert pointedly asks him, “What is the rest of that sentence?” and presses him to recite the rest of the first amendment language beyond the first five words he had provided. Parnell is awkwardly unable

to remember the rest of the language that begins the first amendment, and Colbert, who remains in character, allows for his visibly uncomfortable guest to struggle and stumble through attempting to remember the line. Finally a clearly embarrassed Parnell admits to Colbert, “I did not memorize the entire first amendment,” before the segment shifts to the comedian’s other interview with Krumholz.

Colbert begins the interview with Krumholz by asking her, “Do you see a problem with money in our current political system?” Krumholz responds, saying:

It’s not that money is good or bad, it’s that... money is power – and so if it’s left unchecked, if it’s left unscrutinized, it has greater power to skew policy away from the public interest.

At this point, Colbert turns what seems to be a semi-serious interview into an opportunity to laugh at his interviewee. Colbert asks her, “It sounds like you think that hidden money taints politics?” to which Krumholz response, “I think hidden money definitely taints politics.” Colbert follows up by asking her, “How do you hope to address the taint?” (What Krumholz does not realize during this point of the interview is that Colbert has tricked her into using the word “taint,” a slang term for an embarrassing part of the body — and Colbert has successfully transitioned the seemingly serious interview into rather sophomoric humor, as is evident with the audience’s laughter when the recorded interview clip is shown as part of the program.)

Notwithstanding his humorous and arguably immature interview technique, Colbert does still allow Krumholz to outline her organization’s solution to the issue of money influencing politics — through “encouraging disclosure of contributions going to these outside, often shadowy groups” — before the segment is transitioned back to the previous interview with Parnell.

The remainder of the segment includes portions of conversations Colbert had with both Parnell and Krumholz, asking them each about what sorts of things he could legally buy with his PAC money. Taking the questioning to ridiculous levels, Colbert asks Parnell whether he could use PAC money for a private jet, or a private jet-ski, or even a private trained elephant. Parnell

explains that generally, “If you can show that an expenditure is related to advancing the mission of the PAC,” then that expenditure is considered legal under current campaign finance laws. Colbert asks Krumholz whether he could use PAC money to purchase “thousands of puppies, and then offer free puppies to everyone who votes for the candidates I like?” Krumholz responds by telling Colbert that PACs aren’t allowed to give gifts over a certain value to influence voting, to which Colbert again hijacks the interview into absurdity, dramatically pretending that Krumholz’s response is causing the death of innocent puppies.

The segment ends with Colbert questioning Parnell about the potential for money to negatively influence politics, asking “Is there any evidence to suggest that corporate contributions affect how a politician acts or votes?” Parnell responds to this question, saying “Ah, not really,” appearing to be unaware that Colbert’s line of questioning here is highly sarcastic in tone. Colbert then continues his sardonic assertion, clearly signaling his true beliefs to any viewers who sense his dripping sarcasm:

It’s just seems so sad that people think so little of human nature that they think that money could *possibly* be a corrupting influence in our politics... because corporate money is just like any other money, it doesn’t *really* influence behavior.

Colbert ends the segment, and his veiled editorial about the subversive power of money in politics, using a humorous visual example of how money can influence behavior: both Colbert and Parnell are shown enjoying a Bud Light Lime beer, a product Colbert is frequently shown drinking during the program as part of an over-the-top “product placement” agreement. “Let’s drink to that. That tastes like free speech!” exclaims Colbert, as the interview segment ends.

During the July 28, 2011 episode, Colbert uses an amusing situation to address the purpose of the Colbert Super PAC. Colbert reads aloud to his audience a letter that he had received from two young watchers of his show, 10 and 8 year-old siblings Charlie and Grace. In the hand written letter, which included a \$13 (cash) donation for Colbert’s Super PAC, the

children write that their mother won't allow them to make a lemonade stand (in order to raise additional funds for the Super PAC), "until you decide what the Super PAC stands for..." To this, Colbert complains:

How should I know what it stands for? All I know is that Citizens United said that unlimited money is unlimited speech...so I formed the Super PAC and people were handing me money, no questions asked! Now I've got this huge "money-mouth." I'm supposed to *think* about what it *says*? I don't think about what *I* say...

From here, Colbert steers the topic of the segment to Karl Rove, described as the founder of the country's largest Super PAC, American Crossroads. Joking that he "couldn't reach" Rove himself, Colbert proceeds to talk at his desk to a loaf of canned ham with eye-glasses placed on it (dubbed "Ham Rove," as part of a running joke on the show about the shape of Rove's face and head), as though the ham was actually the powerful Republican political operative.

Noting that Ham Rove isn't saying much, Colbert then introduces his other guest, ABC News political analyst and former George W. Bush campaign strategist Matthew Dowd. In the interview Colbert asks Dowd to describe to the audience how the typical PAC works and what it usually stands for, to which Dowd explains that PACs can advocate for a broad variety of political issues. Steering the conversation to fundraising and the large amounts of money (often from millionaires and billionaires) that support PACs, Colbert asks, "Do those billionaires help set the agenda?" Dowd responds, noting that while wealthy donors do often have influence over PACs, broad support from average members of the public can often be more powerful. At this point in the interview, Colbert asks members of the cheering studio audience, "Why don't I ask you people what you stand for... and then Colbert Super PAC will stand for that?" Next Colbert directs members of the Colbert Super PAC to go to the organization's web site, to click on a special section, titled "I Stand For," to submit their suggestions for what the Super PAC should stand for. Returning to the interview with Dowd, Colbert asks his guest to talk about how PAC money is used to communicate political messages, effectively "turning that money into speech."

Explaining to Colbert that PACs frequently use the money they raise to purchase TV ads in battleground areas, Dowd suggests that the best way for Colbert to make an impact with his PAC is by running ads before the upcoming “Ames Straw Poll” in Iowa.

Later in the same July 28th episode, Colbert also sits down for an interview with Republican presidential candidate and former governor of Louisiana Buddy Roemer. At the beginning of the interview Colbert stresses that, having been warned about non-coordination laws for PACs by his lawyer, Trevor Potter, because he has his own Super PAC organization, he (Colbert) must be careful not to discuss details related to Roemer’s campaign strategy, “. . .so no one can accuse us of working together.” During the interview, Roemer explains that in his campaign for President, as part of an effort to fight against the influence of special interests, he has decided to not accept any donations from PACs — and to instead impose a \$100 limit on all campaign donations from individuals. Colbert then asks Roemer whether he is “on the ballot” for the upcoming Ames Straw Poll in Iowa, but as the conversation proceeds Colbert explains that the topic (Roemer’s campaign strategy) is now in dangerous territory for the two to be discussing. Placing a “cone of silence” device over his head, Colbert pretends to listen to music while Roemer tells the audience what sort of assistance his campaign could use in Iowa. (Here, facing Colbert — who is wearing what looks like a plastic garbage can with the phrase “Colbert Super PAC Isolation Zone” written on it — Roemer explains that what he really needs in Iowa is the support of average, hard-working citizens to help promote his campaign.) Once the Isolation Zone is removed Colbert explains to Roemer that while, according to FEC rules against coordination of PAC and campaign activities, he couldn’t listen to Roemer in person, he *would* be able to later watch the video from that day’s show, and hear the candidate explaining the strategic needs of his campaign. “Now legally, I can go home and watch the show tonight and hear what you said. . .I just couldn’t be here with you to plan.” Ending the interview with this point, Roemer

and Colbert both joke about how this interpretation of federal election law, regulating against political coordination between campaigns and PAC organizations, “makes no sense at all.”

During the August 8, 2011 episode, Colbert explains to viewers that the upcoming Ames Straw Poll in Iowa is for the first time allowing “write-in” candidates this year — and that political experts are anticipating Super PAC organizations to have significant influence over the voting process. Colbert goes on to outline how most of the Republican candidates competing in Iowa are being supported by big-donor Super PACs, such as the “Revolution PAC” backing Ron Paul, and the “Restore Our Future PAC” backing Mitt Romney. Noting that several different Super PAC organizations are supporting the candidacy of Rick Perry, Colbert shows his audience a TV ad produced by a group called “Jobs for Iowa Super PAC” that is being run in Iowa to support the Texas governor’s campaign. Colbert then explains that, due to the wealthy donor network Perry is believed to have assembled, there is actually somewhat of a *competition* between the various Super PAC groups supporting him:

There’s a good reason to want to be Perry’s main Super PAC because Perry already has a *huge* network of mega donors, and their mega money will go into the coffers of whatever Super PAC comes out on top... So I would just like to say, back-off bitches! I saw him first. I endorsed Perry weeks ago...

This particular segment is noteworthy because it addresses additional relatively esoteric information about the strategic operations of Super PAC organizations, which at this point are still a fairly new political phenomenon. Colbert then goes on to announce that, in an effort to join those Super PACs that are vying for the opportunity to be *the* Super PAC supporting Governor Rick Perry, the Colbert Super PAC would soon be releasing its first TV ad, to run later in the week in Des Moines, Iowa, during the local news broadcasts. Teasing the audience with a brief clip of the TV ad, Colbert urges viewers to go to the Colbert Super PAC web site to sign up and donate in order to be among the first to get to see the new ad.

Several days later during the August 11, 2011 episode, Colbert shows a video montage of TV news commentators discussing the Colbert Super PACs release of two TV ads, both supporting Governor Rick Perry. Here Colbert again gives his audience a brief overview of how there are several Super PAC groups essentially competing in Iowa to become the “main” Rick Perry Super PAC organization. Colbert boasts that “last night we (the Colbert Super PAC) launched our ‘air power’ to prove that we’re the only Super PAC Rick Perry really needs,” — and then plays the first ad (humorously titled, “Episode IV: A New Hope”) in its entirety for the show’s audience:

A storm is gathering over Iowa, a money storm. Out of state groups like “Grow PAC” and “Jobs for Iowa PAC” are flooding the Iowa airwaves telling you to vote Rick Perry at the Ames Straw Poll. They think they can buy your vote with their unlimited Super PAC money.

But “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow” ask, ‘What about *our* unlimited Super PAC money?’ We want you to vote for Rick Parry too but not their Rick Perry, our Rick Parry.

On August 13th write in Rick Parry. That’s Parry with an A for America, with an A for Iowa. Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow is responsible for the content of this advertising.

Following the showing of the first TV ad, Colbert confirms for the audience that he is asking fans and voters in Iowa to go to the Ames Straw Poll event and to submit a “write-in” vote for Rick Parry, spelled with an “a” (instead of an e). Continuing the segment Colbert tells an enthusiastic audience that along with the first TV ad, the Colbert Super PAC is also running a second TV ad (titled “Behind the Green Corn”) in the Des Moines metropolitan TV market. Colbert then also shows the entirety of this second ad:

Iowa, a land of good people who can make up their own minds — but outside groups like “Jobs for Iowa Super PAC” are trying to pander to Iowans with pro-Perry ads featuring cheap ‘cornography’ that your kids could see, just so you’ll vote for Rick Perry at the Ames Straw Poll.

But “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow” believe that Iowans deserve better and we’re going to give it to you. (*...to sexy music: We’re getting all up in those niblets. Oh yeah!*)

On August 13th write in “Rick Parry.” That’s Parry with an “A” for America, with an “A” for Iowa. Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow is responsible for the content of this advertising. Ooh!

Both ads, although obviously intended to be humorous and highly irreverent (especially when viewed, as opposed to just reading the audio as text), are also clearly attempting to convey a critical message regarding the influence of Super PAC activity within the state of Iowa. With phrases such as, “They think they can buy your vote with their unlimited Super PAC money” and video images of politicians accepting wads of cash (as though accepting bribe money), these ads run by Colbert and his Super PAC are undoubtedly conveying a clear critique of the political process and the negative influence of Super PAC money within it.

Later in the same episode, Colbert indignantly tells the audience that one of the local TV stations in Des Moines, WOI-TV (the local ABC affiliate), had declined to air the Colbert Super PAC ads because the station felt that the ads were likely to confuse local viewers. Colbert jokes to his audience that the “Midwestern Media Elite are trying to silence us!” Stressing that his (faux) anger is directed at the station’s management, and not the talented news team, Colbert then “attacks” the WOI station, noting that they haven’t received a local Emmy Award in over 10 years. Continuing the segment, Colbert speculates that one of the other Super PACs supporting Governor Perry might have been behind the refusal of the TV ads. Sensing a potential conspiracy against the organization, the comedian excitedly declares to a screaming studio audience that the Colbert Super PAC is 165,000 supporters strong, and that it won’t be silenced. Colbert then also notes that the WOI-TV news team covered the “Rick Parry write-in” ads the Colbert’s Super PAC was running there in the state, and challenges the local reporters to investigate the “corruption” there at the station.

During the August 15, 2011 episode, Colbert discusses the details of the Ames Straw Poll which had taken place in Iowa the previous Saturday. After humorously discussing how Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann had won the straw poll by receiving the most votes, and how Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty, having done poorly in the straw poll, had decided on Sunday to withdraw from the race, Colbert discusses “how the Colbert Super PAC did” in Iowa over the weekend. Declaring victory, Colbert reports that — after having run the two Super PAC ads in the state urging voters to “write-in” their votes for Rick Parry — the official state GOP results showed that Governor Rick Perry had received a total of 718 votes. Noting however that the Iowa GOP officials were refusing to release the full details of the write-in results, Colbert questions how many of those write-in votes actually spelled Rick Parry with an “A,” and then challenges the news team at WOI-TV to investigate the situation and get to the bottom of the story.

The August 16, 2011 episode includes a segment where, referencing his earlier call for supporters of the Colbert Super PAC organization to submit online suggestions for what the organization should stand for, Colbert explains that the PAC had received responses from over 53,000 viewers. Colbert then explains that instead of reading all of the responses individually, he had instructed his staff to analyze the responses by incorporating the suggestions into a “word cloud,” described by Colbert as a “visual representation of your most frequently used words,” in which the most commonly used words become the largest words visible within the cloud. Showing the audience a word cloud representing all of the supporters’ suggestions, Colbert jokes that along with “people,” “government,” and “education,” the word “marijuana” is among the largest words in the cloud. Next, Colbert shows his audience an alternative word cloud, one that not only reflects the most common words from viewer suggestions, but which also gives proportionate weight to the amount of money that those individual supporters had donated to the Colbert Super PAC. Colbert explains:

I believe democracy means: one man, one vote, for one dollar. Remember, Super PACs only exist because the Supreme Court ruled that “money equals speech.”

Continuing with the segment, Colbert jokes that if certain supporters of his PAC wanted to make a difference, they should spend less money on marijuana and more on contributions to his Super PAC. Noting that the alternative word cloud image most prominently displays the words “education,” “people,” “tax,” and “government,” Colbert exclaims that he has no idea what it all means — but that he’s enlisted the services of Republican consultant and message strategist Frank Luntz to help him craft a message using these ideas. Noting that some people critically view Luntz as “a spin doctor, who manipulates public emotion,” Colbert jokes that “Luntz would reframe that [characterization of himself], as “Fox News Analyst” instead.

Continuing on within the August 16th segment, Colbert transitions to an interview he had conducted earlier with Luntz, who in the meeting is supposedly helping Colbert to create the messaging for an effective Super PAC ad. At the beginning of the interview, Luntz begins by explaining to Colbert how basic terminology can be carefully used within political advertising to alter viewers’ understanding of a politician’s message. Discussing how message framing works, Luntz describes how he has advised politicians to use alternative phrases like “Energy exploration” and *not* “oil drilling” — and “climate change” and *not* “global warming.” At this point of the interview, through his unique brand of deadpan sarcasm, Colbert tells Luntz, “I think that is ‘Brilliant, *not* manipulative.’” Later in the interview, Luntz tells Colbert that he can help to create a Colbert Super PAC ad with messaging that will work for both Democrats and Republicans, and will appeal to young and old voters in both the South and the North. The interview ends with Colbert telling Luntz that he will cooperate with his consulting advice on messaging, and Luntz promising to help Colbert create the messaging for a powerful TV ad. Back in the studio as Colbert ends the segment, he shows the audience a copy of Luntz’s book, “Win.” (Promotion of his book to Colbert’s audience, along with the general exposure from the

interviews, seems likely to have been Luntz's motivation for his participation in the Colbert Super PAC project.)

The August 17, 2011 episode addressed what was perhaps one of the stranger twists within the evolution of the Colbert Super PAC, and the blurring it created between entertainment driven satire and the reality of the actual Republican presidential candidates' campaigns. In the segment, Colbert discusses how the previous day, *The Atlantic* news outlet had reported that campaign records showed the same individual, Salvatore A. Purpura, was listed as the treasurer for both the "Rick Perry for President" campaign and the Colbert Super PAC. Feigning dramatic shock, Colbert then goes on to discuss how he had already provided a quote on the matter to the news outlet, *Politico*. The August 16, 2011, *Politico* story (Levinthal, 2011), which included the headline "Stephen Colbert Loses Treasurer to Rick Perry," included the following quote from Colbert:

We're not surprised. Sal is the best in the business. That's why we went with him. We're happy for Sal and we are even happier that Governor Perry has sent the clear signal of which Super PAC he trusts to receive all that unlimited money waiting to pour in on his behalf. Loud and clear, sir. Unofficially, loud and clear.

Humorously describing to his audience the surprising situation caused by the decision of one of his Super PAC staff members ("Rick Perry has taken sloppy seconds on my treasurer..."), Colbert stresses to viewers that this development does *not* mean that there is any illegal "coordination" taking place between his Super PAC and the Perry campaign. However, as is evident within the quote Colbert provided to *Politico*, the comedian again saw the media coverage of an unexpected development within his Super PAC as an opportunity to convey a sarcastic message regarding both "unlimited money" and the issue of non-coordination between PACs and campaigns.

The next day, on the August 18, 2011 episode, Colbert returned to the topic of the Ames Straw Poll, briefing his audience on the latest developments in what the show had dubbed "Perry-

with-an-A-GATE!” Reporting that a “tweeted” cell phone photo a voter had taken of their own ballot provided proof that such ballots (with a write-in vote for “Rick Parry”) existed, Colbert again called for the Iowa GOP to release the full details of the straw poll in order to find out exactly how many voters had followed the Colbert Super PAC’s urging to mis-spell Governor Perry’s name. At this point Colbert reminds viewers that he had suggested that members of the WOI-TV local news team in Des Moines research the story. Colbert then transitions the segment to a pre-recorded satellite feed with several of the members of the WOI-TV station’s news team. During the segment, in which Colbert pretends to be a local news anchor interacting with the individual WOI news staff members — including humorous updates on actual local news, weather and sports — Colbert receives an update from the Iowa station’s anchors about their actual investigation into the local Republican Party’s refusal to release the write-in details of the Ames Straw Poll. Along with its obvious humor, this segment seems to have perhaps been an opportunity, provided by *The Colbert Report*, for the local Iowa TV station’s staff to display a good-natured sense of humor in regards to the attention it had received earlier related to their decision not to run the Colbert Super PACs TV ads.

The September 6, 2011 episode of *The Colbert Report* included an interesting connection to the Colbert Super PAC project as Colbert interviewed former Minnesota governor and presidential candidate Tim Pawlenty. During the interview, discussing how financial issues had hindered his campaign for president and how his organization had “come out a little short” and was now in debt, Pawlenty asked Colbert whether the Colbert Super PAC could help his campaign out financially. This question led to another on-air discussion regarding the FEC’s regulations against “coordination” between campaigns and PACs, with Colbert pointing out that he couldn’t have had this conversation with Pawlenty while he had been a presidential candidate and then provided Pawlenty with a PAC donation (as that would constitute illegal coordination). Still lightheartedly pressing for financial assistance from Colbert’s PAC, Pawlenty pointed out

that Colbert essentially owed him something because Colbert had “stolen” the logo from Pawlenty’s own PAC organization and used a strikingly similar graphic for the Colbert Super PAC. Responding to this comment, Colbert confirmed to Pawlenty that “[your] PAC *was* the inspiration for my PAC.” Still resisting the former governor’s request for money from the Super PAC, Colbert jocularly tells Pawlenty that instead, “I will see you in hell!” Ending the good natured interview, Colbert asks if there is someone that Pawlenty would like to endorse in the ongoing presidential race, and Pawlenty jokes that he’d like to endorse Colbert. The studio audience wildly cheers for the notion that Colbert would run, but the comedian tells Pawlenty that he has no plans to enter the race.

During the next day’s episode, on September 7, 2011, Colbert briefly returned to the topic of the Ames Straw Poll vote in Iowa and the “scandal” the program had dubbed, “Perry-with-an-A-GATE!” in which the local Iowa GOP had refused to release details of the write-in votes that were cast for Texas Governor Rick Perry. After providing a recap to the audience regarding the situation, Colbert explains that the news team from WOI-TV in Des Moines had sent the show an email update regarding their investigation. Reading from the email, Colbert tells the audience that the news team had researched “whether or not the straw poll results might be subject to a Freedom of Information Act request” and had determined that the Republican Party was not legally required to provide information about the vote.

The September 29, 2011 episode of *The Colbert Report* spends significant time on the Super PAC topic, as Colbert begins by focusing attention on the fundraising practices of the “American Crossroads” Super PAC run by Republican strategist Karl Rove. Colbert leads off the segment explaining to the audience how, because of the Supreme Court’s Citizens United ruling, Super PAC organizations are able to accept unlimited political donations “as long as they don’t coordinate with campaigns, and they reveal their donors.” The segment continues by highlighting how Rove’s American Crossroads PAC has a current fundraising goal of \$240 million. Colbert,

feigning shock and admiration towards Rove's fundraising abilities, then brings out the "Ham Rove" character, setting the previously used gag of a ham loaf wearing eyeglasses on the desk next to him, and asks the "Rove" character how he is able to raise so much money. Because the ham is silent and won't answer his question, Colbert decides to cut off and eat a small piece of the ham, in the belief that this will help him to gain Rove's knowledge.

Pretending to now have this newly gained understanding, Colbert reports to the audience details about the American Crossroads organization. First citing a media quote from an American Crossroads spokesperson, declaring that "We have created an organization that will be highly transparent," Colbert provides details from another article showing that during the month of May 2010, the organization had raised only \$200. Colbert then goes on to explain that in June, Rove had created a "sister group" linked to American Crossroads called "Crossroads GPS," structured as a "501 (c) 4" organization, which isn't legally required to disclose information about donors. Noting the minimal fundraising conducted by the American Crossroads PAC in May, Colbert reports to the audience that during the following month of June Rove's Crossroads GPS organization had raised \$5.1 million. Colbert declares, "Clearly these '(c)4s' have created a unprecedented, unaccountable, untraceable cash tsunami that will infect every corner of the next election... and I feel like an idiot for not having one."

At this point Colbert transitions the segment into an interview with his lawyer, Trevor Potter, who he facetiously announces as "here to help me make my move to secrecy and obfuscation completely transparent." Colbert begins the discussion by lamenting to Potter that the Colbert Super PAC hasn't received any "big corporate money" donations. Potter explains to Colbert that corporations are often nervous about giving money to political causes if their names are publicly disclosed, because of fear of public backlash or controversy. Continuing, Potter notes that both individuals and corporations *are* allowed to give money anonymously, if the organization is structured as a "501 (c) 4" group. Hearing this, Colbert asks Potter what he needs

to do in order to get a “c 4” of his own. Potter explains that in order to form such a group lawyers often create what are called “anonymous shell corporations,” which are frequently registered in the state of Delaware.

As was done in previous segments of the show, Potter then produces the necessary legal paperwork in order for Colbert to create his own 501 (c) 4 organization. Potter explains that the paperwork he is providing will allow Colbert to become the “sole director of the corporation” and that by solely comprising the organization’s board of directors, Colbert can also elect himself to serve as the group’s “president, secretary and treasurer.” Finally, Potter tells Colbert that he has also structured the corporation so that it won’t be required to file papers with the IRS until May of 2013. Reacting to all of this information, Colbert sarcastically asks:

So I could get money for my ‘c 4,’ use that for political purposes, and nobody knows *anything* about it ‘til six months after the election? That’s my kind of campaign finance restriction!

Confirming Colbert’s statement, Potter also adds that even after filing with the IRS, the organization’s donors can remain anonymous. At this point Colbert humorously drives home the point to the audience by again dramatically displaying how just the addition of the simple legal documents can so significantly change the disclosure requirements of a political group, joking that “Without this (the newly signed paperwork), I am transparent, [and] with this, I am opaque!” Continuing the discussion, Colbert then asks Potter whether he can take the ‘c 4’ money and donate it to his Super PAC. Confirming that such a transaction is legal under current campaign finance law, Colbert sarcastically asks Potter “What is the difference between that and money laundering?” to which the lawyer responds, “It’s hard to say.”

Later in that same episode, Colbert announces to the audience that he has just formed “Colbert Super PAC SHH!” which is structured as a 501 (c) 4 organization, meaning that he does not have to disclose his donors and can now accept “unlimited but secret donations.” At this point, Colbert tells the audience that the previous year, over 90% of the money raised by Karl

Rove's PAC had been donated by "just three billionaire owners." Going on to explain that 'c 4s' are much better than even PACs for fundraising purposes, because they aren't required to disclose their billionaire supporters, Colbert transitions the segment to a sketch dubbed "The Donating Game" (which is an obvious parody of the classic television game show, "*The Dating Game*").

In "The Donating Game" sketch, actor Kevin Kline provides a cameo appearance as the host of the game show and announces, "Tonight we have three eligible anonymous billionaires who will have a chance to put their money where your mouth is, Stephen!" Kline goes on to describe the supposedly anonymous billionaire contestants on the show, while actually clearly depicting the likes of Australian media magnate Rupert Murdoch, TV talk show host Oprah Winfrey, and Dallas Maverick's professional basketball team owner Mark Cuban. Posing as the game show participant looking for a date, Colbert asks each of the billionaires how much money they will give him — and both the Murdoch and Winfrey characters decline to offer any money, while the Cuban character tells Colbert he will give him "a lot of money." Declaring Cuban to be the "winner" of the fictional game show, Colbert goes on to interview the actual Mark Cuban later in the program.

During the interview with Cuban, Colbert asks him, "As a billionaire, do you get hit up for cash by politicians all the time?" Confirming that he gets frequent requests to make political donations, Cuban tells Colbert that it seems as though politicians typically view wealthy billionaires like himself as simply sources of campaign cash. Colbert then tells Cuban to imagine himself as an anonymous billionaire who is supporting a "theoretical" 501 (c) 4 organization, and asks Cuban to consider what he would ideally like to have that 'c 4' organization secretly advocate for on his behalf. Right as Cuban is about to provide an answer to Colbert's question, the screen briefly changes to a fake "Sorry! Technical Difficulties" image, and the audience is unable to learn what Cuban supposedly desires. Returning to the screen, Colbert then thanks the billionaire Cuban for appearing on his show.

During the October 6, 2011 episode, Colbert discusses an interesting development related to the show produced during the previous week in which he had discussed Karl Rove and Rove's Super PAC and 501 (c) 4 organizations, American Crossroads and Crossroads GPS respectively. Providing viewers with a review of the previous show, Colbert discusses how news media reports had characterized Colbert's segment as implying that Rove was involved in the equivalent of money laundering through his various political action groups. Joking that he wasn't in fact talking about Karl Rove's "shadowy, unaccountable organizations," but instead was talking about his *own* "identical, shadowy, unaccountable organizations," Colbert goes on to announce to the audience that his lawyer had received an email from Rove's lawyer. Blatantly mocking the email's warning not to copy or distribute the communication, Colbert then continues to read text from the email on the air:

Trevor... in order that you have accurate information, Crossroads GPS has not made any transfers to American Crossroads, and Crossroads GPS does not intend to make any transfers to American Crossroads... going forward, any innuendo that such transfers have been made can readily be dismissed by simply reviewing the American Crossroads FEC filings.

Karl Rove's lawyer

Continuing the segment, Colbert then jokes that in order "to undo the damage [he has] unwittingly done to Karl's otherwise spotless reputation" he has decided to issue a "rare clarification" regarding the previous statements made on the show. Colbert then goes on to again describe the differences between Rove's two political organizations, and in a semi-mocking tone declares that "there is no evidence of money laundering" related to Rove's political fundraising. Categorizing the statement sent by Rove's lawyer as saying that no money will be laundered between Crossroads GPS and American Crossroads, a mocking Colbert declares that the statement is as good as "a promise from Karl Rove that if there is any dirty money, it will stay dirty!" Continuing the mockery, Colbert then brings out the "Ham Rove" character and again pretends to speak to the loaf of ham as though it were Rove — and apologizes to the ham, saying

“I never meant to imply you were a money launderer,” before cutting off and taking another bite from the ham being used to portray the Republican operative.

This segment is noteworthy for a number of reasons beyond the humorous and extremely disingenuous and mocking-in-tone apology Colbert publicly offers Rove. The fact that Rove and his legal team felt compelled to contact Colbert’s lawyer to provide such a clarification (to a late-night comedy program) regarding the financial activities of Rove’s political fundraising organizations could be viewed as testament to their perception of the significant public attention and influence that Colbert and his Colbert Super PAC project was garnering. It even seems likely that, notwithstanding the email’s strongly worded warning *not* to distribute its content, Rove’s legal staff would anticipate the possibility that the message would be revealed and used by Colbert as comedic material on the show. Perhaps such a scenario was even viewed by Rove and his legal advisors as an opportunity to publicly respond to, or even fight back against, the negative attention Colbert’s show had focused on the organizations. Again, the mere fact that such a response was viewed as a necessary step — and one worth the risk of continued on-air ridicule by Colbert — serves as evidence of Colbert’s influence via the Colbert Super PAC effort. Additionally the fact that, although seemingly quite disingenuous in its nature, Colbert did technically offer a public apology to Rove could also be viewed as evidence that Colbert was cognizant of the risks to himself (and his own credibility among the public) in being viewed as mischaracterizing a powerful public figure’s political activities through the Super PAC segments on his show. In the end, while these possibilities are only speculative, the fact remains that Rove’s organization was both aware of and seemingly concerned about its portrayal by Colbert on the program.

In the October 17, 2011 episode of *The Colbert Report*, the NBA “lockout” event provides the next vehicle for further extension of the Colbert Super PAC project. During the episode, Colbert first gives viewers a brief overview of the ongoing dispute between NBA players

and owners. Showing a clip from his recent interview with Dallas Maverick's billionaire owner Mark Cuban, in which Cuban tells Colbert he's not allowed to discuss details of the lockout negotiations, Colbert then declares to the audience that although Cuban might not be able to talk about the lockout, the Colbert Super PAC organization can. Explaining that the PAC had recently bought airtime on a TV station in Dallas, WFAA – Channel 8, Colbert then shows the audience video of the next Colbert Super PAC ad, which is focused on the NBA lockout:

It's another sad day in America, as the NBA lockout grinds on depriving millions of their favorite sport. Meanwhile the NBA players will stop at nothing to get all the cheese. With unemployment at an all-time high, the players are demanding more millions.

But the NBA owners are on your side. They're working hard to save the season, so Americans don't have to watch hockey. NBA owners are job creators who send our economy soaring (like these things). And heroes like Mark Cuban are the #1 employer of our nation's tiny blimp pilots. The players have missed their shot. So call your local sports radio show, and yell "We want our N. B. A.!"

Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow is responsible for the content of this advertising. Made possible by a generous donation from Colbert Super PAC - SHH!

After showing the audience the humorous TV ad, which is similar to the previous Colbert Super PAC ads and is clearly intended as a parody of typical political attack advertising, Colbert announces that for some unknown reason the Dallas TV station WFAA had failed to run the ad as it had been scheduled.

Dramatically claiming that there may be some sort of conspiracy afoot, Colbert then implies that it might actually be "an elaborate, nefarious conspiracy" that he (Colbert) himself is behind. Colbert then instructs the audience to consider the possibility that he, through the "Colbert Super PAC – SHH!" organization, had been given funds provided by an anonymous donor — on the very same night that NBA owner Mark Cuban had appeared as a guest on his show. Dramatically noting that had Cuban himself been the person paying for the ad, it "would violate NBA Commissioner David Stern's gag order" related to discussions about the lockout,

Colbert rhetorically asks the audience whether Commissioner Stern would fine Mark Cuban for having violated league rules.

Compared to the previous TV ads produced by the Colbert Super PAC, this ad focused on the NBA lock-out at first seems to be somewhat of a departure from the general topic of politics and political campaign spending. It seems likely that many casual viewers of *The Colbert Report* would be somewhat confused by the ad's focus on the NBA (instead of politics), and would likely be unsure how the ad is related to federal election fundraising and spending laws. That said, as it fits into the overall evolution of the Super PAC project, the spot does successfully continue to advance the overall narrative of exposing the complexities and nefarious possibilities allowed within current campaign spending regulations. The most significant connection is the ad's disclosure language, provided at the end, which explain that "Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow" was responsible for the content of the message, but that it was "made possible by a generous donation from Colbert Super PAC - SHH!" Here, Colbert is providing a demonstration to his audience of how easily a donation made anonymously to a 501 (c) 4 organization could be transferred to a Super PAC entity and then be used to create a typical negative political attack ad. The use of Cuban, characterized as a billionaire who is hoping to secretly influence the process of a labor dispute, is another obvious allusion Colbert is trying to offer viewers — likely hoping they will independently make the connection to the similar actions of wealthy citizens, intent on using anonymous donations to influence the political campaign process.

During the October 24, 2011 episode, Colbert returns to the children's letter he first read during the July 28th program, in which 8 and 10-year-old brother and sister Charlie and Grace wrote to Colbert asking him to let them know what the Colbert Super PAC "stands for," so they could set-up a lemonade stand to raise money for the organization. Here Colbert jokes, "Kids ask the darn-dest questions, that the press generally doesn't" — and again he comments to viewers that over 53,000 people have responded to his earlier call for fans and members of the Colbert

Super PAC to submit online suggestions for what the organization should stand for. Explaining how he had used those responses to create a “word cloud” visual representation, Colbert goes on to tell the audience that the words “people” and “corporations” had surfaced as the most prominent within their responses. Continuing, Colbert tells viewers that he can only conclude that this means that “You (the audience) want Colbert Super PAC to stand for the self-evident truth that corporations are people!” Using his trademark dry sarcasm, Colbert then turns to the topic of the ongoing “Occupy Wall Street” protests and — showing the audience several images of protesters holding signs reading “Corporations are NOT people” — facetiously declares that “this is a crucial time in the fight for corporate civil rights.”

From here, the segment transitions to another interview with Frank Luntz, described by Colbert as “*the* conservative messaging guru.” In the interview, Colbert tells Luntz that he needs messaging help to make the idea that “corporations are people” more appealing to American citizens. Continuing the conversation, a deadpan Colbert asks Luntz, “What are some effective ways to use language to lie to people?” — a comment which leads to a humorous exchange between the two regarding whether Colbert himself regularly lies to people. As the interview continues, Colbert asks Luntz about his research methods using focus groups and dial technology to gauge people’s reactions to various messages. After a brief demonstration of Luntz’s message dial software, Colbert tells Luntz he’s ready to see a focus group in action and declares, “Let’s fire up the propaganda machine!”

As the segment continues, viewers see Colbert sitting behind a one-way mirror watching Luntz conduct a focus group that had ostensibly been paid for by the Colbert Super PAC. Leading the focus group, Luntz asks the participants to tell him how they feel about the phrase, “Corporations are people,” to which several members of the group offer critical comments regarding how corporations “get away with murder” and every year “pay off politicians” with donations. Telling the audience that the focus group session was needed to help the Colbert

Super PAC find the perfect phrases and visuals to use for its new “Corporations are People” TV ad, Colbert then shows an actual memo that had been prepared by Luntz’s consulting company, Luntz Global, summarizing all of its findings from the focus group session.

The segment continues with Colbert interviewing Luntz regarding his findings on phrases that “tested better than ‘corporations are people’.” In the interview, Luntz recommends that Colbert consider three different alternative slogans: “Corporations are Human,” “Corporations are People: Will they be Chinese people or American people?” and “People are Corporations.” Reacting to each of the three options, Colbert sarcastically tells Luntz he especially likes the second option, because it “Plays on [his] innate patriot sense and my fear of Chinese people.” Referring to the third slogan, Colbert notes that Luntz had simply reversed the order of the words — and Luntz tells Colbert that in political messaging, the order of the language used is often very important to how the message is perceived. The segment ends with Colbert telling the audience that the Colbert Super PAC will be working with Luntz “to create the perfect ad to change the hearts and minds of those 99%-ers.”

Similar to previous segments within the evolution of the Colbert Super PAC project, this series of clips is relatively educational, in regards to exposing the actual process that is often used within modern politics to create effective persuasive messaging, and it also provides viewers with some insight into Colbert’s actual viewpoint on the process. Colbert’s comment to Luntz, in which he asks “What are some effective ways to use language to lie to people?”, although couched within the context of a humorous interview, is undoubtedly a pointed condemnation of what Luntz’s message consulting business actually does. (It might also be argued that Colbert was taking a relative “risk” in making such a barbed comment directly to Luntz’s face, in that it seems possible that it could have caused Luntz to immediately end the interview and decide to end his participation with the show.) Along with generally “pulling back the curtain” on the scientific process behind political message creation, this series of segments offers a general

commentary regarding the artificial nature of what is behind much of the country's political communication. As is evident with his cynical comment regarding wanting to "fire up the propaganda machine," Colbert doesn't believe this type of political speech is genuine — and he wants his audience to see how it works and understand it for what it actually is.

The October 27, 2011 episode included a return to the show's earlier focus on the NBA lockout. Giving the audience a brief review of the ongoing labor dispute between NBA players and owners, and showing part of the previous ad which the Colbert Super PAC had produced about the lockout, Colbert then discusses his own comedic involvement in the dispute:

Now I would like to address the accusations circulating on newspaper and sports blogs that my friend Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban is funding my Super PAC to be his mouthpiece and circumvent Commissioner Stern's gag order.

Colbert continues the segment telling viewers that, in regards to questions about Cuban's potential involvement with the Super PAC ad, having investigated the rules, he (Colbert) has determined that he doesn't have to disclose whether Cuban was actually involved (a reference to previous segments' focus on the potential for 501 (c) 4 organizations to provide anonymous financial support to Super PAC groups). Colbert then announces that the Colbert Super PAC has produced a second TV ad about the NBA lockout, this one discussing Mark Cuban's proposal regarding a lockout solution involving a change to NBA "salary cap" rules, and that it will be running on a local Dallas TV affiliate the next day. Colbert then shows the newest ad in its entirety:

The NBA season is dying and Commissioner David Stern is doing nothing to save it. But rumor is Mavericks owner Mark Cuban has a game changing solution. Just replace the salary cap with a punitive luxury tax in lieu of the current dollar for dollar fine, bringing both sides closer to the players proposed 53% of BRI (basketball related income).

Finally a *simple* plan to bring the contractual rock to the arbitrated rim. Why haven't you heard about this plan? Because David Stern has placed Mark Cuban under a gag order. What is Stern hiding?

Starting now, Colbert Super PAC stands behind Mark Cuban, who may or may not stand behind us. We must speak for him. Call your local sports radio and say, “I am Mark Cuban!” “I am Mark Cuban.” “Yo soy Mark Cuban.” “I am Mark Cuban.”

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Similar to the first ad focused on the NBA lockout, it seems that beyond its general comedic value this ad is used by Colbert to again reinforce the notion that PAC organizations can be used by individuals to anonymously communicate persuasive messages and nefariously “circumvent” the rules. However, the connection between politics and the complex negotiation details related to the NBA lockout may have likely been a confusing stretch to many viewers.

During the October 31, 2011 and November 1, 2011 episodes, Colbert briefly maneuvers the Colbert Super PAC project to address the ongoing “Occupy Wall Street” protests taking place in New York City. Colbert discusses news reports which explain how “FreedomWorks,” a political action committee run by Republican Dick Armey, had successfully “co-opted” much of the grassroots Tea Party protest movement and steered the effort toward influencing the Republican Party. Declaring, “Well if Armey’s political action committee can co-opt the Tea Party, I say why can’t Colbert Super PAC co-opt Occupy Wall Street?” Colbert then shows video footage of himself visiting the Zuccotti Park protest grounds, supposedly “undercover” and dressed to be disguised as a communist revolutionary fighter. Having witnessed the Occupy Wall Street movement in person, Colbert then interviews two young members of the movement and invites them to participate in his “co-optportunity” to join forces with the Colbert Super PAC.

During the interview, Colbert asks the protesters about their motivations and humorously learns about the various hand signal techniques they use for “consensus building” among the group. At different points during the interview, Colbert has an opulent room service tray delivered and invites a masseuse into the room — all to humorously drive home the point that his character represents the privileged and wealthy elite of society. Telling the protesters that the

Colbert Super PAC can help them to also live a life of luxury, Colbert offers the “Occupy” members the opportunity to allow Colbert Super PAC to amplify their message, after tweaking it just slightly. Holding a homemade sign that reads, “Corporations are not people,” Colbert shows the protesters how he would simply like to change the sign to instead say, “Corporations are now people.” At this point in the interview, Colbert again brings up how the Supreme Court has ruled that “corporations are people” and facetiously accuses the protesters of being “dehumanizing” and “racist” in their opposition to the actions of corporations. After refusing the offer of financial backing from Colbert’s PAC, one of the protesters earnestly explains to the comedian that “One of the problems is the undue influence of money in politics.” Thanking them for talking with him, Colbert then ends the interview pretending to secretly hand a wad of cash to one of the protesters, who refuses to accept the supposed bribe.

The November 3, 2011 episode included a brief segment related to the Colbert Super PAC. Colbert first showed the audience news clips of how highly publicized accusations of sexual harassment had not seemed to hurt the candidacy of Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain, and instead had even appeared to have helped boost Cain’s fundraising efforts. Noting this surprising effect from what would seem to have been a negative scandal, Colbert then invites “Jay the intern” from the show into the studio and proceeds to engage in several over the top “sexual harassment” style conversations with the intern. Throughout the sketch, Colbert reminds the audience several times that “ColbertSuperPAC.com is now taking donations” and refers to the organization’s web address on the screen. Beyond serving as a short “filler” sketch within the show, the segment seems primarily to have been created to help remind viewers of the project and boost fundraising for the PAC.

The next major development related to the Colbert Super PAC comes several days later during the November 7, 2011 episode. Colbert begins the segment by showing the audience what appears to be a typical political TV ad, supporting presidential candidate Texas Governor Rick

Perry. Joking about how persuasive the ad will likely be, Colbert goes on to explain that the spot was not produced by Perry's campaign, but instead it was created by the "Make Us Great Again" Super PAC. Explaining to viewers that this is an important distinction, because a Super PAC organization "...may not 'coordinate' its activities..." with a candidate, Colbert goes on to note that the head of the "Make Us Great Again" organization, Mike Toomey, actually "co-owns a private island" with David Carney, Governor Perry's top political advisor. Joking that it is surely just a coincidence that the two men share an exclusive vacation spot, Colbert sarcastically assures his audience that no forbidden coordination activities could be taking place between Rick Perry's campaign and the Make Us Great Again organization.

Reminding audiences of the earlier episode in which he had worn an "isolation bucket" to assure no illegal coordination was taking place during his interview with presidential candidate Buddy Roemer, Colbert then goes on to discuss recent actions by the Nebraska Democratic Party. Showing clips of a TV commercial in which Nebraska's Democratic U.S. Senator Ben Nelson appears, Colbert explains to the audience how the state Democratic Party — having spent \$600,000 to run the TV advertising campaign featuring Nelson — had been able to bypass the typical \$240,000 spending limit usually imposed on state party organization support for individual candidate advertising. Showing a New York Times newspaper article headline reading "Democratic Senator's Ads May Break New Ground," Colbert goes on to explain how the Nebraska Democratic Party had essentially circumvented the spending limits regulation related to candidate advertising by claiming that in this situation they were instead, "functioning as an *independent organization* engaged in issue advocacy." After mocking this seemingly ridiculous claim, Colbert continues the segment by returning to the topic of Super PAC activities.

Noting again how, "independent groups, like Super PACs, cannot coordinate with candidates..." Colbert goes on to outline how the TV ad featuring Senator Ben Nelson is not technically considered a "campaign ad," but instead it qualifies as an issue ad — even though

almost anyone viewing the ad would not be able to understand the distinction. (Driving home this point, Colbert jokes that the ad in question is “*clearly* an issue ad... the issue [being that] Ben Nelson is pretty great.”) Colbert then goes on to discuss how this strategy for essentially circumventing campaign advertising regulations is likely to also be similarly adopted by Super PAC organizations. Colbert continues by telling the audience how earlier that day Karl Rove’s Super PAC organization, American Crossroads, had filed a letter of request with the FEC “asking for approval to make issue ads with federal candidates, just like the Democrats.” Displaying a portion of the letter on the screen, Colbert reads text from the American Crossroads request which outlines the organization’s justification for being allowed to create the ads:

While these advertisements would be fully coordinated... they would presumably not qualify as ‘coordinated communications’...

Mocking the seemingly absurd legal distinction being made in the American Crossroads request, Colbert then humorously compares Rove to “a Zen campaign master, asking ‘What is the sound of one hand *not* washing the other?’”

From here, Colbert transitions the segment into another interview with his lawyer, Trevor Potter. Colbert begins the discussion by sarcastically noting that ads, such as the Nebraska Democratic Party spot featuring Ben Nelson, aren’t really campaign ads... but instead are simply issue ads which *happen* to include the candidate in them. Colbert continues the humorous sarcasm with a graphic analogy:

Just because someone’s in my ad, doesn’t mean we’re coordinating with their campaign... any more than... just because my penis is *in* someone’s vagina... doesn’t *mean* we’re having sex...

Proceeding with the interview, a slightly embarrassed Potter goes on to explain to Colbert that the American Crossroads request might not actually be approved, since there may not be a majority of support among the FEC Commissioners.

Later in the interview, telling Potter that he “want[s] Karl to win,” Colbert asks whether there’s anything he can do to help support the request. Responding, Potter explains that Colbert can submit a letter to the FEC urging them to approve the American Crossroads request — and then, as was the case with previous episodes, Potter produces such a letter for Colbert to review and sign. Noting that his letter of support will be “attached” to the American Crossroads letter of request to the FEC, Potter explains to Colbert that the letter becomes “part of the public record” and therefore will be considered by the regulatory body alongside the request from Rove’s organization.

Clearly amused by this, Colbert then asks Potter whether “any visual aids” can be included to go along with their letter of support. After Potter confirms that such materials are allowed, Colbert explains that he would like to include a sample TV ad, so that the FEC will understand “[his] idea of an issue ad including a federal candidate.” From here, Colbert transitions the segment into showing the audience the next 60-second TV ad produced by the Colbert Super PAC, which features former Louisiana Governor and previous guest Buddy Roemer, and is titled “Undaunted Non-Coordination”:

Hi! I’m presidential candidate Buddy Roemer, and God I wish I weren’t in this ad. See, I didn’t pay for it. “Colbert Super PAC” did, and Super PACs are not supposed to coordinate with candidates like me... but because this is an “issue ad” about Super PACs *not* coordinating with candidates, I can be in it, at long as I don’t say... “Vote for me!”

I say that argument is just a fig leaf, so Super PACs can justify doing anything they want. And they have a *lot* of money folks, they built this fake set... with fake books, filled with real money! Hell, they even bought Colbert a unicorn! (*Colbert, shown on unicorn, says: All perfectly legal, Rainbow.*)

I’m Buddy Roemer and I did not approve the message. Would you? (*Colbert, on unicorn, yells: To Narnia!*)

This issue ad paid for by Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow — and approved by Buddy Roemer. No money was harmed in the making of this ad.

With its farcical tone and fantasy theme, the TV ad is clearly intended to further drive home the seeming absurdity of the notion that so-called “non-coordinated” political ads could involve such overt coordination and direct involvement with the same political candidates being promoted.

The next day, following *The Colbert Report* episode featuring the ad with Governor Roemer, a detailed email was sent out to supporters and financial contributors of the Colbert Super PAC organization, outlining the official “Public Comment” letter which the organization was submitting to the FEC in “support” of the advisory opinion request which had been filed by American Crossroads. In the email, Colbert provides an overview of the issue and facetiously describes Super PACs as being “unfairly shackled by [just one] regulation” — the rule banning coordination with candidates’ campaigns. Describing the request put forth by Rove’s American Crossroads Super PAC as a “sham of a charade,” Colbert sarcastically asks readers, “...what fun is buying somebody an election if you have no elected official to share the moment with?” The email to Colbert Super PAC supporters then goes on to provide information regarding how individual citizens can also submit their own public comment to the FEC regarding their opinions regarding the American Crossroads request:

Incidentally, you might be interested in knowing that any person, be they corporate or biological, can submit their Public Comment on Karl Rove's Opinion Request (which is AOR 2011-23) by writing to Office of the Commission Secretary's email address (which is Secretary@FEC.gov).

We hope you'll join us at Colbert Super PAC in letting Karl Rove know: We've got your back. Because we're looking over your shoulder.

The above example, where Colbert is essentially urging his supporters to *join him* in sending emails to the FEC expressing their own disapproval and opposition toward a specific regulatory issue, represents one of the more explicit moments of what could certainly be considered political advocacy or activism orchestrated through the Colbert Super PAC project.

Even providing the necessary email address for members to submit their protest messages to commissioners at the FEC, the email to Super PAC supporters is extremely similar to a “call to

action” message which would regularly be distributed by traditional political campaigns and advocacy organizations. A copy of the public comment letter which Colbert submitted to the FEC is also included in the email to Super PAC members. Within the highly sarcastic language of the letter, an excerpt from the Supreme Court ruling, *Buckley v. Valeo* (focusing on the Court’s own, seemingly reasonable, definition of “non-coordinated”), is included — which appears intended to serve as a more sincere entreaty, urging the FEC to *reject* the request from American Crossroads. (The satirical letter humorously argues that an FEC ruling in favor of American Crossroads would require “strained rationalizations.”)

The November 8, 2011 episode of *The Colbert Report* included a brief reference to the ongoing Super PAC project. Colbert first discusses news reports that, due to budget cuts, a local Suffolk County government in Long Island, New York, had recently decided not to renew a small \$660 annual contract with a local senior citizen to play the part of “Santa Claus” for the upcoming holiday season. Joking that “this year, there will be no Christmas... unless I save it,” Colbert declares to the studio audience that the Colbert Super PAC is willing to cover the \$660 cost of Santa’s contract. Telling the cheering fans that, “All Santa has to do is come on my show and say that ‘corporations are people,’” Colbert ends the brief segment and transitions to a commercial break. (In reviews of *The Colbert Report* web site’s archives, there does not seem to be any additional reference to this topic — so it can be assumed that the offer was either refused by the “Santa” individual and the Suffolk County government, or the piece was simply dropped by the producers of the show.)

The next major focus on the Colbert Super PAC comes during the December 7, 2011 episode, in which Colbert begins a segment by showing the audience a recent *New York Times* news article with the headline, “Colbert Pushes ‘Corporations Are People’ Referendum” (McGrath, 2011). Colbert goes on to admit that the story was linked to a press release and interview he had provided to the *Times*, and explains to the audience that he has been involved

with an initiative to add a referendum to the primary ballot in his home state of South Carolina (Jackson, 2011). Reminding the audience of the Colbert Super PAC goal to “be a player in the 2012 election,” Colbert explains that the idea that “corporations are people” is among the most pressing issues for the PAC. Referring to the notion, Colbert uses an allusion to Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* to drive home a joke about corporate personhood:

And folks, they (i.e., corporations) *are* people. If you prick a corporation, does it not bleed? ... Now technically it doesn’t... but it *does* sue, so do not prick them!

Continuing the segment Colbert tells the audience that he was thrilled when he recently received the ballot for the upcoming South Carolina Republican primary, which included the following referendum item:

In order to address the matter of Corporate Personhood, the enfranchised people of the Sovereign State of South Carolina shall decree that:

- Corporations are people
- Only people are people

Responding to cheers from the audience, Colbert explains that the wording of the referendum on the sample ballot is a nearly identical match to how he had worded it within an email he had sent to the South Carolina Republican Party two months before, “along with a sizable cash offer to put this referendum on the ballot.” Celebrating the victory of having supposedly influenced the South Carolina primary ballot, Colbert declares that, “it just goes to show you what unlimited Super PAC money can do.” However, Colbert then explains that unfortunately the South Carolina Supreme Court had recently ruled against allowing such a referendum, showing a quote from a Greenville, South Carolina newspaper article about the ruling that read, “Non-binding... advisory... questions... couldn’t be placed on any presidential primary ballot.”

Continuing the segment, Colbert explains that because the South Carolina Republican Party had refused to challenge the ruling made by the state’s Supreme Court, he was forced to turn instead to the state’s Democratic Party. Introducing the chairman of the South Carolina

Democratic Party, Dick Harpootlian, as a guest on the show, Colbert proceeds to interview the party official about the organization's decision to oppose the court's ruling regarding rejection of the referendum. During the interview, Harpootlian tells Colbert that the position of the state Democratic Party is actually in opposition to that of Colbert's (character), and that, in disagreement with the rationale of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United*, they believe that only *people* should be considered people. Continuing, Harpootlian argues:

...the Supreme Court said the Constitution guarantees corporations the First Amendment rights... Constitutional rights... Well, don't they get all the other rights? Do they get a trial by a jury of their peers? Should we have the Michellin Man and the gecko from *Geicko* sitting in the jury box? I mean, how far do you carry this?

Responding (in character) to the Democratic leader's rhetorical question, Colbert drolly replies "I think that corporations should be allowed to carry guns and get married." Continuing the interview, Harpootlian explains how the state Democratic Party had filed a petition to ask the Supreme Court to reconsider its decision regarding allowing the referendum. Colbert then asks whether the Democratic Party would consider including the referendum on their ballot, if it was paid for by the Colbert Super PAC, and Harpootlian confirms that the party would absolutely consider such an offer.

Within the segment described above, Colbert essentially signals to viewers his alignment with the Democratic Party and its views regarding the substance of the *Citizens United* ruling. Similar to as had occurred following the early November episode focused on Colbert's public comment made to the FEC, an email update about Colbert's efforts with the non-binding referendum on the South Carolina primary ballot was also sent out to all Colbert Super PAC supporters. In the December 6th email, which included a scanned image of the sample ballot incorporating the "Corporations are people" vs. "Only people are people" language, Colbert provides yet another overt hint to fans regarding his true views about the existing political reality allowed through the existence of Super PAC organizations. In the email, Colbert Super PAC is

humorously described to readers as “an independent expenditure-only committee dedicated to following the Letter of the Law, and letting the Spirit of the Law finds its own way home” — a message clearly designed to once again drive home the notion that the existing campaign finance system is deeply flawed and off track, from what the written laws and regulations had intended.

Later in that same episode on December 7, 2011, Colbert continued to focus on the topic of coordination between campaigns and Super PACs. Showing a television ad running at the time leading up to the New Hampshire primary in support of Republican presidential candidate Jon Huntsman, Colbert explained to the audience how the ad was paid for by a group called the “Our Destiny PAC,” a Super PAC which had been founded by the candidate’s own father, Jon Huntsman, Sr. Joking that the ad “...was...financed by a big, corporate sugar daddy, literally...” Colbert goes on to explain that Huntsman’s father is the billionaire founder of two major companies, including Huntsman Chemical and the Huntsman Container Corporation, and likely had significant funds available to help support his son’s candidacy. Focusing then on the issue of coordination, Colbert again stresses to the audience how “candidates and Super PACs cannot legally coordinate their messaging.” Then showing a news clip of Huntsman being interviewed by a journalist and strongly denying that he communicates with his father about campaign strategy (Huntsman: “We don’t talk about those things, we can’t...”), Colbert then proceeds to joke about how Huntsman and his father might convey veiled signals to each other regarding campaign strategy and the need for TV advertising buys while sitting together at the family dinner table. Colbert ends the segment by playfully mocking the involvement of Huntsman’s father in his campaign, and showing a humorous parody ad (to the previous Our Destiny PAC ad) in which Huntsman’s doting parents supposedly incorporate a series of embarrassing childhood stories and baby photos into the typical political TV ad.

In the January 4, 2012 episode, Colbert continues to focus significant attention on the issue of coordination between candidates and Super PACs. Referencing the recent barrage of

negative political attack advertising that had been targeted at Republican candidate Newt Gingrich, Colbert notes that most of those negative ads had been produced by the Super PAC “Restore Our Future,” which was supporting Mitt Romney. Sarcastically arguing that Romney shouldn’t in any way be blamed for the wave of negative ads, and that “he couldn’t have stopped the ads if he wanted to,” Colbert then shows a news clip of Republican candidate Mitt Romney being interviewed, in which Romney adamantly says:

...Super PACs have to be entirely separate from a campaign and a candidate. I’m not allowed to communicate with a Super PAC in any shape or form... My goodness, if we coordinate in any way whatsoever, we go to the big-house...

After humorously mocking Romney’s use of the term “big house,” Colbert continues to outline to the audience a sarcastic defense of Romney and Romney’s supposed adherence to the anti-coordination rule:

The point is, it is *not* Romney’s Super PAC. It is a separate organization, founded by Romney’s lawyer...for which Romney has personally raised money, and that in turn has spent \$2.8 million to support him. Totally separate!

Colbert then transitions the segment to a video clip of a CBS News interview in which Newt Gingrich accuses Romney of being a “liar” (for claiming he has no control over the Restore Our Future PAC), and makes the argument that Romney is disingenuous in his claim that he doesn’t control the PAC:

This is a man whose staff created the PAC, his millionaire friends funded the PAC, he pretends he has nothing to do with the PAC... it’s baloney.

Colbert’s continued emphasis on the issue of supposedly illegal coordination between the presidential candidates and their respective PAC organizations is interesting. The inherent sarcasm of Colbert’s character, in constantly denying the fact that any prohibited coordination is taking place (and that *obviously*, the candidates’ campaigns aren’t having any influence over the actions of the PACs that are supporting them...), seems perfectly suited to address this topic.

Utilizing a mixture of damning news clips and video footage from interviews with the candidates,

Colbert's alternately naïve and oblivious character provides the perfect vehicle allowing him to adamantly argue for the seemingly absurd notion that such coordination isn't rampantly occurring.

At the beginning of the January 12, 2012 episode, Colbert launches an extended gag on *The Colbert Report* which is clearly designed to continue focusing attention on the “coordination” issue, and the apparent insincerity and falseness of candidates' claims that they have no influence over the actions of the PAC organizations supporting them. First, however, Colbert begins the show by highlighting recent media coverage of the fact that a public opinion poll conducted by “Public Policy Polling” had found that (if he were a candidate) Colbert would receive approximately 5% of the vote in the South Carolina state Republican presidential primary — higher than the 4% the same poll had attributed to actual candidate Jon Huntsman. Referencing the fact that he had already mounted an unsuccessful run for president in South Carolina in 2008 (a partial parody of corporate sponsorship, the campaign was officially named “The Hail to the Cheese Stephen Colbert Nacho Cheese Doritos 2008 Presidential Campaign”), Colbert tells the audience he doesn't know if he can put himself through another traumatizing campaign experience.

Continuing the segment Colbert also notes that the other issue, if he were to run for president, is the existence of the Colbert Super PAC — because “presidential candidates cannot coordinate with Super PACs.” From here, the segment transitions into a montage of news video clips of the various Republican presidential candidates (including Newt Gingrich, Jon Huntsman, and Mitt Romney) all responding to journalists' questions about whether they are coordinating with the Super PACs supporting them — and each adamantly claiming that no such communication or coordination is allowed or taking place. From here, taking an almost educational tone with the audience Colbert explains to viewers how each of the major Republican

candidates have a corresponding Super PAC, being managed by a close associate, backing their campaigns:

...Super PACs are often run by people close to the candidate. The pro-Romney Super PAC, “Restore Our Future,” was founded by Romney’s lawyer. “Winning Our Future,” the Newt Gingrich Super PAC, is run by a former Newt staffer. And the Rick Perry Super PAC, “Make Us Great Again,” was started by Mike Toomey, who was Perry’s Chief of Staff — and co-owns an island with Dave Carney, Perry’s chief strategist...

Commenting that the decision of whether or not to run for president will be difficult, Colbert then transitions the segment into another interview with lawyer and former FEC Chairman Trevor Potter. Colbert begins the discussion by directly asking Potter whether he can run for president while still continuing to have his Super PAC, to which Potter responds that such a scenario would not be allowed because it would constitute “coordinating,” which is strictly prohibited under FEC regulations.

Potter then, however, proceeds to explain to an excited Colbert that it *would* be possible to run for president if he were to transfer control of the Super PAC to somebody else. Stressing that in such a scenario, as a federal candidate, Colbert would be restricted from coordinating with the organization “in terms of PAC ads and strategy,” Colbert innocently responds, “I wouldn’t want to even create the appearance of electoral skullduggery.” At this point Colbert invites fellow comedian and Comedy Central TV host Jon Stewart into the studio and, against the cheers of an excited audience, asks him if he is there to offer to take over the Colbert Super PAC.

Responding that he would be honored by the responsibility, Stewart conveys hesitation with the political arrangement because he and Colbert are business partners. Colbert then asks Potter whether being a business partner with Stewart is a problem — and Potter confirms that, from the perspective of the FEC, “being business partners does *not* count as coordination, legally.” At this point, a still concerned Stewart says “[but] I assume there’s reams of complicated paperwork to be executed before we transfer the reins of power over something as

critical to our very foundation of democracy as a Super PAC?” Responding to Stewart’s inquiry, Potter announces that he brought with him the “one document” that is necessary to conduct the transfer, and hands it over to the comedians who both proceed to add their signatures. Stewart then casually asks Colbert about how much money the PAC has raised and, when shown a checkbook with the amount, pretends to react lustfully toward the financial windfall he has just received. At this point in the segment, sitting across the table from each other, both Colbert and Stewart grasp their hands together while Potter dramatically chants the phrase, “Colbert Super PAC transfer activate!” — and the two comedians, grasping hands and shaking, pretend as though a great super power (signified with sound effects and animated “\$” sign graphics) is being transferred between them.

Following the theatrical transfer of power, Colbert melodramatically comments that “Colbert Super PAC is dead...” to which Jon Stewart, having thrust his arms into the air, yells “but... it has been reborn... as “The Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC!” Following a brief recovery from the taxing act of transferring power, Stewart then asks Potter whether he can use the PAC to create TV ads supporting his friend Stephen Colbert and perhaps also attacking Colbert’s potential opponents. Responding affirmatively, Potter tells Stewart “Yes you can, as long as you do not *coordinate*.” Continuing the inquiry Stewart mentions that he is “busy” and then asks Potter whether he is legally allowed to hire the same Super PAC staff that Colbert already has in place, to produce the attack ads he plans to create. Again, Potter confirms that this arrangement is also allowed as long as the staff has “no knowledge of Stephen’s plans.” (Here, Colbert responds to Potter’s warning by quipping “Well that’s easy, I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.”) At this point, Colbert warns Stewart that he had better leave so that they couldn’t be accused of “coordinating” with each other. Colbert then facetiously tells Stewart, as he leaves the studio, “From now on, I will just have to talk about my plans on my television show — and take the risk that you might watch it.”

Once both Potter and Stewart have left the studio, Colbert then dramatically tells the audience that he has “a major announcement” to make — and declares:

I am proud to announce, that I am forming an exploratory committee, to lay the groundwork for my possible candidacy, for the President of the United States of South Carolina.

At this point, as red, white and blue balloons fall from the ceiling and *patriotic* music plays, Colbert yells to the audience that, with their help, “and possibly the help of some sort of outside group that [he] is not coordinating with...” they will “explore taking this country back!” Ending the segment as though he was suddenly standing before an enthusiastic political rally, Colbert declares to the audience, “God bless you all, and God bless Citizens United!”

During two major television interviews broadcast just days apart, airing respectively on January 12 and January 15, 2012, Colbert spoke with veteran political journalists Ted Koppel and George Stephanopoulos about the Colbert Super PAC project. With these two interviews, significant insight can be gained into the comedian’s perspective on campaign finance, and his motivations for spearheading the Super PAC effort. The interview with Ted Koppel ran as part of the NBC News program *Rock Center* on January 13, 2012, and is noteworthy because Colbert seems to somewhat abandon his pompous conservative persona during the conversation and answers Koppel’s interview questions with relative seriousness and sincerity. During the interview with Koppel, Colbert discusses how he has come to understand that the only distinction between a traditional “PAC” and a “Super PAC,” which can collect unlimited contributions, is a cover letter — and then goes on to stress that because of infrequent FEC reporting deadlines, he can generally operate his Super PAC without disclosing information about his donors. Colbert and Koppel discuss the fact that violation of FEC rules rarely results in actual punishment. At one point in the interview, Koppel refers to the dysfunction of campaign finance regulations as “classic Washington bureaucracy” — and Colbert, briefly channeling his conservative character

persona, corrects him, sarcastically saying that instead of bureaucracy, it's actually "democracy" that Koppel should have said.

After running video of the earlier interview with Colbert, the *Rock Center* segment continues with Koppel sitting down for a discussion about Super PACs with NBC News anchor Brian Williams. The two journalists use Colbert's efforts as a transition into a broader conversation regarding the impact of the Citizens United court case on the influence of money in politics. Discussing his personal reflections about Colbert's Super PAC project, and the larger issues it highlights, Koppel somberly discusses the topic with Williams:

It's funny until you think about it. The fact of the matter is, Stephen Colbert has proved by going before the Federal Election Commission, by becoming a Super PAC, by now handing the super PAC over to his buddy Jon Stewart so that he can go and run to be president of South Carolina, he is proving how ridiculous the system has become.

And the sad thing, Brian, is that every one of those Republican candidates that I talked to said they wished that the Super PAC thing would go away. Newt Gingrich said he feels that 80% of the poison would be drained out of our political system if it weren't for these super PACs. But we're stuck with them until the Supreme Court reverses its ruling and, if that's ever going to happen, it'll be years away.

Ted Koppel, *NBC News*

Koppel's comments about Colbert and his Super PAC activities give the comedian significant personal credit, twice using the word "proved" to describe how Colbert's actions had exposed the ridiculousness of the existing campaign system. It should also be noted that the follow-up conversation between Williams and Koppel, as opposed to being at all light-hearted (considering that the program had just focused on the activities of a late-night comic), was instead quite serious — and almost gloomy and foreboding in tone, as the two veteran journalists discussed the current state of money within the political system.

During the interview with Stephanopoulos, in which Colbert appeared on the *ABC News* Sunday morning political program "This Week," Colbert adopted a lighthearted but occasionally

combative tone with the veteran political journalist as he was asked about the seriousness of his recently announced run for “President of the United States of South Carolina.” Stephanopoulos began the interview questioning the viability of Colbert’s candidacy in South Carolina, to which Colbert humorously corrected him and stressed that he was simply exploring the possibility of an “exploratory committee” for forming a campaign — and that he was attempting to gauge whether there is “a hunger for a Stephen Colbert candidacy” among the voting public.

Throughout the interview Stephanopoulos frequently attempts to force Colbert into serious conversation, while Colbert repeatedly resorts to humor and silliness in his answers. At one point, Stephanopoulos shows the audience a video clip of the “attack ad” against Mitt Romney, which had been created by “The Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC!” (and insinuates that the Republican presidential candidate could be a “serial killer,” humorously dubbed in the ad as “Mitt the Ripper”) and then questions whether such an ad was crossing the line of fairness and good taste. Colbert responds incredulously to this questioning from Stephanopoulos, humorously insisting that he has no knowledge of, or control over, the TV ad (because he no longer holds control over the Super PAC) — and then even implies that he has little familiarity with his long-time friend Jon Stewart, who is now controlling the Colbert Super PAC organization. (This response by Colbert is yet another satirical critique of the sincerity of politicians’ recent claims to have no knowledge or influence over the actions of Super PACs run by close political associates.) Driving home this satirical critique of the disingenuousness of political candidates, referring to the attack ad Colbert tells Stephanopoulos, “...if that’s not accurate, I hope they take it down. I don’t know if Mitt Romney is a serial killer, that’s a question he’s going to have to answer... I do not want any untrue ads on the air that could in any way be traced back to me.”

Later in the interview, Stephanopoulos poses a question to Colbert submitted from a viewer via Facebook which asks whether Colbert believes “the outcome of the 2012 Presidential

election is based on how much money each candidate can raise.” This portion of the interview provides viewers with the most noteworthy insight into Colbert’s feelings about the influence of money in politics, as he sarcastically addresses the viewer’s question with the following response:

No, it’s [not how much money candidates can raise...it’s] how much *speech* they can express... because money equals speech. It doesn’t matter if the speech comes from money, or comes from your mouth... Money equals speech. Therefore the more *money* you have, the more you can speak. That just stands to reason. If corporations are people, corporations should be able to speak. That’s why I believe in Super PACs.

Following this contention, Colbert proceeds to humorously press Stephanopoulos to answer whether he personally agrees with the notion that corporations are people, with the conversation devolving into Colbert sardonically accusing a slightly flustered Stephanopoulos of possibly harboring “racist” feelings toward corporations. Later in the interview, Stephanopoulos steers the discussion toward a more thoughtful tone, candidly pressing Colbert by saying: “I’m going to try to get serious here...now what difference do you hope to make with this mock campaign? ... Are you worried about how much money... what money is doing to this political environment?” In response, Colbert again provides one of the most telling commentaries regarding his true feelings about the current influence of money in the political sphere. Responding to the question, an “in-character” Colbert brandishes his trademark sarcasm and argues to Stephanopoulos why he is *not* concerned:

No... in no way. Why would you worry about what money is doing to the political environment? There are \$11.2 million in Super PAC ads being run in South Carolina. Super PACs are outspending the candidates 2-to-1 in South Carolina right now. That just means, according to Citizens United, that there’s just more speech than there was before. And I don’t know about you, but I believe in the freedom of speech.

With this comment coupled with the earlier highlighted quote, through his pointed sarcasm, Colbert is again providing relatively overt insight into his actual views about the negative effects that increased money is having on the political system. In sarcastically asking the question,

“Why would you worry about what money is doing to the political environment?” Colbert is signaling to viewers that he thinks people should absolutely be worried about the situation.

The following week, during the January 16, 2011 episode, Colbert begins a segment by discussing the especially negative political attack TV ads that have recently dominated the Republican presidential primary campaign. Included among them, Colbert notes, is a new ad which has just been released by a “shadowy outside group calling itself the ‘Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC.’” Declaring the ad “the most shocking attack ad yet,” Colbert then show the audience the newest Colbert Super PAC TV ad, which is titled “Attack in B Minor for Strings”:

Corporations... America’s greatest institution. They built this country one job at a time.

Mitt Romney says he’s for corporations. *Video showing Romney saying:* ‘Corporations are people, my friend.’ But Mitt Romney has a secret. As head of Bain Capital, he bought companies, carved them up, and got rid of what he couldn’t use. If Mitt Romney really believes ... ‘Corporations are people, my friend,’ ...then Mitt Romney is a serial killer. He’s “Mitt the Ripper!”

If you believe corporations are people, do your duty and protect them. On Saturday, January 21st — stop Mitt the Ripper, before he kills again.

“Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow” are responsible for the content of this advertising.

Although this humorous parody ad, which interestingly features a voice-over by movie actor John Lithgow, is obviously an over-the-top “send-up” of the stereotypical, nasty political attack ad, it also includes several repetitions of the actual Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, speaking at a campaign rally, telling supporters that he believes “corporations are people...” — a gaff for which he had received significant criticism on the campaign trail, and which his campaign had made attempts to distance him from (Rucker, 2011). (It could be argued that, unlike the previous Colbert Super PAC sponsored TV ads, which most likely had minimal impact on the ongoing primary election — i.e., instructing voters to mis-spell a write-in vote for Rick Perry in a straw

poll was unlikely to have made a significant difference in the larger prospects of the Perry campaign — this ad, prominently featuring a truly damaging quote from a potential front-runner, might have helped to inflict minor but measurable damage to Romney’s candidacy if, through the added media attention focused on Colbert’s Super PAC project, more people became aware of Romney’s comment.)

Back in the studio, reacting (in character) to the “attack ad” made against Romney, Colbert proceeds to mimic the frequent behavior of other candidates who vehemently disavow any knowledge or influence over the negative attack ads produced by the Super PAC groups supporting them. Blithely commenting that the ad is “shocking stuff,” Colbert jokes that despite inaccurate news reports attributing the creation of the ad to him, he has nothing to do with it:

...I need to make it as clear as the bleach Mitt Romney may or may not use to dissolve the bones of his victims... this commercial is the sole responsibility of the person I turned my PAC over to four days ago... if one word of that ad is inaccurate, I hope he takes it off the air...

Continuing the segment, Colbert stresses to his audience that he is legally unable to coordinate with Stewart, who is now supposedly running the Super PAC. Reviewing the details of how Stewart has hired Colbert’s old Super PAC staff to continue the organization — and how they are still even sharing office space and operating in the same building as Colbert as he explores a potential presidential campaign — Colbert makes a pointed comparison between the questionable dealings of his comedic enterprise and the very real political operations of the powerful American Crossroads Super PAC:

We are not in any way “coordinating.” We are instead meeting the high standard set by political “master scalp” Karl Rove, whose American Crossroads Super PAC employs campaign strategist Carl Forti, who operates Black Rock Consultants, who makes ads for the Mitt Romney campaign. Yes, one hand washes the other... but they do it in separate bathrooms!

Colbert then ends the segment with a visual representation (using interns from the show wearing different colored t-shirts with confusing “red team” and “blue team” labels) of how he has clearly

separated his employees between those working on the “Super PAC” staff and those working on the “Exploratory Committee.” Joking that he has consulted with a paralegal regarding the convoluted division system (and was told that the system is “para-legal”), Colbert ends the segment which was clearly designed to demonstrate to viewers the absurdity of a system in which FEC regulations are being technically followed, but the actual intent of the law is blatantly ignored.

In a later segment during the January 16th episode, Colbert shifts attention to the upcoming South Carolina primary election. In a regular segment titled, “The Word,” Colbert first shows a montage of news clips in which reporters discuss how there’s actually no way that Colbert will be able to participate in the South Carolina primary election because the filing deadline has already passed and the state does not allow for “write-in” candidates. Colbert then proceeds to explain to the audience that while he is unable to get his name added to the South Carolina ballot, because the state has a “locked-ballot” system, former Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain (who had by then already dropped out of the race) also still has his name listed among the active candidates on the ballot. Jesting that he and Cain are in many ways extremely similar, Colbert tells the audience that “...if Herman Cain were to get a significant number of votes, that would be a sign that voters are hungry... for a Stephen Colbert campaign.”

Continuing the segment, Colbert then proceeds to make what appears to be one of the more impassioned and sincere entreaties to his enthusiastic audience. Stressing that because South Carolina has an “open primary,” and anyone — not just Republicans — is allowed to participate, Colbert earnestly declares: “anyone who shares my values can show it by voting for Herman Cain.” Insisting that people of all walks (including independents and Democrats, college kids, viewers of the show, and people who attended the rally in Washington D.C.) should take this opportunity to “stand up and shout,” Colbert earnestly stresses to the audience that they are all legally eligible to participate in the primary. This moment seems to be one of the few times in

which Colbert seriously, sincerely signals to his audience his desire for the Colbert Super PAC project to make an impact on the political process. Ending the segment, Colbert tells viewers, “If our message is going to be taken seriously, we’re going to have to do more than just raise money, and raise awareness... we’re going to have to ‘raise cain.’”

The next day during the January 17, 2012 episode, Colbert begins a segment by showing portions of a recent Republican presidential primary debate in which the candidates are alternately arguing with each other about the accuracy of negative TV ads being produced by their respective Super PAC organizations — and then claiming that they in fact have no control of the content of similar ads being produced by their own Super PAC organizations. Mocking the situation, Colbert says “Folks, these guys are *victims* getting blamed for negative Super PAC ads they are powerless to stop... meanwhile, why are their opponents pretending to be powerless to stop all of these negative Super PAC ads?” Joking that he understands how powerless the candidates feel, Colbert then explains to the audience that he has found himself in a similar situation with the release of another ad from the Colbert Super PAC, an organization he no longer has any control over. Briefly reviewing for viewers his previous night’s call for voters in South Carolina to support a Stephen Colbert candidacy by voting for Herman Cain, Colbert then shows the newest TV ad, which is titled “Not Abel”:

The people of South Carolina are frustrated. It’s less than a week before the election and there’s still no candidate for us... plus the economy. Thankfully, there is one name on the ballot that stands for true American-nimity, Herman Cain. *(Image of Colbert appears, with a label reading “This guy.”)*

Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow believes a vote for Herman Cain is a vote for America. *(Another image of Colbert appears, with a label reading “Seriously, this guy.”)*

He’s not a career politician. He’s such a Washington outsider, he’s not even running for president. Send them a message. On January 21st vote Herman Cain.

Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow are responsible for the content of this advertising.

The humorous parody ad ends with a lengthy shot of Colbert, next to the words “Herman Cain — President 2012,” as Colbert very slowly starts to smile at the camera, an obvious lampooning of a similar shot used at the end of an actual Herman Cain for President campaign ad.

After showing the newest ad in its entirety, a grinning Colbert then goes on to tell the audience that people in the news media have declared that something about the new ad “smells fishy” as it relates to federal election rules. From here, Colbert shows and reads a lengthy quote written by former Politico columnist Ben Smith:

Stephen Colbert begins taping around 7:30 p.m., and he detailed his “Vote Cain” strategy... on last night’s show. Meanwhile, The Colbert Super PAC released a slick 60-second “Vote Cain” ad before that Colbert Report episode even hit the air. How did both production-intensive video segments get made within hours of each other without illegal coordination?

Pretending to indignantly react to Smith’s accusations of impropriety, Colbert then jokes that there might be a simple explanation for the simultaneous actions — that Colbert and Jon Stewart (now supposedly running the Colbert Super PAC) share a “psychic connection,” and unknowingly shared the information with each other.

Continuing on, Colbert admits that there is also one other *possible* explanation: Stewart had simply told him ahead of time about the details of when he was going to be running the political ad. At this point in the segment, Colbert provides the audience with a humorous but detailed lesson in the intricacies of election law and the specifics regarding “anti-coordination” rules:

You see, it’s perfectly legal... according to former FEC Chairman, and my and Jon’s lawyer, Trevor Potter. Evidently, “non-coordinating” just means I can’t help them, or approve what they’re doing. But I *can* know in advance what they’ve done. That’s not coordinating. That’s just “ordinating.” Information can go one way, but not the other. It’s like a one-way membrane, basically a money placenta. I give him nothing, and Jon nourishes me in a warm amniotic bath of strategy and cash — until I slide out all wet and electable.

Using this bizarre and somewhat graphic image, Colbert drives home the point to his audience that the actual interpretation (and enforcement) of federal laws banning “coordination” between political campaigns and the activities of Super PAC organizations is significantly different from what the average citizen would understand it to be. Providing confirmation from his lawyer, Potter (one of the country’s foremost experts in campaign election law), Colbert “pulls back the curtain” and highlights how the legal community’s treatment of the word “coordination” in regards to political campaign activities is very distinct from the common sense notion that most voters hold regarding what constitutes coordination.

The next day, during the January 18, 2012 episode, Colbert begins a segment by referencing the especially negative tone of TV ads being run by candidates competing in the ongoing South Carolina Republican primary. Noting that things in the race are “already nasty enough,” Colbert then announces to viewers that a new TV ad was just released by “The Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC,” in which the organization (being run by Jon Stewart) is “pleading for civility.” The ad, in which actor Sam Elliott provides the voice-over, is titled “Double Negative”:

You can’t turn on the TV these days without seeing some negative attack ad. A Super PAC supporting Mitt Romney flooded Iowa with commercials hammering Newt Gingrich. Newt said, he wanted it to end. So the Super PAC backing him just dumped millions into ads attacking Romney. It’s enough to make you sick.

Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow knows we deserve better.

Donate today... and we’ll destroy both these guys and their Super PACs with a merciless ad, torn so fierce they’ll wish they’d never been incorporated. An orgy of pure distortion leaving *nothing* behind... but the clean campaign we all deserve.

Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow are responsible for the content of this advertising.

Incorporating dozens of short video clips from actual TV ads being run by the various Super PAC organizations supporting the various Republican candidates, the humorous ad focuses attention on

the inherent irony of candidates harshly criticizing negative political attacks being orchestrated against them — and then using the fundraising and messaging abilities of their own corresponding Super PACs to respond in kind with increased vitriol. (The ad’s over-the-top imagery, even including video of an atomic bomb to humorously represent the dangers of unbridled spending and Super PAC ads, clearly likens the situation to that of an arms race — with the obvious implication being that ultimately nobody will win.) Finally, the TV ad ends with a humorous and unappealing video clip of factory workers making sausage, which could be interpreted as yet another signal from those involved with the Colbert Super PAC project that they view their efforts as showing viewers “how the sausage is made” when it comes to the political campaign process.

From here, Colbert transitions the segment to a reminder of his earlier call for voters in South Carolina to vote for Herman Cain, essentially as a protest vote and proxy method of showing their support for Colbert’s message. Attempting to persuade his audience, Colbert exclaims “I’ve said that a vote for Herman Cain in this Saturday’s primary would be a strong message to *me* that voters want me to run...” Colbert then goes on to announce the joint political rally that he plans to hold that Friday in South Carolina on the College of Charleston campus. Humorously named the “Rock Me Like a Herman Cain South Cain-olina Primary Rally,” the event, Colbert explains, will even feature an appearance by “special guest,” Herman Cain himself — along with political speeches, cheerleaders, a marching band, and even a gospel choir.

During the next evening’s episode, on Thursday, January 19, 2012, after providing viewers with a summary of campaign news from the Republican primary candidates, Colbert tells viewers how he had recently been “viciously attacked by Jon Stewart’s ‘The definitely *not* coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC’” — via the release of a new TV ad. The ad, which this time features the highly recognizable voice-over talent of movie star Samuel L.

Jackson, is then shown to the audience. The audio of the entire ad, which is titled “Modern Stage Combat,” is below:

America is in crisis, and Stephen Colbert is turning our election into a circus. This East Coast Hollywood elite is exploring a run for president of the United States of America of South Carolina. And come on, why is the T in his name silent? What else is he silent about? Letting murders out of jail?

Now, a Super PAC that he founded is running attack ads against him, just so we’ll think they’re not coordinating. Enough is enough. I have had it with these money grubbing Super PACs messing with our Monday to Friday elections.

South Carolina, send Stephen Colbert a message. On January 21st vote Herman Cain, because we can’t afford to have a leader like this.

Grainy video of Colbert saying: “Look, I just think that Rosa Parks was overrated... overrated... overrated.”

Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow are responsible for the content of this advertising.

Similar to previous ads created by the Colbert Super PAC, the spot is clearly intended as a humorous parody of typical political attack ads — while this time, in what could be described as “meta,” also adding an additional level of self-referential awareness and irony. The ad ends with an animated Benjamin Franklin, pictured as shown on the \$100 bill, delivering the final “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow...” disclaimer line — providing viewers with a final hint regarding Colbert’s actual message regarding the corrupting influence of money within the political campaign system.

Perhaps one of the more noteworthy and unique moments of the Colbert Super PAC campaign occurred with the interview Colbert conducted with retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens. In the interview, portions of which initially appeared during the January 19, 2012 episode, Colbert begins by feigning surprise and disappointment at the news that Justice Stevens is only a *retired* Supreme Court justice (instead of a current sitting judge), and then ribs the 91-year-old Justice Stevens as being a “quitter” and by asking him “What part of lifetime

appointment don't you get, sir?" Stevens' willingness to conduct the interview with Colbert was likely at least partially linked to a desire to promote his recently released book, "Five Chiefs: A Supreme Court Memoir," which Colbert references and briefly displays during the segment. However the interview, during which Justice Stevens frequently appears to be entertained and amused by the antics of Colbert's character — and in which there is a humorous aside as Colbert checks to see if Stevens can help him deal with a speeding ticket — includes a brief but substantive discussion of the Supreme Court's ruling in the Citizens United case, for which Justice Stevens wrote the court's dissenting opinion. Colbert, who remains in character throughout, steers the interview toward a discussion of the "corporations are people" legal argument — considered a key element in the Court's majority ruling related to the right of corporations to spend unlimited money to engage in political speech. In an illuminating portion of the interview, Stevens outlines his perspective on the distinction between "natural persons" and "corporate persons," and why the speech rights of individual citizens (i.e. humans) should be seen and treated as distinctive from those of a corporate entity.

In another portion of the interview, Justice Stevens and Colbert's character engage in a faux debate regarding the danger of money being used to buy influence within political campaigns. Here Stevens provides a sarcastic suggestion that the length of time allocated to candidates to speak during political debates ought to be determined based on a system of how much money each candidate is able to pay in order to speak. In offering his mock agreement with the overly-simplistic "pro-market" perspective of Colbert's character, Justice Stevens sardonically concurs with Colbert's conclusion that, "Because money equals speech, the more money you have, the more speech you should have." At this point of the interview, Colbert brings up the topic of Super PACs and how, following that logic, it could mean that a corporation or a Super PAC could "pay the bills" for a particular political candidate and thus (in keeping with the notion that corporations should have unlimited free speech), would mean that some candidates

might have “more speech” than their competition. Laughing, Stevens jokes that Colbert ought to explore this issue by getting involved in a Super PAC of his own, to which Colbert enthusiastically explains to the former Supreme Court Justice that such an organization already exists, the Colbert Super PAC — and that Stevens should himself donate at least \$100 to Colbert’s PAC. (Here, Colbert lightheartedly jokes with Stevens that he really “owes [him] that much for pushing the book.”) Justice Stevens appears to genuinely enjoy the interaction with Colbert’s character, and the dynamic of the interview itself is jocular on both sides, with the comedic highlight occurring when Colbert asks a seemingly serious question regarding whether Stevens had ever made any decisions that he later regretted, and Stevens responds to Colbert with a slightly snarky quip, asking “Other than this interview?”

(Although attempts were made through the press office at the Supreme Court to contact Justice Stevens to ask about his decision to appear on Colbert’s program — and to specifically inquire about the Justice’s perspective and support for the Colbert Super PAC effort — unfortunately coordinating such a discussion with Stevens was not possible. However, it could be argued that through Stevens’ participation on the show and his comments about Colbert’s Super PAC during the interview that Stevens was fully aware of and at least tangentially supportive of Colbert’s efforts — and perceived the goals of the Colbert Super PAC to be in general alignment with his own perspective regarding the Citizens United decision and the need for regulation of corporate money in politics.)

During the Monday, January 23, 2012, episode, Colbert devotes significant time to the rally held in South Carolina the previous weekend. Joking that “Herman Cain” (while showing the audience a photo of himself) was a “huge winner” on Saturday, Colbert provides a breakdown of the votes. First noting that since he had officially left the Republican primary race, Cain had received only 45 votes in the Iowa caucuses, and 160 votes in the recent New Hampshire primary, Colbert reports to viewers that 6,324 votes had been cast for Cain during Saturday’s

South Carolina Republican primary. Noting that in garnering a full 1% of the vote, he (and Cain) had received more votes than Rick Perry, Jon Huntsman, and Michele Bachmann combined. Colbert tells the audience, “That means we beat *everyone* who was no longer trying to win!” Continuing on in the segment, a sober Colbert then announces that he has a “major announcement” to make — that, due to the fact that Cain do not win in South Carolina, he (Colbert) would be “Re-suspending Herman Cain’s suspended campaign...” and also ending his own “exploratory committee to run for president of the United States of South Carolina.”

At this point, Colbert explains that because he is no longer an official candidate, he would be offering to take back control of “The definitely not coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC.” Turning then to a video feed of Jon Stewart in his own television studio, Colbert finds Stewart greedily counting a stack of money, presumably money from the PAC. Colbert’s character then demands that Stewart return control of the Super PAC to him, asking Stewart “...remember how we *didn’t* coordinate how you would give it back to me if I decided not to run?” The segment then ends with Stewart first denying to Colbert that he had ever received the “transfer papers” for returning control of the PAC, and then an animated shot of Stewart defiantly flying away, with all of the Super PAC money, in a private zeppelin.

Continuing on with the episode, Colbert plays audio of various news outlets’ coverage of the South Carolina rally to introduce a video montage of footage from the rally itself. Both Colbert and Herman Cain are shown walking through cheering and enthusiastic crowds of people. Colbert is shown singing on stage in front of a gospel choir, and then speaking at a podium, telling the audience that he doesn’t “need to pander... to the most beautiful people in the world!” Colbert is then shown delivering a number of jokes about the various Republican candidates to the crowd, before introducing Herman Cain to speak to the crowd. Cain is then shown also joking with the audience and singing on stage, before re-introducing his “brother, from another mother... Mr. Stephen Colbert!”

Running back onto the stage, Colbert then delivers a rousing speech to the crowd, and provides the audience — through his trademark sarcasm — with some of the strongest clues and insight regarding his true motivations and the actual intended message behind the Colbert Super PAC satire:

My fellow Americans, a lot of people have asked me, ‘Why are we here? What is this about?’ In fact Herman asked me that on the bus coming here just now....

It’s quite simple, as Herman Cain said, “We the people are still in charge. We the people still retain our power.” ... But what do we *mean* when we say, “We the people...”? Well, when our founding fathers wrote those words, “We the people,” they meant ALL the people... who were white, male, landowners. But throughout our nation’s great history, every generation has been called to expand the definition of ‘who is a person’ to more of their fellow human beings... regardless of race, creed, color, or whether they are ‘human’ or have beings. Because now, we know that corporations are people... (crowd boos)

So is this a civil rights issue? Yes! ... I’m like Martin Luther King. I’m the Martin Luther King of corporate civil rights! The ‘Lockheed Martin Luther Burger King,’ if you will...

Now some of you may be too young to remember, but years ago, back in 2010, there were still limits on how much money corporations could spend on elections. And not just corporations, also billionaires and unions... but mostly corporations. And faced with this tragic lack of corporate influence in our government, two years ago five courageous unelected justices on the Supreme Court took a stand...

The case: Citizens United vs. the Federal Election Commission. In it they ruled that since corporations are people, and people have the right to free speech, and money equals speech... therefore corporations have the constitutional right to spend unlimited money in political speech. With the stroke of a gavel, these brave men leveled the playing field... and then sold the naming rights to that playing field to Bank of America.

But these wise men knew that there had to be some reasonable restrictions, to protect all that innocent money from the corrupting influence of politicians. And so they declared that the unlimited corporate and union and billionaire bucks had to be completely independent from the campaigns, and lo, Super PACs were born unto us...

...

The pundits have asked, ‘Is this all some joke?’ ... And I say, if they are calling, being allowed to form a Super PAC, and collecting unlimited and untraceable amounts of money from individuals, unions, and corporations... and spend that money on political ads and for personal enrichment, and then surrender that Super PAC to one of my closest friends while I explore a run for office... If *that*

is a joke, then they are saying our entire campaign finance system is a joke! (*crowd cheers in agreement*) And I don't know about you, but I have been paid to be offended by that!

We fought a great civil war to ensure that *all* people are people. As Abraham Lincoln said at Gettysburg, "Give me some money!" ... There are cynics who say, that you have to be a billionaire to have your voice heard in Washington. Wrong! You just have to *know* a billionaire... I believe we must not go back to those dark days, when we discriminated against corporate persons based on the color of their skin, or because they didn't have skin, or a head, or a face...

...so tomorrow, January 21st, the two year anniversary of Citizens United, you can thank the Supreme Court by going into that voting booth and voting for Herman Cain... because sadly, it is still illegal to vote with just pure cash. Now the experts say, "He can't win." They've been wrong before... (but) not this time... this time, they're spot on. But just because you lose, that doesn't mean you surrender.

We here must highly resolve that these unlimited funds shall not have been donated in vain... because if corporations are people, people with a constitutional right to influence our elections, then I promise you, government *of* those people, *by* those people, and *for* those people, shall not perish from this earth. Thank you, God bless you, and God bless Herman Cain!

With this lengthy speech at the University of Charleston, Colbert essentially offered both the crowd of fans and the media outlets which had come to cover the event an extended commentary on his actual beliefs regarding the state of American campaign finance laws. Employing his trademark sarcasm, Colbert's focus on the issues of unlimited money and coordination between Super PAC entities and candidate campaigns ends with an unquestionably clear and strong statement: "...our entire campaign finance system is a joke!" Along with its sheer length (only excerpts are shown above), Colbert's speech in South Carolina demonstrated a relatively high level of rare sincerity from the comedian; although it was laden with humor and satirical twists, Colbert — through his references to slavery and the civil war — was also highlighting the basic themes of fairness within society and equal democratic representation, messages which are arguably not typically incorporated into a late-night comic's repertoire.

During the January 24, 2012 episode, Colbert briefly sets aside time from the show to give what amounts to a fundraising pitch for the Colbert Super PAC organization. Reminding viewers that the PAC is still being held "hostage" by Jon Stewart, Colbert tells the audience that

he can't imagine "how scared [his] money must be right now," and then pleads with viewers to help "comfort my money by sending it more of itself." Directing viewers to go to the ColbertSuperPAC.com web site to "give recklessly" to the organization, Colbert hints to the audience that the PAC is nearing a certain significant fundraising amount: "We are so close to a nice, round, ridiculous number ... no one thought we'd hit, in a *million* years." It seems likely that in timing this call for donations immediately following his South Carolina event, Colbert was taking the opportunity to leverage media attention (and the subsequent increased viewers of the show) to help boost the Colbert Super PAC's fundraising efforts.

In the January 30, 2012 episode, Colbert begins the program by celebrating with his studio audience the "return" of the Colbert Super PAC, control of which had ostensibly been shifted from Stewart back to Colbert. Colbert then goes on to explain that the next day, January 31st, is the deadline for Super PACs to file financial disclosure paperwork with the Federal Election Commission. Noting that until the FEC's quarterly filing deadline passes, it is often impossible for citizens and the media to learn who is behind the funding of the various Super PAC operating in their state, Colbert sarcastically applauds the seemingly ineffective system. "It's a great day for transparency," Colbert says, "because tomorrow, voters in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Florida, will finally have the vital information that would have been useful before they voted." With this statement Colbert is underscoring the apparent ridiculousness of a system, designed to provide the public with information regarding campaign related spending, which doesn't require public disclosure of an organization's funding sources until after some states' primary elections have already occurred. Colbert continues the segment by explaining that similar to other Super PAC groups, the Colbert Super PAC would be filing its own disclosure paperwork right at the midnight deadline — and then would also post the information on its web site, so viewers would be able to learn how much money had been raised. Colbert also notes that, due to FEC regulations, the names of individual donors who had

contributed amounts more than \$200 would be disclosed — and then goes on to humorously highlight some of the more “creative” (and apparently fabricated) Super PAC donor names (i.e., “Pat Magroin,” etc.). Colbert then, in a moment of semi-sincerity, thanks all of the individuals who had donated to the Super PAC project.

Later during the same episode, Colbert plays an extended, three minute long video montage, which supposedly shows viewers “the great chase” — in which Colbert hunts down Jon Stewart, chasing him through various TV studios and city streets, before finally forcing Stewart to return power and control over the Colbert Super PAC. The humorous sequence ends with a frantic, money-hungry Stewart being pursued and then trapped by Colbert in a dark corner — and then Colbert, taking on a faux “evil” persona, forcibly transfers the imaginary power of the PAC from Stewart back to himself. The sketch treats the power held by the Super PAC almost as a supernatural strength. The melodramatic scene, which farcically depicts the Super PAC (and the power inherent within it, through the money it contains), as the embodiment of greed and corruption, seems primarily intended as humorous filler within the show — although the sequence also serves to drive home to viewers the general message that Super PACs (and the influence they hold, through money) have the potential to corrupt, in this case, our political system.

During the February 2, 2012 episode, Colbert begins a segment by noting that he has “been talking about Super PACs for almost a year now,” and then explaining to his audience yet again the basics of the Citizens United Supreme Court case. Eventually simplifying the ruling, and how it impacts the spending of money in politics, Colbert jokes by comparing the court’s ruling to the penny tray next to a cash register: “I like to think of it as a ‘Give a Penny, Take an Election’ tray.” Colbert then goes on to explain how an FEC disclosure deadline had recently passed, meaning it was possible to know how much money various PACs had raised and who their large donors were. Introducing a montage of news clips regarding multi-million dollar

donations that had been made to the Super PACs supporting Republican presidential candidates Newt Gingrich, Mitt Romney, and Jon Huntsman, Colbert jokes: “And to all the worrywarts out there, who said Super PACs were going to lead to a cabal of billionaires secretly buying democracy... Wrong, they are *publicly* buying democracy.”

Continuing the segment, Colbert stresses that nearly half (47.9%) of the total money contributed to all Super PACs during the most recent reporting period, \$67 million, had been donated by just 22 individuals. Colbert then sarcastically comments that while the “good government goo-goos” will likely express concern that such a process gives disproportionate power to just the “top 1%” (an obvious reference to the ongoing “Occupy Wall Street” protests), the *actual* percentage (22 individuals, out of the country’s total population of approximately 300 million) is really about “seven one-millionths of one-percent.” Colbert then continues the segment with his dripping sarcasm, emphatically arguing:

This is what the Supreme Court intended with their Citizens United ruling. Twenty-two billionaires deciding who our next leader would be... I’m sure it’s the way that the twenty-two billionaires who chose our founding fathers would want it. So join me in honoring these twenty-two patriots, who have given so much... and expect so much in return.

Colbert then transitions the segment into a patriotic montage — complete with footage of Mitt Romney awkwardly singing “America the Beautiful” — and presents to viewers “the people selecting our next president.” With an American flag waving in the background, the names, photos and contribution amounts of twenty-two top political contributors (including both individuals and corporate entities), are displayed on the screen. Finally, to drive home Colbert’s overall message that these large dollar contributions mean that regular citizens no longer have control over the election, the segment ends with a final sarcastic message on the screen — “Thank You for our Election” — and Colbert crossing his fingers, telling the audience that he hopes they (the billionaire donors) pick someone he likes. Beyond just providing his viewers with specific information regarding the identities of extremely wealthy political donors, through

displaying their names and photos Colbert is arguably also attempting to “shame” those individuals for “buying” the upcoming election. This effort, in highlighting publicly available donor information on his show, could also be viewed as part of Colbert’s perspective regarding the importance of disclosure within the political financing system.

Perhaps one of the best indicators that the Colbert Super PAC effort had become a central part of the national political debate occurred in early February, 2012, when former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and current House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi released a 47-second YouTube video titled “Stop Colbert.” In the parody video (meant to be a satirical response to Colbert’s satire), Speaker Pelosi appears in what is intended to look like a typical political attack ad, complete with unflattering black-and-white photos of Colbert and “scary” lightning bolt special effects. In the video, Pelosi says that although Colbert used to be her friend, since he started his Super PAC and “started taking secret money from special interests” he has been out of control and must be stopped. In a humorous nod to over-the-top political attacks, Pelosi ends her mock-assault on Colbert with an accusation that Colbert “doesn’t even like kittens,” and concludes the video with an appeal for viewers to join her in “stopping Colbert and creating a new politics free of special interest money.” Stating that passing the DISCLOSE Act is the first step toward this better future, Pelosi directs supporters to a Facebook page titled “StopColbert” to learn more about the legislation. (Multiple attempts were also made to contact staff within Pelosi’s Congressional press office to inquire about the origins and strategy behind the “Stop Colbert” web video.)

From an earned media perspective, the use of Colbert and reference to the Colbert Super PAC project as a “hook” to generate news coverage and media attention (for both Pelosi and about the DISCLOSE legislation) appears to have been an overwhelming success. Beyond generating over 340,000 views on YouTube (as of April 3, 2012), several unique print articles and online news pieces were produced about Pelosi’s satirical “attack ad” and how it had “gone

viral” on the internet (Rao, 2012). The nod to Colbert’s efforts with the Super PAC project, and the use of a Facebook page for providing information about the legislation could also be viewed as an attempt by Pelosi to appeal to both a younger audience, and to encourage grassroots support for the legislation among the generally more politically informed audience of programs like *The Colbert Report*. The fact that one of the most powerful members of Congress made the strategic decision to use a reference to a late night comedian in order to gain media attention and to help promote a specific piece of campaign finance reform legislation is testament to the significant role and perceived cultural impact of Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC project.

A couple of weeks after Congresswoman Pelosi released the “Stop Colbert” web video, Colbert announced during the February 21, 2012 episode that the former Speaker would be appearing as a guest on the next evening’s episode as part of a continued effort to promote passage of the DISCLOSE Act. Colbert then showed the audience Pelosi’s “attack ad” and provided viewers with a brief overview of the DISCLOSE Act, most notably that the legislation would require Super PACs “...to reveal their top five donors in each ad.” Later in the segment, Colbert focuses attention on the recent decision made by the Obama campaign to actively solicit contributions to a Super PAC specifically created to support the President’s re-election — even though President Obama had publicly criticized the Citizens United ruling and had just recently said in an interview that he did not believe Super PACs and the unlimited money they allowed was good for American democracy.

At this point in the segment, Colbert sarcastically jokes to viewers that although Obama may believe the new Super PAC system is “morally wrong,” he still needs to *use* that system in order to defeat it: “It’s like how Lincoln won the civil war, by buying a bunch of slaves!” Colbert then ends the segment with a strange and entertaining gag, donning a dark hood and pretending to be the *Star Wars* character Obi-Wan Kenobi, and theatrically telling an image of President Obama to “feel the power of the green-side” (as in, to become focused on the money). The clip

ends with Colbert dramatically and humorously implying that, through the use of unlimited Super PAC money, President Obama could essentially transform himself into an evil and more powerful “Darth-bama” character — and that through this money fueled power, Colbert and Obama could together rule the universe. Although obviously meant to be farcical, this sketch’s allusion to the *Star Wars* allegory of Darth Vader represents yet another moment on the program where Colbert promotes the notion of Super PACs as inherently corrupt and evil, and melodramatically insinuates the reliance on Super PAC money as equivalent to “selling one’s soul” for power.

During the next night’s program, on February 22, 2012, Colbert hosted Speaker Nancy Pelosi on the show. Referencing that Pelosi had said in the past that she would not appear as a guest on his program, Colbert began the interview by joking with Pelosi: “You said you’d never come on here. Do you often break your promises?” Beyond the good natured humor and banter between the two throughout the interview, it was evident within the conversation that Colbert and Pelosi shared a common perspective regarding the harmful influence of large money donations within elections. Referencing Pelosi’s parody video on YouTube, Colbert began the discussion noting that the Congresswoman had recently “attacked” him, in claiming that Super PACs (including Colbert, and the Colbert Super PAC) were hurting democracy. Outlining her perspective on the impact of unregulated money within politics, Pelosi explained that, “If we want to cancel elections, and have the wealthiest people in America... give tens of millions of dollars, we can just ask them: who do they want to be president, who do they want to run Congress, who do they want to be governor?”

Noting that such an arrangement would essentially mean the country would become the equivalent of a plutocracy, Pelosi declared that “We are a democracy and our founders intended that the people would decide,” as members of the program’s studio audience cheered. At this point, Colbert steers the interview to a discussion of the Supreme Court’s legal rationale for the Citizens United decision regarding “corporate personhood” and the right of corporations to

participate in free speech through the act of political donations. Responding to Colbert's questioning of why Pelosi might not want people (i.e., corporations) to have the right of free speech, Congresswoman Pelosi replied:

Let's just say that I want them to disclose. The people have a right to know. If they're going to have tens of millions of dollars that they're putting up for a candidate or a cause, the public has a right to know by whose authority is this coming to them.

From this point in the interview, Pelosi outlines her vision for reforming the system beyond passage of the DISCLOSE Act (which focuses primarily on imposing more rigorous and timely disclosure requirements related to publicly available information about political donors), and a drive to “overturn the Supreme Court decision [Citizens United] by amending the Constitution and give the vote and the voice and power to the people.” Later in the interview, Colbert and Pelosi discuss how wealthy political donors “want to own the presidency.” Referencing the influence that money is having on the electoral process, Colbert makes the “in character” (i.e., sarcastic) comment to just “let the free market decide who represents us!” Colbert ends the interview by offering to support the DISCLOSE Act in exchange for Pelosi agreeing to encourage other Democratic House members to appear on his show, and then transitions into what seems to be a rare moment where he briefly leaves character, thanking the former Speaker for agreeing to the interview and then earnestly declaring to the audience, “The DISCLOSE Act, it's gotta happen!” In making this declaration, Colbert briefly broke character — a rare event on the show — and offered his viewers a glimpse into his sincere perspective regarding the need for improved disclosure regulation.

Although there are occasional passing references to the Colbert Super PAC on the program over the next several weeks, it isn't until over a month later, during the March 29, 2012 episode, that significant airtime and attention is again focused on the Super PAC project. During the program, Colbert first highlights to viewers a recent *Houston Chronicle* article which had reported that, to date, more Texans had donated money to Colbert's “Americans for a Better

Tomorrow, Tomorrow” Super PAC than to the pro-Romney “Restore Our Future” Super PAC organization. Colbert, embracing the pompous and self-congratulatory nature of his on-air persona, goes on in the segment to also highlight another article from the political newspaper, *The Hill*, which focused on the recent proliferation of Super PAC organizations across the country. Selectively citing two quotes from the article — which put together read, “The explosion of Super-PACs is likely being fueled by a surge of media interest...” and “...Stephen Colbert has brought the issue to late-night television.” — Colbert claims credit for helping to promote the creation of the political organizations.

Continuing on in the segment, Colbert then tells viewers about a letter he had recently received from a University of Texas undergraduate student who had proposed starting a local Colbert Super PAC organization there at his school. Reacting to a cheering studio audience, Colbert rhetorically asks whether he should “give his blessing” to these requests to extend the Colbert Super PAC project to college campuses across the country. Next, Colbert unveils to viewers a cardboard box which is labeled “The Colbert Super PAC Super FUN Pack” — a “do-it-yourself kit” which can be ordered by college students wanting to create their own Super PAC organizations. Explaining to viewers that the kits will be sold through his Colbert Super PAC entity, Colbert declares that “All you need is a burning desire for civil engagement, and \$99!” Colbert then goes on to explain that the kits will include *all* of the required legal documents needed to create a Super PAC (the joke here being that it is only one document), as well as an Ikea-style “Instruction Manual” for filing the legal paperwork. Colbert humorously stresses to viewers that the manual, which was created with the help of his lawyer Trevor Potter, “does not constitute legal advice.” The kits, Colbert explains, also include: a free T-shirt, a dorm room sign (which reads: “Do Not Enter — Official Super PAC Business in Progress”), a pair of official Colbert Super PAC tube socks, a copy of the Forbes list of the 400 Richest American (for fundraising purposes), and a treasure map. The first person to use the included map to locate the treasure, Colbert declares, will win a guest appearance by Colbert at their own school. Colbert

then ends the segment by directing viewers to the ColbertSuperPAC.com web site to donate the necessary \$99 contribution in order to receive one of the Fun Packs.

A couple of days later, during the April 2, 2012 episode, Colbert provides further detail about the Fun Pack effort. Providing the first “clue” in the earlier mentioned treasure hunt (two scrambled words: “KARF FNARGLEZOX”), Colbert also informs viewers that along with the earlier mentioned items, the kits will include a special decoder ring (for use with the treasure hunt clues) and a miniature “Ham Rove” canned ham, similar to the ham Colbert had used in running gags on the program. On the next night’s program, Colbert continues to promote the sale of the Fun Packs, telling viewers that the boxes will now also include a giant red plastic button which plays “Not-Legal Advice” from his own lawyer, Trevor Potter — as well as a special paper Certificate of Presidenthood, signed by Colbert himself.

During a later segment of the April 3, 2012 episode, Colbert focuses continued attention on his *other* Super PAC organization, “Colbert Super PAC SHH!” — which, he reminds viewers, is even more secretive because, as a “quasi-charitable” organization, it isn’t required to disclose names of its donors.

Continuing on, Colbert explains to the audience how some states have recently been pushing for regulations that would require 501 c 4 organizations to disclose donor names, but the effort for greater transparency has been opposed by Colbert’s personal “hero,” Karl Rove. The segment continues with Colbert sarcastically comparing Rove to Martin Luther King, in his effort to protect the rights of corporate persons. Next, Colbert reports to viewers recent news that a U.S. district court had ruled that 501 c 4 organizations should be required to disclose the names of their donors — and that the IRS was also questioning the special tax status of some 501 c 4 groups as “social welfare” organizations.

Feigning panic about these threats to the special rules protecting the secrecy of his 501 c 4 organization, Colbert then transitions the segment into another educational interview with Trevor Potter.

Colbert begins the interview by asking Potter to explain why the IRS is concerned with Super PAC groups. Potter then goes on to explain that the special designation of 501 c 4 tax status, in the eyes of the IRS, requires that organizations be focused on furthering public policy goals and that their “primary purpose must be social welfare,” but that the legal distinctions in this area are in fact “a little gray.” Reacting to this information, Colbert then asks Potter if he has again brought any special paperwork to help Colbert circumvent the potential legal issues the “Colbert Super PAC SHH!” organization might face if the IRS determines it doesn’t qualify for the 501 c 4 status. Potter then explains to Colbert that while there are no special legal documents, the issue can actually be generally avoided because “You do not have to file anything with the IRS until *after* the election.” Outlining the fact that current law doesn’t require for 501 c 4 organizations to file for special tax status with the IRS until after the date of the upcoming election, Potter highlights to Colbert that this issue is largely irrelevant for their organization, since any legal or tax repercussions won’t arise “until after it doesn’t matter anymore.” Like the past interview sessions with Potter, this segment is noteworthy for its educational and somewhat esoteric nature, in regards to the fine details of campaign finance law — and it seems certainly intended as an effort by both Colbert and Potter not only to inform, but also to motivate viewers to be incensed by the gaps and loopholes found within current election regulations.

During the April 4, 2012 episode Colbert announced to his audience that the program had received a Peabody Award, an honor given to “recognize distinguished achievement and meritorious service” among those in the radio and television industries (<http://www.peabody.uga.edu/>). The award was designated to specifically honor the “Super PAC segments” of *The Colbert Report* program, which are described on the Peabody organization’s web site as “a satirical protest against megabucks politics, [though which] Colbert mixed cerebral comedy with inspired sight gags, interviews and preposterously funny monologues.” (www.peabody.uga.edu, 2012). In the segment, Colbert jokes that he wants to thank both the staff of his show and the staff of his Super PAC, “who thanks to the FEC rules are allowed to be

the same people” — a reference to the recent June 30th FEC ruling. Colbert then continues, saying:

And I share this award with the members of the Supreme Court, whose Citizens United ruling made it possible... Just as CNN could not have won their Peabody for their coverage of Egypt, without the brutal regime of Hosni Mubarak, you guys [the Supreme Court] are the real heroes.

Here, Colbert uses the attention generated from the Peabody Award as yet another opportunity to again draw attention to the Citizens United case and to take a public stab at the Supreme Court’s decision. In a similar example, within a TIME magazine story written about Colbert’s Peabody award, the article quotes a tweet from Colbert in which he proclaims, “What an honor! I am truly speechless. Luckily, thanks to Citizens United, my money can speak for me,” (Subramanian, 2012).

The April 26, 2012 episode included a segment where Colbert focused continued attention on the college campus Super PAC effort, and showed viewers a recent TV news clip reporting how several Colbert Super PAC “spin-off” Super PAC organizations had already been founded at the University of Texas, the University of Missouri, and Purdue University. Colbert then reminds viewers about the “Colbert Super PAC Super FUN Pack” kits, and boasts that all of the 1000 boxes that had been produced had sold out in less than a week. Continuing the segment, Colbert reveals the “treasure” that participants in the treasure map search (from the Fun Pack kits) will be competing against each other to win — an “antique sterling silver bell shaped like a turtle.” (The intentionally odd reward for the treasure hunt, beyond simply serving as a token prize, also apparently references the turtle which is shown on the official Colbert Super PAC t-shirt — another product of the unique and quirky humor of the program.) Next, Colbert links the silver turtle prize back to the issue of campaign finance and the unlimited fundraising capabilities of Super PAC organizations. Noting that the antique bell had likely been used long ago to “summon servants on British estates,” Colbert explains to viewers and treasure hunt participants that they “can ring it to summon the politician whose loyalty you will be purchasing with

unlimited Super PAC money.” Finally Colbert displays a cryptic series of colors on the screen as the “launch clue” for the treasure hunt, and then explains that the treasure will be hidden at an undisclosed location somewhere in the United States — and reminds viewers that the person who finds the turtle will also receive a visit from him to their college campus.

Throughout the months of May and June, 2012, Colbert continued to occasionally reference the Super PAC project, as well as the 1000 “Fun Pack” kits which had been sold, during various segments of the show. At one point during the June 7th episode, Colbert spent time during the program discussing a “clue” that was being sent via email to all of the college students who were participating in the treasure hunt competition. Three weeks later, during the June 28, 2012 episode, Colbert announced that the treasure hunt had been solved — and introduced the winner of the contest, University of Pittsburgh college student, Dan Stough, as a guest on the program. (The final clue necessary to win the extremely complex treasure hunt involved obtaining the GPS coordinates necessary for finding a hidden fake log — in Dixon, Illinois, President Reagan’s childhood home — which contained a special email address for contacting the show’s producers and claiming the winning prize.) Presenting Stough with the prize of the silver antique turtle, Colbert reminded the audience that Stough and his winning teammates would also be receiving a guest appearance (by Colbert) on the campus of their school, the University of Pittsburgh.

Although the Colbert Super PAC effort continues, the culmination of the “Colbert Super PAC Super FUN Pack” kits initiative and the related college student treasure hunt project provides a fitting and natural conclusion for this timeline. Colbert’s focus on involving college students with the Super PAC kits and the treasure hunt project helps provide further clarity into his motivation and vision for the larger Colbert Super PAC effort. Clearly, Colbert views young citizens as being a key part of any future efforts to reform the nation’s campaign finance system — and his efforts to motivate college students to get involved with Super PAC organizations of

their own is seen, by Colbert, as a way of perpetuating and amplifying the message of the Colbert Super PAC project. Some evidence exists that the effort was embraced and well received by many college age fans. A *CNN Money* news article from May 21st, with the headline “Colbert Spawns Army of Crazy Super PACs” (Riley, 2012), discusses the proliferation of Colbert-inspired satirical Super PAC organizations. Highlighting the formation of several new Super PACs, complete with silly and irreverent names (similar to Colbert’s “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow”), the article includes quotes from college students at both MIT and Duke University who were inspired by Colbert’s efforts and formed their own PAC organizations. One student who is quoted in the article is described as being concerned because of the “insane amounts of money [that] flow into the political system,” while another tells the reporter that “...the whole (campaign finance) system is really rather sad and degrading to the political process.”

As further evidence that many college students fully understood and embraced Colbert’s message with the Super PAC project — and were inspired to go beyond just reflecting on the issue of money in politics, and have become politically involved in efforts toward campaign finance reform — an illuminating piece about the project, written by a college student from Penn State University, appeared on July 3, 2012 in the Huffington Post’s “College” section (Maisel, 2012). In the article, Penn State undergraduate and author Remy Maisel writes about how she and her friends had been among the students who had received one of the 1000 “Super FUN Pack” kits, and how disappointed they were to not have been the winning treasure hunt team — especially because they would not be receiving the prize of a visit from Colbert to their school. Maisel declares that through the Super PAC project Colbert had been “using satire to give the U.S. public a civics lesson on how corrupt our campaign finance laws had become,” and then goes on to reflect on what Colbert’s message to college students might have been, in compelling them to participate in such a complex and onerous treasure hunt effort. Discussing the need for

perseverance, not just in following the clues of a treasure hunt, but also in political participation and engagement, Maisel reflects on her understanding of Colbert's message:

... as Colbert shows us night after night on his show, engaging in politics can be fun even though the stakes are high. There is no reason why we can't enjoy ourselves while we make a real impact on the campaign and take back the reins of our democracy. Ironically, all we need to do is to start using the very system that favors corporations to demonstrate its fallibility. We are hoping that each of the Colbert-inspired campus based Super PACs will use their power to push back on the Super PAC system itself...

Make no mistake, Mr. Colbert, we're gunning for second prize, and we're not alone. A secret league of heavy-hitting PACs is forming as we write this, and we are up to no good. We'd tell you more, but we don't have to, so we won't. Don't blink, America, or by the time you refocus your eyes, we just might have pulled the 2012 elections right out from under your feet. We may not have been diligent enough or creative enough to have solved the treasure hunt, but Colbert has taught us that we have all the skills we need to influence the 2012 election.

Remy Maisel, Penn State undergraduate

Maisel's comments reveal a defiant and enthusiastic perspective toward political involvement, and a belief in the ability to enact change and to positively influence the political process. The piece clearly credits Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC project with helping to inspire this effort, and in empowering college students with not only knowledge of the system, but a motivation to voice dissent and work toward change. As the Colbert Super PAC project continues to unfold and evolve leading up to the November 2012 election, and likely beyond, it is clear that the initiative will not only encompass Colbert and his staff — but also an inspired and devoted network of politically engaged fans and supporters.

Selected News Coverage & Journalists' Perspectives

Perhaps the single most significant media article that has been written about Colbert in during the past year was a 5,500-plus word profile piece focusing on Colbert and his satire, which was written by Charles McGrath and appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* on January 4, 2012 (McGrath, 2012). The profile represents one of the few times in which Colbert openly discusses details of the Super PAC project, along with some of the intricacies of his humor, outside of his usual “conservative blowhard” character — and is therefore also of significant importance to this research effort. In the piece, McGrath describes how there are multiple versions of Colbert’s persona. Beyond the actual Stephen Colbert (the real individual), McGrath writes that there is also the conservative character he plays on his show, and now through the Super PAC project, Colbert’s “character” has also begun to exist and operate in the real world of politics. As McGrath writes, “the new Colbert has crossed the line that separates a TV stunt from reality and a parody from what is being parodied.”

The profile includes a number of quotes from Colbert which seem to provide at least some insight into the comedian’s sincere perspective on the Super PAC project, and several of the noteworthy elements within the effort. In one such quote from the article, Colbert tells McGrath, “Basically, the F.E.C. gave me a license to create a killer robot.” This comment seems to imply that Colbert views his efforts as having the ability to “do damage” or to perhaps at least nominally wreak havoc on the existing campaign finance world. Later in the piece, regarding the potential use of unregulated 501 (c) (4) funds anonymously transferred to a regular PAC organization, Colbert is quoted as asking McGrath, “What’s the difference between that and money laundering?” Describing how such a potential for circumvention of intended regulations essentially negates the impact of the law, Colbert says, “Citizens United said that transparency would be the disinfectant, but ‘(c) (4)’s’ are warm, wet, moist incubators. There is no disinfectant.” Beyond offering readers this insight into Colbert’s true perspective on the

ineffectiveness and absurdity of campaign finance laws, the profile also describes details of Colbert's childhood and family life, the trajectory of his career in comedy, and his natural affinity to unscripted, improv-style humor.

In one of the phone interviews that was conducted as part of this research, on February 17, 2012, McGrath discussed Colbert's willingness to open up for the interview — and to offer the *Times* writer a rare opportunity to explore the comedian's attitudes and viewpoints, without the insulation of his comedic persona. Asked about Colbert's willingness to conduct the interview, and his choice to leave character for the journalist's questions, McGrath provided the following insight:

It was kind of his (Colbert's) decision, it was interesting. I had to pursue him to get him to do this and I went through his PR person. And at a certain point he said to her, "Well okay, we are all in. And if we are going to do this we are going to do this." And then, so from the very first time I met him, he said, "I am going to do something here that I almost never do." And that is, talk to me not in the character. And that was his decision.

Obviously, I was more than happy that that's what had happened. I mean, if he had done it the other way I could have made it work. I mean, it would have been a different piece. It might have been a funnier piece but that was his decision. And then there were things that were off the record; and they had to do with, mostly had to do with...and I still can't talk about them, further plans he has for what he might or might not do with his PAC, stuff with the money. So that was off the record, and then certain stuff about his family was off the record. But otherwise, that was just his decision.

Charles McGrath, *New York Times*

In the profile he wrote about Colbert, McGrath devotes a significant amount of attention to Colbert's training and skill as an "improv" comedian. At one point during the interview, McGrath commented that he viewed Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project as having naturally evolved and grown from a smaller, limited gag on the show. McGrath's perspective is that Colbert and his staff didn't originally have a "master plan" going into the project, but instead followed it to where it took them. Below, McGrath also provides his thoughts on Colbert's attitudes regarding campaign financing, and his goals with the Super PAC effort:

... as I said in the (*New York Times*) piece, one of the things that I think is crucial to him (Colbert) and to his personality is all these years of improv training — and he has got a hold of this thing and it just keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger and I don't think he has a game plan. He's just going to ride this thing for as far as he can and he will, as a great improviser, he will make up new stuff or discover new stuff as he goes along.

Ultimately, I think though that his goal is to point to the absurdity of the Citizens United decision and perhaps help... roll back this process ... I think it's pretty clear that Colbert thinks that this is pernicious and that it is a distortion of what ought to be the democratic process. And I think probably in his heart of hearts he would like to see this changed.

Charles McGrath, *New York Times*

Among the journalists interviewed as part of this research, McGrath's insight into Colbert and his motivations are among the most valuable considering the numerous, direct interactions the journalist had with the comedian. McGrath's belief that Colbert would ultimately like to see the Citizens United decision rolled back is especially noteworthy since it was informed with this unique opportunity to interview Colbert outside of his typical character.

During the interview, McGrath discussed how early on he felt that the Colbert Super PAC was largely just a publicity stunt, with the primary goal of “enhancing the Colbert brand name” — but as the project evolved, he came to see the effort as more substantive and significant. When asked to comment on whether he believed Colbert's efforts had served an “agenda setting” role and whether Colbert had influenced media coverage about Super PACs, McGrath offered this response:

Yeah, of course. Absolutely, I mean there is no question about it. I think that... I mean it's kind of a lucky accent. He started doing this precisely at the moment when we see it playing out in the Republican [primaries]. But at the time that I wrote my piece, if you Google “Super PAC” the phrase, Colbert is the first name that comes up. I mean that in itself tells you that he's framing the agenda. He is the source by which a great many people know about this phenomenon at all.

Charles McGrath, *New York Times*

Asked specifically whether he thought Colbert had influenced journalists' understanding of Super PACs, McGrath confirmed that he felt everyone — journalists and the general viewing public alike — had gained a better understanding of the system from the Colbert Super PAC. Noting that Colbert's satire had been effective in explaining campaign finance law, McGrath said that Colbert had "clarified it for everyone by dramatizing how it works."

Although McGrath had commented early in the interview that he didn't believe Colbert's motivation was self-promotional, he also later noted that he believed the Super PAC project was probably partially driven by the comedian's ego, and that the media coverage of the project was feeding Colbert's love of attention:

Among other things, there is an ego thing here as well. I mean, he (Colbert) loves this. If you were an improv comedian, this is your wildest dream come true. He loves this. Here he is, he is a comedian and, as you say, now he is a news figure. I mean, how great is that? And he basks in the love of the audience and so he's not going to let that go away.

Charles McGrath, *New York Times*

McGrath's perspectives on Colbert and his motivations are especially important for this research, considering the fact that multiple attempts at gaining a direct interview with Colbert himself (or members of his staff) were unsuccessful. In recent years Colbert has participated in few media interviews outside of character, thus positioning McGrath — through the research he conducted for his *New York Times* profile of the comedian — as a valuable resource within this effort to examine the comedian's views.

One of the more significant articles that was written early on about the Colbert Super PAC project was a piece by Kenneth Vogel, which appeared in on the web site *Politico* on May 13, 2011, shortly after the time of Colbert's initial appearance in front of the FEC (Vogel, 2011). In the *Politico* article — which is titled "Colbert at the FEC? Really." — Vogel goes into relative depth exploring both Colbert's potential motivation and intent behind the Super PAC project, and the actual legal implications related to campaign finance regulation review being triggered by

Colbert's FEC request. Referring to Colbert's efforts, Vogel notes that "...the stunt could have real — and potentially broad — implications in the world of campaign finance," beyond simply affecting the actions of just Colbert's Super PAC. Writing that Colbert's project helps highlight the ability for corporations to spend unlimited funds in support or opposition to a candidate, Vogel quotes a supportive campaign finance reform advocate, Lisa Gilbert (from the organization Public Citizen), saying that Colbert is helping their effort to "expose 'the clear conflict of interest that FOX media has as they allow political figures to promote their PACs on a supposedly neutral media outlet.'" Vogel's article provides detail regarding the "media exemption" law that was at the root of Colbert's FEC advisory request, and also reports how a number of individuals within the campaign finance reform community had alternately expressed concern that if the FEC decided in favor of Colbert, and ruled to grant the comedian "wide latitude" for using his program to promote the Colbert Super PAC, it "would be a troubling development" and would "have a real election law impact" — essentially serving to *weaken* current-standing corporate contribution restrictions.

Vogel's article also provides some examination into the motivation behind Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project. Discussing some of the specific language within the actual FEC advisory request, Vogel surmises that "Colbert sees his political commentary as something of a public service," in that the Super PAC allows for Colbert to have a vehicle for discussion of campaign finance issues. Later in the article, however, Vogel acknowledges to readers that it is difficult to discern with any certainty Colbert's true motivations:

As with all things Colbert, though, it may be folly to try [to] deduce any serious underlying motivation — other than satirizing the silly side of American politics and politicians — from his shtick.

Continuing on in the piece, Vogel writes that regardless of questions about Colbert's intent, "Washington's political class clearly respects and fears the potential of Colbert... to both

embarrass politicians and to shape political narratives, particularly among younger, left-leaning demographics.”

During a February 18, 2012, phone interview with Vogel, the journalist further discussed his perspective regarding Colbert’s motivations and intent for the Super PAC project — and emphasized the fact that, beyond the inherent ambiguity of Colbert’s comedic persona, which serves to intentionally cast doubt on his actual beliefs, it’s perhaps more important to examine the *effects* of Colbert’s efforts.

What is Colbert’s intent? It would seem to be... obviously, it’s tough to unravel because his character is such a... he is so fully-assumed... it’s tough to tell where the light shtick ends and the underlying motivation, comic or otherwise, begins. But, the effect of his ongoing gag about campaign finance rules and Super PAC and 501(c)(4) [groups] has been to create in the public consciousness this idea that the campaign finance rules are woefully inadequate and loophole-ridden. Whether that’s his intent or not, that is the practical effect.

... again, I don’t know what the intent is, but the effect is to provide information from a very specific perspective — that if you were to believe that its intended effect was the actual effect, then it would seem that he would be coming to it from a perspective of trying to spur reforms to the system. I mean that’s how you certainly help that side’s case.

Kenneth Vogel, *Politico*

Although unwilling during the interview to state with any certainty that he understands Colbert’s true intent with the Super PAC effort, Vogel seems to argue that the more important issue is simply the impact made by Colbert’s satire. Later in the interview, Vogel also argues for a similar distinction in response to the question of whether Colbert’s Super PAC project could be considered political advocacy or activism.

I don’t think it’s necessarily advocacy because he is not, like, speaking a desired policy outcome, which is not seen today, even if what he is doing is providing ammunition for those who are. So I’m thinking there’s a fine line between satire and activism or advocacy and he’s right on that line. But, because he has so shrouded himself in this character, he has not tipped his hand towards any, like, desired policy outcome. So even if he is giving ammunition to those who are

seeking desired policy outcome, he himself is not and so therefore it's just right on that line between, what he's doing is just right on that line between advocacy-activism and just plain old satire.

Kenneth Vogel, *Politico*

Through this comment, Vogel seems to indicate that he views the distinction between political satire and political advocacy as being linked to whether Colbert is making an explicit call for a specific policy outcome. Because Colbert's humor had not directed his fans to take any certain action, beyond donating to the Colbert Super PAC, Vogel viewed the effort as not quite crossing the line into true activism.

A number of significant news articles were written about Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC project around the time of Colbert's second appearance in front of the FEC, during which he sat before the commission to hear their ruling on his advisory request related to the earlier discussed "media exemption" issue. In one of the more noteworthy pieces, which appeared in *The Atlantic* magazine on June 30, 2011, and was titled "Colbert's 'Super PAC' Pushes the Limits of Election Law" (Good, 2011), journalist Chris Good devotes significant time to explaining the fine details related to campaign finance law and the FEC's ruling regarding Colbert's request for a media exemption designation for his program and Comedy Central's parent company, Viacom. Outlining the complicated distinctions affecting so-called "527" and 501 (c) 4 groups, which are registered with the IRS and therefore not regulated via the FEC, versus PACs and Super PAC organizations (such as the Colbert Super PAC, for example), Good explains to readers how with the recent ruling to allow for what is essentially a *partial* media exemption, Colbert's Super PAC "now exists at the vanguard of soft-money election spending." Noting how Colbert had "forced the FEC to make this decision by planning to operate as a real political group, not a parody," Good treats the Colbert Super PAC seriously in the article, and later goes on to explain how the ruling related to Colbert's request had "implications for other media companies, like FOX news."

Breaking down the details of the FEC’s ruling regarding the media exemption request, Good explains the regulatory body’s decision to allow Colbert to discuss his Super PAC project during his program without it being considered the equivalent of a political donation from Viacom — essentially allowing *The Colbert Report* to receive coverage under the traditional “media exemption” law. Good also goes on in the article to explain what is perhaps the larger and more consequential element to the ruling, which was the decision as to whether Viacom would be allowed to pay for the production of “Colbert Super PAC” political ads — which would both run during the show, and then also be used as actual paid television ads that would run in outside venues beyond just the program. Related to this specific scenario, Good explains in the article, the FEC ruled that “Viacom cannot fund ads to run outside of Colbert’s own show, or on any other network.” Providing important context to the larger campaign finance regulatory issues at stake with Colbert’s request, Good explains that the ruling held “potentially vast implications for FOX News, which employs political figures like Mike Huckabee and Sara Palin, both of whom have PACs of their own.” Good explains that, if it had ruled differently, the FEC’s decision regarding Colbert’s request would have significantly altered the regulatory landscape as it applies to media companies and their relationships with political actors. As an illustration, Good provides a relevant example as to how such a change in regulation would specifically have affected FOX News:

...had it allowed Colbert to air Viacom-funded ads outside his show, FOX, for instance, could conceivably have funded the production of political ads for Huckabee’s HuckPAC to air outside his own weekend show on FOX.

Good’s article ends by explaining to readers how the ruling on Colbert’s request could potentially alter the operating strategies of some existing PAC organizations, but that because alternative legal structuring options are already available to political organizations, such situations were likely to be rare.

In a March 9, 2012 phone interview with Good (who by this time had changed positions and, having left *The Atlantic*, was now working as a political reporter for *ABC News*), the journalist offered significant reflection regarding the Colbert Super PAC project, including his own perception regarding the motivations behind it, as well as its likely impact on the political sphere. Asked about his own perspective regarding Colbert's personal motivation and intent behind the Super PAC effort, Good provided a response quite similar to that of other interviewees:

Well, we are speculating here, because I don't know ... we don't know what Colbert is thinking and obviously Colbert's entire existence is kind of this like layered gestalt of you know irony and semi irony, but my guess is that... his goal with the Super PAC project is to shed light on our campaign finance system and make fun of it.

Chris Good, *ABC News*

Asked about his thoughts regarding whether it is fair to characterize Colbert's efforts as political advocacy, Good spoke in depth about how there are varying definitions of what advocacy might mean, and how Colbert's humor makes it inherently difficult to discern whether or not he is actually attempting to advocate for anything specific. Good did agree, however, that Colbert was likely educating viewers about campaign finance and was also potentially influencing public opinion through the promotion of the Super PAC project:

Yeah, I mean just by educating people on it you sort of change public opinion no matter what, because people are forming their opinion on a different knowledge base... I think as people have sort of come to understand what Citizens United and Speech Now did, their understanding has developed. And I think just by pushing all this stuff into the news, Colbert probably has helped develop people's sense of it...

Chris Good, *ABC News*

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy observations Good provided about Colbert during the phone interview was his assertion that Colbert, through his Super PAC project, was essentially *showing*

his audience the realities of campaign finance law, versus just telling them about it. Discussing the literary mantra which is often stressed to aspiring writers to “Show, don’t tell,” Good declared that, “Colbert is great... Colbert is the only one showing and not telling.” Continuing on in depth with this point, and contrasting what Colbert is able to do against the limitations that he himself faces as a traditional journalist, Good explains:

...so Colbert is the only one actually *showing* people what it looks like to have a Super PAC instead of just telling them what Super PACs do. So when Colbert teases out these little specifics, he does it sort of dramatically and entertainingly. And so, when you watch it you are not sitting there having it explained to you, how it will work, you are actually seeing it work... the fact that he is entertaining and the fact that he has made Super PACs and their minutia of the rules vivid, it like allows him to get into the weeds in ways that traditional media can’t.

There is a fear in mainstream media of complicated explanations that will lose the audience and Colbert doesn’t have to worry about that, because the complicated nature of the rules, that’s kind of what he is making fun of. So, that’s what he is drawing his audience to him instead of what’s turning it off.

... if you are writing a newspaper story or a blog post or a radio script or a TV script, you want to relate the information in an accessible way and you don’t want to bore people with details that they don’t care about. And so, when you are talking about campaign finance rules, it’s so, so dry that you are afraid ... in the mainstream media there is a fear to get into it too deeply because you think, ‘You know, do people really care about this in this deep level?’ And you know, if it’s Tuesday morning and I’m surfing the internet and reading articles about something, do I really have time to get that deeply into campaign finance rules as a reporter or as a writer? You sort of think, alright I’ve got to explain this and kind of ‘get in and get out’ in a way that’s not going to turn the reader off and make the reader think that I am belaboring it. That’s a big challenge in mainstream media... taking complicated things related to political process and making them... not necessarily dumbing them down, but making them easily digestible enough that you are not going to lose people and doing it accurately.

Chris Good, *ABC News*

Good ends this portion of the interview by arguing that instead of “dumbing down” the intricacies of campaign finance law, a frustrating challenge that he himself regularly struggles with in writing complex news articles, Colbert is essentially doing the opposite — largely focusing on the complicated details, because it is in the complexities and minutia of the law where the potential for humor is found.

Later in the interview, asked to consider whether Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project could be viewed as a form of journalism, Good also offers a compelling argument that what Colbert is doing is actually engaging in a form of "gonzo journalism" — through his participation in, and portrayal of, the Super PAC project:

...yeah, it's public education. It counts [as] journalism in that sense because it educates the public about campaign finance, about how it works, about recent developments in the law. That's the basic function of journalism... is relating new developments to people. So, Colbert has... you could also argue that Colbert is a gonzo journalist here because Colbert isn't writing about it or talking about it in a removed way. Colbert is going and experiencing it, and that's sort of one of the [elements] of gonzo journalism, is that you insert yourself into the story and be part of the story as you're experiencing it.

So, Colbert is letting everyone watch him experience and navigate the rules of a Super PAC. So, he is kind of standing in for the confused public a little bit but he is also standing in for the nefarious political evil doer who wants to use the system to pursue the base ends, which is funny to watch... Colbert has formed a public advocacy group not necessarily to do public advocacy for the sake of the end that he is advocating for, he is doing it for the sake of public education. I don't think Colbert is... that's why it's comedy, right? The end goal of it is not the stated goal. I mean, that is like one of the basic ways that humor and irony work, is a mismatch between expectation and delivery...

Chris Good, *ABC News*

Among all of the interviews conducted as part of this research, the conversation with Good was perhaps the most contemplative and thoughtful. Good's perspective on Colbert and his efforts with the Super PAC project was quite nuanced — and the journalist's observation that Colbert was "showing" his audience the world of campaign finance was almost admiring in tone. The multiple comparisons Good makes between Colbert's work and his own as a journalist are also interesting. Clearly Colbert is viewed by Good as successfully educating the public through his satire, and the Colbert Super PAC is seen as serving a worthy journalistic purpose.

Another significant piece of the media coverage Colbert received related to his Super PAC project and the FEC's ruling on his advisory request was a June 30, 2011 story on *NPR* (National Public Radio), written by veteran campaign finance reporter Peter Overby. Titled

“There’s Nothing Funny About Colbert’s Super PAC” (Overby, 2011), the story, similar to other news coverage, details the results of the FEC hearing which granted Colbert and Viacom permission to claim a media exemption — and describes portions of Colbert’s celebratory victory speech outside the doors of the FEC afterwards. In the story, Overby succinctly describes Colbert’s media advisory request as allowing for “the possibility of a new loophole — a way for media companies to underwrite commentators with political ambitions.” Overby also outlines the perspectives of several FEC commissioners, in describing their ruling to generally “deny Viacom special treatment” in regards to campaign finance law — but to still allow Colbert to form a Super PAC, following partial media exemption regulations. An interesting quote which Overby includes in the story comes from Democratic Commissioner Ellen Weintraub, who during the hearing thanks Colbert for providing the FEC with additional media attention: “Thank you, Mr. Colbert, not only for coming in today and presenting us with this interesting question, but for raising the profile on the important issues that we deal with every day.” Later in the piece, Overby further explains to his audience how the issues being debated by the FEC relate to the 2010 Citizen United Supreme Court case.

During a March 6, 2012, phone interview with Overby, the journalist discussed his perspectives on the Colbert Super PAC project. Among the most interesting elements of the interview were several comments that Overby made regarding how he admired Colbert’s efforts and how well Colbert had successfully explained to viewers complex issues related to campaign finance law. Stopping short of describing Colbert’s activities as being political advocacy (since he hadn’t explicitly called for reform), Overby also said that he believed Colbert’s efforts were generally an effective and non-partisan commentary about the system. Considering a question about Colbert’s motivation for spearheading the Super PAC effort, Overby responded:

Yeah I’ve wondered that... I’ve never tried to actually find the answer to this question. I have kind of contemplated it in idle moments. My sense is that, it started out as sort of an easy ripe target for humor and then grew into something

more than that. I kind of doubt when they started out that they thought they'd end up putting ads on air in South Carolina, but I also think they probably weren't sorry that it worked out that way. They started with... sort of the definitional stuff, you know, the thin line between what's allowed and what isn't... And then [they] just kind of kept following it to see where it took them. And I think in the process they explained the whole business of Super PACs a lot better than most other people who've tried to do it including me.

Peter Overby, *NPR*

Overby openly gives Colbert significant credit for successfully explaining the details of complex campaign finance laws to his audience. Echoing similar comments from other journalists, Overby also described Colbert's effort as effectively "shining a light" on flaws within the system.

Yeah, I don't know that he (Colbert) is advocating reform but he is putting the spotlight on cases — Citizens United, Speech Now — that have brought our campaign finance system to a pretty strange place. And, I think that's what he set out to do and I think he succeeded.

Peter Overby, *NPR*

In addition, Overby remarked that he believed Colbert's efforts had been uniquely responsible for drawing early attention to the potential "loophole" of 501 (c) 4 organizations being allowed to transfer anonymously donated funds to PAC organizations. Discussing Colbert's focus on the loophole, Overby described Colbert as having been "ahead of the curve on that" — something that he (Overby) had "... thought was pretty impressive." Here, somewhat similar to the previously discussed comments from fellow journalist Chris Good, Overby's description of Colbert's activities with the Super PAC seem to implicitly place Colbert's efforts into the realm of journalism. By describing Colbert as "ahead of the curve" with his focus on anonymous donations, Overby almost seems to be describing Colbert as a journalistic colleague — or as someone he views himself to be in competition with for story scoops and news angles. Similar to the interview with Good, Overby clearly conveys admiration for how successfully Colbert had explained campaign finance law to his viewers.

When asked whether he believed that Colbert's efforts had served an "agenda setting" function in relation to either creating additional news coverage or in influencing *how* the news media had decided to cover campaign finance issues, Overby noted that he believed Super PACs and their activities would have been the major focus of a lot of news stories regardless of Colbert's efforts:

It's a tough question, because I think that he clarified a lot of things... the way they boiled it down and explained it I thought it was just terrific. Like I said, I really admired it but I think that it (Super PACs) would have gotten all this coverage anyway because there is so much money in it and it's having such a big impact. You know, you look at the role of the Super PAC like American Crossroads in the 2010 elections and then you look at what's going on with the presidential Super PACs now, the impact that they are having on the Republican side, these big donors coming in and just dumping millions of dollars into them. And Obama and the Democrats deciding they have to go chasing after this so they can do it too. That's such a big story, people would be covering that anyway.

Peter Overby, *NPR*

Continuing on regarding this topic, however, Overby acknowledged that he did believe Colbert was uniquely responsible for drawing media attention to the topic of Super PACs *earlier on*, before they had become the focus of many political stories regarding the ongoing Republican presidential primary race. In addition, Overby argues that Colbert's efforts served as a "clarifying effect" in how many individuals, including journalists, viewed and understood the inter-workings of PACs.

... I think right now, in the heat of the primary season, there'll be as much coverage whether or not he (Colbert) had done this, just because of the shadow that Super PACs are casting over the entire race. You know, they loom so large in what's going on. I think that he, I think he did generate coverage earlier when it was a more easily ignored topic.

And he didn't, I don't think he changed the direction of the coverage because I think that he, that his take on it and the take of most people who are outside the campaign finance system are in sync, but by devoting so much time to it — time and energy — I think that he had this clarifying effect on it and sort of cemented the idea that this is a fairly simple process that's going on. It's not all bound up in court language and regulations and stuff.

Peter Overby, *NPR*

Confirming that he believed that Colbert's efforts had likely influenced how Super PACs had later been covered by other journalists, Overby also emphasized how Colbert and his Super PAC project had served to clarify what is and isn't allowed under the current campaign finance system, and had also generally altered people's naïve understanding of the effectiveness of existing FEC regulations. Describing this dynamic, Overby explains:

In people's understanding, you know, you start out with in this case Citizens United and Speech Now and the FEC advisory opinions that came from those. You know, those things say... "Here are the lines, stay between the lines." All this kind of stuff. And he (Colbert) comes along and sort of says, "*These* are the lines? You've got to be kidding!" And shows how thin and porous those lines really are. So, he is not poking holes in the law, he is poking holes in the... poking holes is the wrong metaphor, that is my problem. He is basically saying, "The rules are not what you think, the emperor has no clothes."

Peter Overby, *NPR*

In finding the appropriate metaphor, Overby seems to be saying that Colbert's project is serving to elucidate the topic of campaign finance — and was also working to dispel a certain collective denial held by a public who might want to believe that the existing campaign finance laws in place are effective and sufficient.

On August 21, 2011, a piece written by media columnist David Carr, titled "Comic's PAC is More Than a Gag," appeared in the *New York Times*. In the column, Carr discussed how Colbert's Super PAC project — which Carr at one point describes as an "evil plot to make fun of campaign finance abuse" — was different from past satirical gags, such as "faux candidacies," in which comedians have primarily just made fun of politics and politicians. In the article, Carr

quotes Stephen Hess, a political scientist from the Brookings Institution, who describes Colbert's efforts as not having "any real parallel in history" — and discusses how Colbert's PAC had recently begun to solicit actual donations from supporters and was running paid television ads in Iowa. Later in the piece, Carr quotes University of Maryland journalism professor Mark Feldstein, who offers the following positive critique of Colbert and his Super PAC satire:

There is a hall-of-mirrors quality to what he is doing that is hilarious and very effective... He is taking advantage of loopholes to set up an organization that is not a legitimate political action committee, if there is such a thing, to make the point that the current system is a form of legalized bribery. Try making that point as a member of the mainstream media and holding on to your objectivity.

In highlighting this quote, Carr is providing readers with a summary notion of the inherent message, or commentary, within Colbert's satire: that parts of the existing campaign finance system are essentially equivalent to legalized bribery. In addition, Feldstein's comment essentially compares Colbert's efforts to the activities of journalists — a notion that echoes the comments made in the previously discussed interviews. Directly following this idea in the column, Carr provides his own commentary regarding the value of Colbert's efforts with the ongoing Super PAC project:

Maybe the whole [campaign finance] system has become such a joke that only jokes will serve as a corrective. But if Mr. Colbert succeeds only in drawing out more humor, then the whole idea is a failure... it would be a shame if this is only fun and games.

David Carr, *New York Times*

In making it the focus of an entire column in what is known to many as the nation's "newspaper of record," Carr is simultaneously raising the profile and arguably also lending additional credibility to the Colbert Super PAC project. In the tone of Carr's comments near the end of the piece, there also seems to be a message almost intended just for Colbert himself (and his staff): the project you are promoting is worthwhile and valuable — it has merit — so be careful not to

allow the pursuit of humor to overshadow or detract from the larger critical message held within the satire.

During a February 18, 2012 phone interview, Carr provided significant insight into his own personal feelings and perspectives regarding the Colbert Super PAC project. In response to a broad question about his understanding of Colbert's intent and motivation behind the Super PAC, Carr echoed the message of his column — conveying that he thought, beyond the humor, Colbert was intending to communicate a serious critique about the state of politics:

I think [Colbert's] intent is deeply serious. The execution may be comic in form, but the comment... his career generally, as it relates to the intersection with government, has been to just use whatever avenues the government has to go as far as you can within the political process, even though he does not represent a legitimate... let me see, he does not represent a traditional political actor. He is... there is this sort of meta thing going on where, I think part of what he is saying is, "I am really no more or less legitimate than other people that are doing this."

David Carr, *New York Times*

With the above comment, Carr offers an interesting interpretation of Colbert's satire — that Colbert sees the Super PAC project (and the public's reaction to his mockery) as an opportunity to question the "legitimacy" of the campaign finance system. Asked specifically whether he believed that Colbert envisioned a "goal" that he was hoping to accomplish through the Super PAC project, Carr offered an interesting perspective in which he echoed previous journalists' responses, saying that he thought Colbert's primary intent was to get laughs — while also serving to educate his audience about the complexities of campaign finance laws. Beyond this, however, Carr stopped short of assigning a more overt political intent to Colbert's efforts:

Well the goal with him is always to be funny, but if you are going to pick something to be funny about, I think campaign finance is very, very difficult. It is hard to write a vaguely interesting new story about campaign finance. And he's managed, I think and always managed, to make it pretty funny and get some bounce off it and that's tribute to him, because it's incredibly complicated. And the fact that he is engaging his audience through sending money, I think... gives people a deeper understanding of what is going on.

I will say it's like the one (newspaper) I work for, it's been writing about the horrors of campaign finance for decades. And it's really only gotten worse every time they come up with a fix, it just breeds new fresh horrors. And since money has been defined to speech and, I think he wants to demonstrate... you know, I got to be careful. I am not exactly sure what he is up to. I mean, I've talked to him about it... he wants to be funny, he wants people to learn about the process, and I don't know if he is specifically in the business of trying to create change or not. I couldn't say.

David Carr, *New York Times*

Continuing this line of discussion, Carr indicated that he believes Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC aligned more directly with forms of journalism or political commentary, instead of political activism. However, in order to know for sure, Carr thought, it would depend on how the Super PAC funds were spent — meaning the PACs contributions could either be spent directly on promoting campaign finance reform, or just on perpetuating the activities of the PAC project itself. Expanding on this thought, Carr continues:

It depends on what he (Colbert) spends the money on, I guess. Well, what if the money goes to somebody who is trying to reform campaign finance laws? Then it's activist. If it's funding for the goose, then it continues to be commentary.

David Carr, *New York Times*

In utilizing the “goose or the gander” metaphor, Carr seems to be hinting at the notion that Colbert has multiple scenarios available for use of the donated Super PAC funds — and that some options for spending the money would be more self-serving than others. Later in the interview, Carr argued that Colbert's fans and supporters, in donating their money to the Super PAC project, were essentially engaging in a kind of voting — and that by accepting this money, Colbert and his staff were taking on a level of responsibility, to use the contributed funds in a smart and meaningful manner. (This last comment, it should be noted, corresponds closely to the earlier referenced message of Carr's August 21, 2011, *New York Times* column.) Commenting on this exchange of money and trust, and the inherent symbolism (and scrutiny) Colbert faced in how he utilized the Super PAC funds, Carr says:

And so, people are in essence engaging in the process when they give him (Colbert) money. And they're saying, "We like your commentary on this issue and please continue." And there is a level of trust that he has with his audience, you know, he hasn't really said what he is going to do with the money...

So, it's like, I mean if I were his guys — and I know a couple of people that work with him — I'll be working kind of hard on where I spend that money, because there is semiotics attached to what will be significant.... [Through donating money], I think they are voting for Colbert. I think they are saying, "We're with you."

David Carr, *New York Times*

When asked his thoughts on whether Colbert's activities had served an agenda setting function, or otherwise successfully increased the amount of attention within the news media focused on Super PACs and campaign finance issues, Carr noted both that he thought a lot of journalists and opinion leaders watched *The Colbert Report* — and that Colbert had likely helped elevate the issue in their minds — and that Colbert's Super PAC project had influence his own thinking about the topic.

Well, there is the coverage of his Super PAC alone, so that, per say, adds to the pool of coverage. And then, I do think that a lot of, you know, he takes in a lot of top leaders at the end of the day in terms of like who watches his show. And so, I think it's probably put the issue up front of mind. And I would say he's altered my perception of Super PACs, and I've written about Super PACs since and it's somewhat informed by the bits he's been doing.

David Carr, *New York Times*

Also on the topic of agenda setting, Carr stated that he believed that Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC likely helped journalists to write about the topic of campaign finance in that it "warms up both your editors and audience to say that this topic is not as boring as it sounds." With these comments, Carr is not only giving credit to Colbert for making the general public (his reading audience) more interested in the topic of Super PACs, but he also seems to be saying that Colbert's efforts have helped influence the editorial gatekeepers of news institutions, such as the *New York Times*, to be more receptive toward covering the issue of campaign finance.

In an interesting discussion about the inherent complexity and difficulty involved in performing Colbert’s unique form of satire, Carr referred to the blowhard conservative character Colbert plays as an “avatar” — which not only allows Colbert to claim a certain “plausible deniability” in the comedy he creates, but also ensures that there are always multiple levels to his humor. Carr, who has also been a guest on Colbert’s program, mentioned that he has a loose personal relationship with the comedian, and also conveyed a high level of admiration for Colbert’s quick wit and sharp intellect, and the complexity of his satire:

... What he (Colbert) is doing is extremely hard and... really without precedent. I’ve been on the show a couple of times and I also know him as somebody I see at church and say hello to, because he lives in the same town as I do and I know his wife a little bit. You have to understand on a technical level, picture him sitting there. So, let’s talk about descriptive parts of the show, and more about the interview aspect of the show. He is hearing things as his persona, right? And then he is dropping that back into who he is as an artist and or a comedian, and coming up with a take on that and then reprocessing that back out through a persona in real time. Imagine the sort of pure brain processing power that takes.

[It’s] significant. Yeah, because there’s tiers to it if you diagram it and technically, this is what the avatar thinks. No, this is what the avatar hears. This is what I hear, this is what I think, this is what the avatar thinks, this is what the avatar says and you measure that in hundredths of a second. It’s a pretty big deal.

David Carr, *New York Times*

Conveying an obvious respect for Colbert’s personal intellect, Carr’s comments also suggest that the *New York Times* journalist had spent significant time contemplating the comedian’s unique brand of satire.

Beginning on January 16, 2012, and running for five consecutive days until January 20, 2012, the online news outlet the *Huffington Post* published a series of pieces focused on the Colbert Super PAC effort. Written by veteran political journalist Dan Froomkin and Paul Blumenthal, who had previously served as a senior writer for the Sunlight Foundation, the series was launched with an article titled “Stephen Colbert’s PAC Parody Explains Campaign Finance to America,” and appears to represent the single most detailed media examination of the complex

legal issues addressed by Colbert with the Super PAC project. In the initial article from the five-part series, the authors first explain to readers the significance of Colbert's ongoing effort:

Colbert has spent much of the past year on a crusade to accept unlimited contributions from corporations, unions and individuals in order to make political statements and lavish himself with luxuries. In so doing, he may have helped bring the troubling issues surrounding campaign finance to the public's attention more than either the reform community or traditional media.

Later on in the same piece, Froomkin and Blumenthal provide a helpful rundown of the major elements of campaign finance law Colbert's project has addressed:

Colbert has exposed many of the potential dangers of the current campaign financing system, including the influence of PACs and unlimited-donation super PACs, secret contributions by big donors, the failure of regulators, and the coordination between campaigns and supposedly independent groups.

The series is primarily unique in not only its sheer length, but also in how well it provides an easily understandable and detailed explanation of how the various elements of Colbert's satire relate to the specific issues within campaign finance law, FEC regulatory gridlock, and IRS oversight over the activities of political organizations such as "527" and 501 (c) 4 groups. The series, in highlighting the elements of Colbert's ongoing Super PAC project, serves as an effective primer into both the history of, and the dysfunctional issues within, campaign finance regulation and oversight.

In section three of the series, titled "Stephen Colbert's Super PAC Goes to Washington," Froomkin and Blumenthal discuss the dysfunction of the Federal Election Commission, and argue that, "Colbert's parody of a right-wing blowhard may be one of the greatest ongoing jokes in recent television history, but in its own sphere, the modern FEC may be an even bigger one." In the fifth section, which is focused on how Colbert's project has in particular done an effective job of highlighting the issue of illegal, but rarely stopped, "coordination" between Super PAC organizations and the campaigns of political candidates — Froomkin and Blumenthal compliment the comedian for drawing attention to such a timely and significant issue: "Colbert

may have never been more on point than he is now, in part because the issue of coordination may become one of the most explosive of the 2012 election.” The *Huffington Post* series, while obviously appearing in a left leaning media outlet (which, it seems, would naturally be inclined to provide attention for Colbert and his antics), provides a serious examination of the details within the Colbert Super PAC project — and recognizes the significant legal and political issues Colbert’s humorous efforts have exposed. Included in the fifth article is a quote from Fred Wertheimer, the founder of campaign finance reform group Democracy 21, who describes the lack of regulatory enforcement related to “coordination” as the equivalent to legalized bribery:

For all practical purposes, these unlimited, corrupting contributions are being given to the presidential candidates. As such, candidate-specific Super PACS are eviscerating candidate contribution limits and restoring the system of legalized bribery that existed in our country in the pre-Watergate era.

Ending the final piece in the series, Froomkin and Blumenthal drive home the message that American politics is risking a return to the corruption that plagued Washington in the days before Watergate — and leave readers with a sobering conclusion about the current state of politics:

Indeed, if that one last shred of campaign finance law -- prohibiting the coordination between groups that can accept unlimited contributions and the candidates themselves -- is no longer enforced, then we seem to be only a fig leaf away from the Nixon-era days of million-dollar payoffs, bribery and organized extortion of companies and individuals.

During a March 6, 2012 phone interview, Blumenthal discussed his thoughts on the Colbert Super PAC project. Several of Blumenthal’s comments closely echoed statements made by other journalists who said they believed Colbert’s satire was primarily intended to “shine a light” on a “ludicrous campaign finance system.” Asked to consider whether Colbert’s efforts could be considered political activism, Blumenthal provided a thoughtful response — and discussed the savvy nature of Colbert’s supporters:

I mean he (Colbert) could be [engaging in activism], he is certainly, in his own way, he’s been helping to inform people about this sort of convoluted system that

is, you know, it's really hard to explain and get people to pay attention when you get down into the minutia. And he's done the best job of explaining what's going on in campaign finance for anybody out there that needs to learn through comedy, which people can relate to and people engage with.

And you saw that in the advisory opinion request that American Crossroads had with the FEC where they said that, "We want to have fully coordinated ads that won't be coordinated." And Colbert did a whole series of shows that included sketches about that, where he called on his viewers to send in letters, you know, voice in their support. And his viewers, they get the sarcasm and they sent in thousands of letters to the FEC basically saying how terrible this idea was and how absurd it is that, you know, supposedly an independent group can fully coordinate, while not coordinating.

So, I mean there is an element of political activism, that's what I was sort of explaining ... he has been out there organizing people, per say, to go out and do something. But his people get the whole tongue and cheek character and they understand that he doesn't need to organize them, that they are just, they are learning and they'll follow suit even if they are doing the exact opposite of what he is telling them to do.

Paul Blumenthal, *Huffington Post*

Blumenthal's comments illustrate a perspective that contends, beyond educating his audience, Colbert is also essentially leading his supporters in a concerted effort to engage in political activism. As was discussed in the Detailed Timeline, Colbert urged supporters of the Colbert Super PAC organization to send letters of "support" to the FEC regarding the American Crossroads advisory request related to campaign coordination efforts. As Blumenthal notes, Colbert's supporters understand his sarcasm — and many of them went on to do the opposite of his suggestion, by sending letters of protest to the FEC.

Later in the interview, Blumenthal said that he believed Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project had "helped people understand the (campaign finance) system a whole lot better, which probably makes them angrier" regarding problems within the process. Mentioning that he thought "Colbert has explained [the system] better than anybody else in the media," Blumenthal noted that instead of getting "bogged down in the technical language" as was frequently the case with journalists and election law experts, Colbert has been able to use his satire to highlight the absurdities of the system while still being entertaining. Providing a specific example of this

dynamic, Blumenthal discussed how Colbert had used his humor to focus on the “coordination” issue during his show:

... the way that he’s done it is just through direct humor, through satire, to be able to explain how the system works. I mean, there was the whole, when he handed off the Super PAC to Jon Stewart and they did the whole coordination bit. I mean, that was just a perfect explanation of the absurdity of the word ‘coordination’ in this instance, which doesn’t... people think of the word ‘coordination’ as an actual English word with a real definition, but it’s a legal term that has a legal definition that is different than the English language definition. And so, this drives people insane and they hear that these groups are supposed to be independent... but that is just not true. And Stephen Colbert did a great job along with Jon Stewart of showing exactly what you can do in a way that you don’t forget, you know, it’s funny.

Paul Blumenthal, *Huffington Post*

Asked whether he felt Colbert’s representation of the various details of campaign finance law during the show had been accurate, Blumenthal responded saying that he thought “almost 99% of it has been incredibly accurate, more accurate than a lot of stuff you hear on cable news...”

Crediting the legal accuracy of the gags on the show to Trevor Potter and his expert knowledge of campaign finance regulations, Blumenthal also commented that he felt that Colbert had been especially successful in showing his audience how “broken” and dysfunctional the FEC was, in that “the only way you can really get a ruling out of them is if you have a television show and millions of viewers.”

During the interview, Blumenthal was also asked to consider whether he felt Colbert’s efforts with the Super PAC had played an “agenda setting” role in creating or influencing the broader news media’s coverage. Noting that Colbert had been focusing on the issue of Super PACs earlier than most other members of the media, Blumenthal also said he thought Colbert had given journalists a “storyline” to use in their coverage of Super PACs and their influence in the election:

... I think that he (Colbert) was there to it before most of the media. I mean, you see the coverage is sort of, there is a lot of news media coverage now in the presidential primary of Super PACs. And there is a lot of talk about it. I mean, Colbert has covering this since well before that. And, you know, he started his PAC... I don't remember exactly when, maybe in 2010 or in the beginning of 2011, and to really try to explain this process and through his own satirical way. So, he has been a leader in explaining this.

I think that the press would have eventually gotten there anyways because stories about secret million dollar contributions are pretty juicy and they like them, and the way that the Republican primary has played out. But I think that Colbert's involvement had really provided the rest of the media with a storyline that they can turn to when they talk about Super PACs that actually connect with people better. So, when you do a story about money and politics or Super PACs you can reference Stephen Colbert. You can even base the story that would normally be kind of dull and about legal things, you know, like you can pepper it with anecdotes about Stephen Colbert that can turn a reader on more than just an ordinary story about some legal fight at the FEC. So, I think that he's been sort of vital to help explaining this and has also has... been helpful to the media at large in providing them with the way to make their stories about campaign finance reform more accessible...

Paul Blumenthal, *Huffington Post*

Expanding further on this point, Blumenthal noted that the Super PAC project had essentially “provided people (reporters) a handy reference point so that they don't have to explain it themselves, they can reference what Colbert does.” Later on in the interview, discussing how he believed that “reporters like covering anything that has to deal with Stephen Colbert,” Blumenthal again reiterated that he felt as though Colbert had “certainly influenced... coverage by providing a really easy reference point for reporters to help explain, and in a fun and interesting way, something that is normally really dull.” This notion that Blumenthal describes of how journalists could use the Colbert Super PAC project as a reference point in stories written and produced about campaign finance law is perhaps perfectly illustrated in a radio story that aired right around the same time as the Blumenthal and Froomkin *Huffington Post* series.

On January 20, 2012, a story titled “How to Be a Super PAC, Like Stephen Colbert,” ran on *American Public Media's* “Marketplace” program. The piece, which was produced by veteran

radio reporter Nancy Marshall-Genzer, was timed to coincide with the two-year anniversary of the Supreme Court’s 2010 ruling in the Citizens United case. The story, which was framed as a “Super PAC how-to” and focused on the particular requirements needed for someone to apply for and register a Super PAC political organization, included portions of an interview conducted with Trevor Potter and also utilized a number of audio clips from portions of *The Colbert Report* program. In the piece, Marshall-Genzer suggests that Colbert’s goal with the Super PAC project is to teach his audience “a few things about campaign finance” — and, she notes, “Campaign finance reformers are delighted.” The story includes a quote from Gabriela Schneider, a spokeswoman for the Sunlight Foundation, a “good government” group that advocates for increased transparency and accountability, which clearly indicates support for Colbert’s efforts from the reform community:

There's more questions being asked. There's going to be more engagement. And we can all agree that the system is broken. And we need it to change.

This particular radio story is perhaps most interesting in its dependence on Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC project as a tool for explaining the legal and regulatory details of campaign finance law, in particular how Super PAC and 501 (c) 4 organizations can operate together.

During a phone interview conducted with Marshall-Genzer on February 21, 2012, the journalist echoed the notion conveyed in her radio piece that she believes Colbert’s primary intent with the Super PAC project is to *educate* his audience — to “shine a light” on campaign finance and to “pique the public interest” on the topic. Below, Marshall-Genzer expands further on this idea:

I think he wants to educate people and I think he is doing a really big good job to educate people. I mean, he can sum up really complex campaign finance law in about four minutes. And he can be funny which is not easy to do. So yeah, I think his main goal is to educate people about the impact of the Citizens United decision and what campaign finance law actually says and what it allows the candidates to do.

Nancy Marshall-Genzer, *NPR*

When asked if Colbert is hoping to specifically promote campaign finance reform through his satire and whether his efforts could be considered political advocacy, Marshall-Genzer initially responded affirmatively:

Oh, definitely yeah. I think that's pretty clear. And I don't think he's tried to hide that at all. I think that he thinks the campaign finance laws are pretty ridiculous in what they allow candidates to do and that they have so little bite. And I think he wants to change that and I think that he, you know... I can't get into his head, but I would surmise that the way he thinks the law can be changed is by getting the public upset about it through his satire.

Nancy Marshall-Genzer, *NPR*

However, later in the interview, Marshall-Genzer clarified that she believed that in order for Colbert to truly be considered a “political activist,” he would need to go beyond just education and would have to form a political party or otherwise do something more explicitly designed to promote change.

Political activism... I don't know, because he's not actually setting up a party and he's not running for office. Political activism... maybe, but it seems to me he'd have to take one more step like actually forming a party to really be considered a political activist instead of someone who's just trying to shine a light on something and not forming a party, and not running for office.

Nancy Marshall-Genzer, *NPR*

When asked about whether she believed Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project had served an “agenda setting” function in influencing news coverage about campaign finance issues, Marshall-Genzer offered a response similar to that of fellow *NPR* journalist, Peter Overby, saying that she believed that because of the significant role of Super PAC activities in this election year, campaign finance issues would have been “the” news story of the season, regardless of Colbert's project. However, Marshall-Genzer did offer some interesting insight into how she and her producers decided to *use* Colbert's Super PAC project as an example to create their own news coverage — and that, in her opinion, Colbert had helped make covering the topic an easier task for journalists, since he had increased public attention on the issue and had “made campaign finance law fun”:

I don't think so. I mean, we've been doing campaign finance reporting for years and years, you know, before Colbert started drawing attention to it. And the way we try to use Colbert was my editor for that story you mentioned, my editor said, you know we just wanted to kind of do a primer on campaign finance law. "What is a Super PAC? What is a 501(c) 4?" And we want to do it in a way that people will remember, you know, because campaign finance laws are so dry. And so we wanted to use Colbert as a vehicle to tell our story. But, I don't think he is setting the agenda. Super PACs have been getting an awful lot of attention this year, with or without him, because of the tons of money they're spending... I think it's just made it a whole lot more interesting than it would be otherwise.

Nancy Marshall-Genzer, *NPR*

Later in the interview, Marshall-Genzer mentioned that she had repeatedly contacted Colbert's publicity staff requesting an interview with him for her story about Super PACs, but was unable to secure a meeting with the comedian. She also said that she believed Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project represented a "new use of satire," but that she did not think Colbert's humor — with its reliance on a "faux persona" — was likely to have many imitators, simply because of its inherent difficulty and complexity.

Between the summer of 2011 and spring of 2012, a handful of noteworthy articles appeared in the *Christian Science Monitor* about the Colbert Super PAC project. Written by *CSMonitor* staff writer Peter Grier, the articles closely followed the progression of the Super PAC project, including details of the organization's first TV ad, the transfer of power to fellow Comedy Central comedian Jon Stewart, and information within the organization's Federal Election Commission quarterly spending reports. Perhaps the most noteworthy piece written by Grier appeared on February 1, 2012, with the headline, "What Did Stephen Colbert Super PAC Spend Its Money On?" In the article, Grier discusses details found within a recently released Colbert Super PAC FEC report that showed the organization had spent over \$12,000 on "writing and media consulting services" (that was mostly paid to individuals who work for Colbert's television show), "a \$2,000 payment to Comedy Partners, the corporate subsidiary which operates the Comedy Central network on which Colbert's show appears," and just over \$6,000 which was paid to Caplin and Drysdale, the law firm in which Colbert's lawyer, Trevor Potter, is a partner.

Grier's article also reports that \$10,569 was spent during the reporting period for the "design, production, and storage and on-line order handling" of Colbert Super PAC T-shirts. In reporting this publicly available information, Grier's article seems to adopt a somewhat critical tone regarding how the Colbert Super PAC had been utilizing some of its donated funds. At one point in the article, discussing the money spent on PAC T-shirts, Grier (who uses a plural first-person voice in the piece) writes, "We think it's defensible to say Colbert is running a donor-supported shirt business as opposed to a super PAC."

During a March 2, 2012 phone interview with Grier, the journalist provided some additional insight into his personal attitudes toward the Colbert Super PAC effort. During the interview, Grier stressed that he viewed Colbert as an "artist" and described his political satire as being a type of "performance art" — in which the comedian was using his fame "to illustrate to people something that he believes is inane about the American political system." The discussion with Grier was interesting because unlike other journalists interviewed, who largely only offered praise for Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project, Grier was more critical of Colbert for "oversimplifying" the details of campaign finance laws, and for misleading viewers regarding the actual significance of the Citizens United court ruling. Agreeing that Colbert's efforts could be considered political advocacy, Grier explains some of this criticism:

Yes, I would call it a political advocacy. I would also call it performance art, as I said, I would call it artistic political advocacy because he's obviously got things he believes about the system and it isn't like he is presenting both sides of the argument there. And I will add, to a certain extent, he grossly oversimplifies what he is doing and that's to a certain point to be expected... I mean, journalism grossly oversimplifies. I don't mean that as a big criticism, but as I am sure a lot of other people have pointed out to you, Citizens United is far from the only thing that's responsible for this, and to a certain point, it wasn't even the decision that's responsible for the things that he's making fun of. So in that sense, I think it's a little bit misleading but, you know, that's kind of... I'm really sort of nitpicking there.

[Regarding Colbert's portrayal of campaign finance law...] Yeah, it isn't entirely accurate. Wouldn't you ... come away from watching all the Colbert

stuff feeling that this is all the result the Citizens United Supreme Court decision and that if we could reverse that then perhaps all the absurdities he points out would go away? All Citizens United did was open further the doors to Super PAC that all were already open. What Citizens United did was allow unlimited contributions from unions and corporations to existing non-candidate independent expenditure committees. Individuals could already donate a large sum of money to that. To a certain extent, he doesn't really mention that point ...the problem is that the whole structure is an immensely complicated result of years of decisions and regulations building out (from) each other and one decision or another isn't really going to make that much difference to focus on if it changed. So in that sense, yeah, he grossly oversimplified the system.

Peter Grier, *CSMonitor*

With these comments, Grier is simultaneously criticizing Colbert for oversimplifying his portrayal of the problems of campaign finance law — insinuating that the Citizens United case is solely responsible for issues within the system, etc. — while conceding that “journalism (also) grossly oversimplifies,” in what seems to be an admission that such oversimplification is often unavoidable.

Grier acknowledges that Colbert's efforts have successfully educated the public about the intricacies of campaign finance law — more so than any other *journalist* — and then speaks to the criticisms he had for Colbert's spending decisions within the Super PAC organization which he had addressed in the earlier mentioned news story:

... [Colbert's] done more to educate Americans about what the political money structure is like than any journalist has this year. So in that sense, he's done the country a service. But what I'm saying is..., and this is again kind of nitpicking on my part, but from an artistic and dramatic point of view, he really doesn't talk about what he's really doing. I mean it's interesting, you may or may not have seen, I did write once about what he actually spends his money on as opposed to how he raised it and it's pretty interesting. He has spent some money on political ads like, you know, he talks about doing all the time. That's true. But he's also spent large sums of money on developing those ads and that money, which all Super PAC do, that money's all gone to his own writers. So to a certain extent, he's getting his fans to subsidy the product, to directly subsidize the product.

Peter Grier, *CSMonitor*

With this comment, Grier is offering a unique perspective on Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project on his television show, implying that part of the motivation for the Colbert Super PAC might be less altruistic than might otherwise be assumed — and that there could be some self-serving financial motivation related to some of the PAC activities. Expanding on this notion, Grier provides these additional comments about Colbert and his staff:

... and it's completely legal and they're doing stuff that's only tangentially related to the show, but then he uses it on the show. He's getting the fans to basically pay for every segment that he does about the Super PAC, because you can bet that a lot of that is scripted by the writers who are then being paid by the Super PAC. A lot of the money, he has also spent a lot of money on the t-shirt side of business. The merchandise developer and the merchandise warehouse that deals with those turtle t-shirts that they sell? That's a huge expense. So if you were really, if you're a Nancy Pelosi, you really wanted to do an attack about Stephen Colbert, you can point out that his Super PAC is really a staff maintenance and t-shirt company.

Peter Grier, *CSMonitor*

Later on during the interview, Grier — who generally seemed neutral about the Super PAC project, and at times was also even somewhat laudatory of Colbert's success in focusing public attention on the issue of campaign finance — again brought up this criticism regarding the financial benefits Colbert and his staff were gaining through the project. Grier contends that part of the PAC effort had become “a Trevor Potter support act,” in that the lawyer had been “paid quite a bit of the Super PAC money that Colbert collected.” At one point during the interview, Grier said, “What he's (Colbert) really running is a staff support t-shirt company supported by his viewers.” Out of the twenty interviews conducted as part of this research, Grier's comments represent the only time that this type of criticism was raised regarding Colbert and his staff. The notion that Colbert had found a way for his fans to financially “subsidize” the product of his show is an interesting one. (It seems dubious, however, that personal financial gain would be a primary motivator for Colbert and his staff, especially given the relatively small dollar amounts involved,

and the risk of a much costlier public backlash if the Super PAC effort became viewed by fans as being primarily self-serving.)

Beyond this topic, during the interview Grier also discussed his thoughts regarding agenda setting and whether Colbert's efforts had influenced media coverage regarding campaign finance issues, saying that he believed the Colbert Super PAC had "absolutely" resulted in an increased amount of media coverage of campaign finance law. Noting that in many ways, he and Colbert shared a similar agenda to provide people with "something that's interesting and has a grain of substance in it that people can learn from," Grier describes Colbert's efforts as "a great tool" to communicate to and educate people. Discussing how Colbert, through the Super PAC, had in some ways "extended the boundaries of his own show" to reach beyond the traditional half hour long time slot on cable television and into the broader world of politics, Grier also offers an interesting and emphatic response to the question of whether Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project constitute a form of journalism:

Sure. Why wouldn't it be? What's journalism? I don't get to pick who's the journalist. The government doesn't pick who's the journalist. It's the audience that picks who's the journalist. And lots of polls show that people say they get their journalistic information from Colbert. That makes him a journalist, in a larger sense. And because he is funny and people are entertained... many, many more people want to watch him than want to read my stories. So that's the big advantage because he has the genius of taking information and presenting it in a way that mass audiences find appealing. Is he using that for good or for evil? I don't know.

Peter Grier, *CSMonitor*

While Grier's perspective on Colbert's success in providing his audience with "journalistic information" leads to a broader, more philosophical debate about the parameters and distinctions of journalism (and who should be considered a journalist), it is also clear that Grier views Colbert's efforts as both a form of journalism — and successful in communicating complex campaign finance material to his audience.

A noteworthy piece about the Colbert Super PAC project, written by Dahlia Lithwick, appeared in the online magazine *Slate* on February 2, 2012. In the article, which was titled “Stephen Colbert is winning the war against the Supreme Court and Citizens United,” Lithwick wrote that Colbert — whom she describes in the same story as a “public opinion wrecking ball” — “has probably done more to undermine public confidence in the court’s 2010 Citizens United opinion than anyone, including the dissenters.” Outlining to readers Colbert’s efforts with the Super PAC project, Lithwick describes Colbert as helping to educate Americans about the effects of the Supreme Court ruling. Beyond this, however, the former contributing editor at *Newsweek* also argues that Colbert’s satire represents something more significant in its effects on perceptions of the Supreme Court: “His (Colbert’s) broadside against the court raises important questions about satire and the court, about protecting the dignity of the institution, and the role of modern media in public discourse.” Continuing in the article, Lithwick argues that through his satire, Colbert has successfully made “every part” of the Court’s majority opinion “look utterly ridiculous” — and that because of the institution’s intentional avoidance of media exposure or outreach (in not allowing cameras within the court, etc.), to help communicate the rationale of its decisions, the Supreme Court is essentially mismatched against Colbert’s mockery in the larger court of public opinion.

The article, which clearly conveys Lithwick’s own disdain for the Supreme Court’s majority decision in the Citizens United case (which she describes at one point as “politically naïve”) also provides some insight into the perspective of Colbert’s personal lawyer, Trevor Potter. Having interviewed Potter as part of the research for her article, Lithwick discusses Potter’s response to her own questions about Colbert’s motivations and intent with the Super PAC project:

Potter is very careful not to ascribe an end game to Colbert’s efforts but says that he has seen Colbert’s campaign finance crusade as an “opportunity to open up to the rest of the world what we lawyers already know: that the whole area of

campaign finance is a mess.” He adds that Colbert’s antics are “having a real effect in terms of public understanding about how the system works” and getting people to start to think about how to fix it.

This particular quote is significant as it displays Potter’s own attitude toward the problems within the existing campaign finance regulatory system, and indicates that he believes Colbert’s efforts are contributing toward an eventual effort to reform or “fix” the system.

During a phone interview conducted with Lithwick on February 8, 2012, the veteran Supreme Court and legal affairs journalist further discussed her perspective on Colbert’s Super PAC effort. Similar to other journalists who were interviewed, Lithwick stated that she believes Colbert’s first and foremost objective is to entertain his audience — but that beyond that, she believes his goal is to teach and educate the public regarding issues of campaign finance. Lithwick described Colbert’s intent as hoping to “unpack” the layers of complicated and arcane legal language for his audience, and to show them the issues and to tell his viewers, “Here is the incredibly screwed up system that we have, and these are the consequences.” Asked her thoughts on whether Colbert’s efforts with the Super PAC constitute political advocacy, Lithwick thoughtfully considered the question and responded that she didn’t think it crossed the line into true advocacy, primarily because the comedian hadn’t provided his audience with a clear agenda, or “marching orders,” as to what to do in order to fix the system. Expanding on this point, Lithwick continues:

I think ... that’s a little bit of the criticism... to what end is all this really, really good education if he doesn’t tell people what to do? I mean it’s really like this thing that you do, sending Stephen Colbert’s PAC a check. You know, that seems like the beginning and the end of the advocacy. And I think that that’s where a lot of people get wobbly.

Now, I don’t have that problem because ‘A,’ he’s a comedian — he doesn’t purport to be doing, express instruction of how to fix it. And also, I really do think it’s maybe enough to just educate people that the system is broken, without explicitly saying, “Here’s what you might do to fix it.” In other words, maybe it’s just enough to say, “This sucks, go figure out for yourself how to fix it.” But I guess I just, I would stop a little bit short of [calling it advocacy] because I don’t know that he ever explicitly says, you know, “The solution is to have the

court revisit Citizens United,” or “The solution is to amend the constitution,” he doesn’t say that.

Dahlia Lithwick, *Slate*

Later on in the interview, when asked whether she believed Colbert’s efforts had functioned as an “agenda setting” effect in altering the news media’s coverage of campaign finance issues and the activities of Super PACs, Lithwick responded affirmatively, noting that Colbert had absolutely influenced news coverage, especially during the time of the recent South Carolina Republican presidential primary. Discussing Colbert’s effect on news coverage, Lithwick said, “... I think that there’s no question that this has changed, you know, both the amount of discourse and the level of discourse on the subject,” and again later on described Colbert as having “really sharpened and focused the conversation (on Super PACs) as well.”

Probing further into her perspective on Colbert, and her thoughts on how other journalists viewed his efforts with the Super PAC project, Lithwick offered an interesting viewpoint arguing that many journalists were likely “grateful” for the *clarifying* effect of Colbert’s satire — and that it provided a “vehicle” and common area in which to discuss campaign finance within their reporting. On these points, Lithwick commented:

...and my own sense of it is that most journalists feel that they are actually kind of grateful. You know, whether you like Citizens United or not, I think that what Colbert has done is given us a way to talk about it, a sort of vehicle to think about it. That’s really helpful.

... that there’s like a cultural, at least at some level, some cultural signpost of what it is that we identify as the problem. And I think Colbert has done an enormous amount of short-handing. You know, often again I think Trevor Potter would be the first person to say... short-handing in ways that don’t always fully explore the nuance, but short-handing, “This is the problem, this is a Super PAC, this is what they can do, this is what coordination looks like,... this is the one page document.” So, I think he’s given the entire country a sort of a jumping off place from which to at least to begin to look at this in really concrete ways.

Dahlia Lithwick, *Slate*

Here, Lithwick’s discussion of “short-handing” is reminiscent of comments made by journalists in other interviews regarding Colbert’s success at simplifying the complexities of campaign finance law, and providing his audience with an entertaining but still generally accurate clarification as to the effects of existing regulations. Noting that as a journalist, she is always facing a constant challenge of simplifying complicated information “without losing the things that are critically important,” Lithwick argued that Colbert’s simplified and satirical portrayal of the complexities of campaign finance law on his show was largely justified in that it helped in “exciting, arousing, [and] tantalizing the public about an issue that would otherwise bore them silly.”

Among the other topics discussed during the interview, Lithwick also commented on how as a comedian, Colbert sometimes has “unfair advantages” in using his satire to participate in the public debate. Describing Colbert as having “the ability to toggle back and forth between serious criticism and [humor],” — and always having the fallback option to say, “Oh, I was just kidding!” — Lithwick talked about how this dynamic provided Colbert with a unique rhetorical advantage.

...it’s a little bit of a loaded game for Colbert, because he gets to both say he’s serious... he gets to have a serious project, but then when serious people try to ask him serious questions, he jujitsu’s them with his nuttiness. And so, I think that part of the problem is that he always gets the last word, because he always gets to reset the terms of the debate...

Discussing Colbert’s unique form of satire, and the awkward dynamic it forces upon those who encounter his character, Lithwick — who has also been a guest on Colbert’s program — offered several interesting insights into how individuals who interact with Colbert are essentially forced to play on his terms.

I think it’s everybody who comes into contact with him — and I can say this, as someone who went on his show — needs to sort of find this almost mysterious sweet spot between playing his game and playing your game, and being the foil for this thing that isn’t real.

... I mean, it's like you have to accede to his rules, now you have to like be in his world, and his world is upside down. So, it seems to me it's not just journalists, it's [everyone who faces] this tension... if you want to be in the conversation as he's having it, then it's on his terms.

Dahlia Lithwick, *Slate*

Further contemplating the complexities of Colbert's satire, Lithwick also discussed the topic of how Colbert is successful in getting supposedly serious politicians to willingly participate in his satire — and how part of the message of Colbert's satire (and the pompous and self-important character he plays), is that the absurdity of his humor isn't that far removed from the so-called “serious” world of politics which it lampoons. Specifically discussing former Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain's willingness to participate in Colbert's South Carolina rally, even though his participation posed the risk of Cain becoming the butt of some of Colbert's jokes, Lithwick offered these thoughts:

...what Colbert has figured out is that everybody has the biggest ego in the world. And... if you are dealing with people whose sort of sense of self importance is so bloated, then you can get anyone to be on your show. And I think it's one of those things he is cashing in on, you know, that... people who say yes to him, at their own peril, sometimes do it because there's no such thing as bad publicity. And I think that he has really, I don't want to say monetized that, but he's incentivized that.

And then I think the other thing that's really important is that he understands that there are whole presidential campaigns that are run on the proposition that you can sell books and get a commentary gig on cable TV, and that the line between entertainment and politics has completely collapsed. And so, if it is in fact the case that there were people running for office with no hope of winning or thought of winning, but [for] the idea that they could get a sweet gig on cable, then how different is it from what he's doing? And so, I think he's just kind of pointing to yet another crazy paradox of the way politics and entertainment have sort of folded up on themselves.

Dahlia Lithwick, *Slate*

Lithwick's comments above are striking in that they describe a political environment that is deeply intermixed with Colbert's world of entertainment and humor — and Colbert's unique ability to leverage politicians' own questionable motivations into his satirical critiques and commentaries about the insincerity of politicians and the silliness of the entire political system.

Also unique to Colbert seems to be his ability (through his faux character) to create a somewhat “uneven” interview environment, tilted to his advantage, for his interactions with politicians and other guests, which allows him, as Lithwick describes, to conduct the conversation on his own terms.

A phone interview conducted on March 9, 2012, with Aaron Blake, a political reporter with the *Washington Post* provided several noteworthy insights into perceptions of the Colbert Super PAC project. Agreeing with the notion that Colbert’s efforts could be viewed as a form of political activism, Blake also argued that among Colbert’s ultimate goals — beyond focusing attention on campaign finance — was likely a more basic drive for television ratings and self-promotion. Asked about his understanding of Colbert’s goals, Blake responded:

I think it’s ratings, but I think that it’s a great way for him to reach a new demographic by doing this whole thing because everybody in Washington D.C. is now paying attention to it. [It] just kind of increases his brand with people like me who may write about what he’s doing and that reaches a whole bunch of people... but I also do think that he’s trying to make a point about something that he probably has some opinion about and I think that that’s just the helpful side effect.

Aaron Blake, *Washington Post*

Continuing on with the interview, Blake reiterates a point he made earlier about the significant number of people in the country who only know about Super PACs because of Stephen Colbert. Responding to a question about Colbert’s success in focusing public attention on campaign finance issues, Blake gives the comedian significant credit:

Without question. I think that it’s probably a matter of multiples... I think that the number of people who actually would know what a Super PAC is right now would be significantly smaller than it is if it weren’t for Stephen Colbert. I don’t think that people still understand what a Super PAC is, but I think that they at least know what it is and I think that he’s played a major role in making people aware of that.

Aaron Blake, *Washington Post*

Later in the same interview, Blake commented on Colbert's unique talent for combining the two worlds of comedy and political activism — and noted that he feels Colbert, with the Super PAC project, had broken new ground within the realm of political satire. Bringing up the recent one million dollar contribution fellow political comedian Bill Maher had given to the left-leaning Priorities USA Super PAC, Blake even argued that Maher's actions might have been somewhat spurred by Colbert's focus on Super PAC organizations:

One thing that is interesting is if you look, even in just a last couple of weeks here, with Bill Maher giving a million dollars to the Priorities USA Super PAC that is supporting Obama and supporting Democrat candidates, I think that that's along the same line of comedians stepping out and doing political advocacy. Obviously, Maher always has his opinions but I don't know that he would have done this if not for Stephen Colbert. I think Stephen Colbert just made the Super PAC that much more relevant to average people and I think that Maher sees that as a way to be a political actor while also continuing to be a comedian.

Aaron Blake, *Washington Post*

Further discussing the evolving and increased role that comedians are playing in national politics, Blake also noted the differences between Colbert's satire and that of his peer Jon Stewart, arguing that Stewart, likely in an effort to avoid being viewed as overly partisan, frequently seemed to refrain from overtly political actions. Alternatively, because Colbert's television persona is actually only a character that Colbert plays, Blake argues, he is left with more leeway to engage in political activism:

... I feel like a lot of these guys, while their political views come through in their act, they're always extremely careful to not come off as favoring one side or another. Even Jon Stewart, who I think many people will agree is clearly left leaning and I think he admits that most of the time, he tries to temper that quite a bit when he's on the air. He'll tell people that he, on the right, disagrees with them, but he won't go after them hard or he'll say something like, "Well, I'm just a comedian, 'What do I know?'" He stops short of being a totally political actor even when it seems like sometimes he wants to. So I think that Colbert's found a good way of combining the two without looking like a partisan necessarily.

I think that (Colbert's) just really, really good at playing at character. And it's much easier to do something like this when you're doing as a character and not

as yourself because you can answer questions about this whole thing and you can just continue to offer ridiculous answers and not really have to, like a lot of politicians, not really have to answer the tough questions necessarily because everything he is doing, he's doing through his character, which I think is one of the most ingenious characters in the country. The character that he plays every night, it's one of those things where you're like, "How come nobody thought of this before?" But it just makes perfect sense.

Aaron Blake, *Washington Post*

Blake also said that he believed Colbert's portrayal of campaign finance laws through the ongoing Super PAC project on his show had been generally accurate and fair, and that while there had been significant news coverage of Colbert's activities with the Super PAC, he felt little media attention had been devoted to Colbert's actual motivation or intended message. Blake also noted that he thinks Colbert was likely OK with the fact that most viewers weren't 100% certain regarding his true motivations or goals with the Super PAC project, and that he may only view his role as helping to focus public attention on the issue:

I feel like he's (Colbert) right now just trying to make people aware of the situation and if he does have an agenda when it comes to campaign finance, I feel like that's something that's going to come further down the line, or something he's going to leave to other people to figure out. I think part of the battle with campaign finance reform is just getting people to care enough about it. And I feel like maybe he feels that's what his role is even if he doesn't necessarily know what the final outcome should be or what the answer is.

Aaron Blake, *Washington Post*

Blake's comments convey a belief that Colbert may somewhat intentionally foster an aura of uncertainty (and curiosity) regarding his true agenda with the Super PAC project, perhaps in an effort to increase attention for the effort. Also, Blake's response somewhat reflects the perspective voiced by Lithwick — that it may be enough for Colbert to focus primarily on education regarding the state of campaign finance laws, versus engaging in explicit advocacy toward reform — except Blake also seems to argue that it might just be that Colbert hasn't yet revealed his larger "agenda" with the project. (The interview with Blake took place in early

March, while Colbert didn't introduce the previously discussed college campus "Super FUN Pack" initiative until late April — in hindsight, lending support to this particular notion.)

During a phone interview on March 20, 2012, *Washington Post* columnist and opinion writer George Will offered his perspective on the Colbert Super PAC project and the broader topic of campaign finance regulation. Although Will had not written specifically about the Colbert effort in any of his columns, per the suggestion of conservative advocates within the campaign finance legal community who had been contacted during this project, an interview was pursued with Will as part of this research. Along with his regular column in the *Washington Post*, Will also serves as a news analyst for the *ABC News* television program, "This Week with George Stephanopoulos."

In a February 22, 2012, column appearing in the *Washington Post*, titled "Super PACs Can't Crown a King," Will argued that many individuals within the so-called campaign finance "reform" movement, as well as many journalists, were mistaken in their understanding of how the Citizens United court case had altered laws related to campaign spending limits. Noting in the piece that the *New York Times* had recently mischaracterized large political contributions recently made by billionaire Sheldon Adelson as having been made possible because of the Citizens United ruling, Will stressed during the interview that many liberals and members of the media were misstating the actual effects of the Supreme Court's decision. (The key "solecism" that Will is focused on with this criticism is the fact that donations such as Adelson's are actually *individual* contributions, and not from a corporate or union entity, meaning that such contributions were fully legal long before the Citizens United ruling.) In addition, in his column, Will argues that what many reformers actually want is a federal campaign system which is fully funded through government dollars — something he argues most citizens are opposed to, since few people elect to contribute \$3 each year when asked on their IRS tax return if they want to support government funding of presidential campaigns.

During the phone interview, Will reiterated several of the points made in his column, while also stressing that he knew few details regarding Colbert’s ongoing activities with the Colbert Super PAC project. Although he said he had been a guest on Colbert’s program twice in the past, Will stressed that he didn’t watch the show — and knew little about the Super PAC project. After having said this, however, Will did speculate that Colbert, similar to the staff at the New York Times (which he had criticized in his recent column), was likely “ignorant” regarding the details of how Citizens United had changed campaign election laws. Making this point, Will declared:

...to repeat I don’t know anything about his Super PAC Project. Other than that, I gather, he (Colbert) is unhappy about Citizens United. But since the *New York Times* itself, which fulminates against Citizens United and clearly has no idea what Citizens United did, I have no expectation that Colbert understands it either.

George Will, *Washington Post*

Later on in the interview, after discussing the earlier referenced topic of the *Times*’ inaccurate characterization of political contributions made by Adelson as having been linked to the Citizens United ruling, Will again implied that Colbert likely wasn’t being accurate in his portrayal of campaign finance laws: “...so, given the fact that, as I say, the editors of the *New York Times* don’t know what they are talking about, why would we expect Colbert to?”

During the conversation Will argued that most Americans are generally very unconcerned about the details of campaign finance issues, and that those citizens who do think about the topic are usually uninformed regarding the actual specifics of how the regulatory laws work. In making this point, Will sets the blame for this ignorance squarely on journalists (who, he says, themselves don’t understand the laws), and then also lumps Colbert into the same uninformed group:

... Poll after poll, year after year, demonstrates that people worry about campaign finance issues slightly less than they worry about being hit by the Goodyear blimp. It just doesn’t register — “process questions” rarely do — and campaign

finance process questions even more rarely do. ... Most Americans don't understand [the laws] because most journalists don't understand it and are... indifferent to getting it right. And as I say, why would I expect nuance from Colbert? He's not in the nuance business, he is a comedian.

George Will, *Washington Post*

Speaking to his perceptions of Colbert's motivations for spearheading the Super PAC project, Will said he believed Colbert was likely earnest in his efforts, but then again reiterated that he didn't think the comedian understood the law:

I am sure he's convinced himself that this is, that there's high moral seriousness in what he is doing. But, I would bet dollars to dawn, I say, he doesn't know what Citizens United did.

George Will, *Washington Post*

Following these comments, Will discussed his thoughts on how both Colbert and journalists were possibly compelled to simplify the details of campaign finance issues because of the inherent complexities of the laws. Will was highly critical of this "oversimplification," which he claimed amounted to distortion — and resulted in the public's misunderstanding of laws such as Citizens United.

Transitioning the interview into a broader conversation about campaign finance regulation, Will offered his attitudes toward what he viewed as the misguided efforts of the so-called campaign finance "reform" community. Discussing how he feels reformers essentially want to limit the power (and political advocacy activities) of certain entities within politics, Will also argued that he felt media outlets such as the *New York Times* were being hypocritical in their criticism of corporate speech:

... I am waiting to hear from the reformers... they are so excited about Citizens United. And they've always come back to the banality that there is too much money in politics. And since most of the money in politics, the vast lion's share of it, is used for the dissemination of political advocacy... they are saying there is too much political advocacy in the United States.

This comes often from journalists who just assume that they alone were entitled to influence federal elections. *The New York Times* is, you may have noticed, a corporation. *The New York Times* corporation tries to influence federal elections. *The New York Times* can do so because a media exemption was written into campaign finance laws. *NBC* is a corporation. It's a subsidiary of General Electric and it enjoys the media exception. So all these people clamoring for more restrictions on other people, they are doing just that, restrictions on other people.

...

Next time you read a *New York Times* editorial about the wickedness of corporations influencing federal elections, raise an eyebrow, alright.

George Will, *Washington Post*

Will's comments convey a belief that members of the campaign finance reform community are misguided in their efforts to limit political spending — and that media exemptions essentially allow corporate owned media outlets, which often promote perspectives opposed to his own, an unfair playing field within the political debate.

Ending the interview with a slightly more philosophical discussion regarding the questionable necessity and problematic nature of governmental attempts to regulate political speech, Will offered his thoughts on the unreasonable complexities of existing campaign finance laws:

... how did we get to the point where government regulation of political speech is so pervasive and so complex, with something like 87 different brands of political speech identified by the FEC? How did we get here? And will the advocates of this complexity and this government regulation of political activity ever be satisfied?

... the beginning of wisdom is to say, is to stand back a little bit, get out of the weeds, and say "How did political speech become so complicated?" when the First Amendment is rather simple.

George Will, *Washington Post*

Asked whether he felt there should be *any* regulations related to campaign spending in the United States, Will offered a "seven word" prescription for how to address the issue by streamlining and vastly simplifying the regulatory system.

I will give you in seven words [for] the entire constitutional regime on campaign finance. “No cash, no foreign money, full disclosure.” Period. Seven words.

Asked to further expand upon his solution, Will explained that in saying “no cash,” he meant that the law should require that there be a record, or “paper trail,” related to all campaign contributions, and that “no foreign money” meant that political contributions should only be allowed to come from domestic sources. Outlining what he meant by “full disclosure,” Will explained that he believed there should be an online system, which would be updated on a daily basis and made available to journalists and the public, providing details about the source of all political contributions. Discussing how this system of no contribution limits and full and (relatively instant) public disclosure would work, Will argued: “If someone wants to take \$100,000 from Philip Morris, let him. It’s a free country, and then people can make up their mind about this.”

Will closed the interview with a comment regarding “liberals” and their efforts to regulate political contributions, essentially arguing that the current, complicated system had been born from the previous, misguided efforts of “reform” groups, such as the Democracy 21 organization headed by Fred Wertheimer, and that it was now those same groups that were unhappy with the unintended results of their own activism:

What Fred Wertheimer and all these people have done is produce the system whereby Sheldon Adelson has to send his money to a Super PAC because he can’t contribute it [directly] to politics. That’s what they’ve accomplished. *They* produced the Super PACs. Now, they are unhappy with what they’ve done. Liberals go through life regretting what they’ve done.

George Will, *Washington Post*

The perspectives conveyed during the interview with Will differ drastically from all of the interviews that were conducted with other journalists. To a certain degree, this difference is certainly to be expected, considering the fact that Will, unlike a traditional journalist or reporter, primarily serves as a conservative columnist and commentator. As was noted earlier, Will also

stressed during the interview that he hadn't followed, and knew very few details about, the Colbert's Super PAC project — although this fact did not keep him from criticizing Colbert or categorizing his efforts (as being uninformed) with the larger campaign finance reform community. Each of the other members of the media interviewed as part of this research could all be considered to more closely fit the role of a traditional journalist, and thus were arguably all less likely than Will to offer such overtly political or partisan perspectives. (The possible exceptions to this statement include Paul Blumenthal and Dahlia Lithwick, who, respectively, write for the openly left-leaning media outlets the *Huffington Post* and *Slate*.)

Considering the fact that Will constitutes the only explicitly “conservative” among the journalists interviewed, his disdain for the efforts of the campaign finance reform community — including Colbert's Super PAC project — is perhaps not surprising. Mr. Will is, after all, described as an “opinion writer” at the top of his columns for the *Washington Post*. However, it could be considered noteworthy that so few of the notions within Will's critical perspectives (especially his attitudes toward Colbert and the media's general tendency to “oversimplify” the details of campaign finance law — and his comments about the overly complex state of campaign finance law as being the unintended result of liberals and the reform community) were shared in any of the conversations conducted with the other so-called “traditional” journalists interviewed. For the most part, the interviews conducted with journalists, from a wide range of leading news outlets, seemed to indicate that at least among the news media community, Will's opinions about campaign finance reform are part of the minority perspective.

Although many journalists made comments about how “broken” or “insane” the current campaign finance regulatory system had become, no one else offered Will's suggestion that the issues with the system were specifically the (unintended) result, and *fault*, of the pro-reform and pro-regulatory community — or that the ultimate solution involved a near elimination of all existing spending regulations and a vast simplification of the regulatory system. Clearly, Will's

perspective is inherently partisan (or at least ideologically conservative), whereas for the most part the other journalists interviewed were likely intent on maintaining a perspective of “journalistic neutrality.” That said, it seemed the one thing held in common among all of the other journalists interviewed — beyond Will — was a certain respect for Colbert’s satire, and what he had accomplished, especially in regards to public education, with the Colbert Super PAC project.

Summary and Discussion of Journalist Interview Conversations

Colbert's Intent and Motivation

As is evident above, among the journalists who were interviewed as part of this research, when asked the question “What is Stephen Colbert’s intent or motivation behind the Super PAC project?”, nearly all responded with a combination answer — often indicating that they first and foremost believed Colbert’s primary goal was generally to entertain and get laughs (and ratings), but beyond that, they also believed that he wanted to educate his viewers and to “shine a light” on the “absurdities” of our campaign finance system. Several journalists also commented that they believed Colbert had almost “stumbled into” the Super PAC project, in that the effort had started as a limited gag on the program about campaign finance, but that the project naturally grew into something larger. The quote below offers an exemplar of this type of response:

I think he (Colbert) has two intentions. One, and it might even be the primary one, and we shouldn’t lose sight of that, is simply to get laughs. I mean, that really - ultimately that’s the main thing that he does. He’s an entertainer and he sees his job as making people laugh. Secondly, I think, and though he denies it, sort of... he denies that he has any kind of missionary role here, any kind of teaching role but I don’t believe it. I think he clearly has stumbled on this thing and he’s using it as a way to educate both himself and the rest of us about the way the system works. And I don’t think you have to watch the show very long to see that he’s, he thinks it’s absurd and the comedy points out the absurdity of it all. And as I said, I am not sure that was his goal from the beginning but I think it is part of it now.

Charles McGrath, *New York Times*

Several of the journalists who were interviewed, however, were more hesitant to speculate regarding Colbert’s motivation and intent, instead claiming general ignorance as to what Colbert might personally feel and believe in regard to campaign finance law. This hesitancy is interesting in that it seems as though even a casual observer to the Colbert Super PAC effort would notice the frequent, dripping sarcasm that Colbert uses throughout the show and his public appearances, and conclude that at a minimum Colbert intends to focus attention on the issue of campaign

finance — because he believes the system is deeply flawed, and thinks others should be aware of its problems. It may be that this hesitancy to speculate or draw solid conclusions regarding Colbert’s personal beliefs or intentions is simply a reflection of journalistic training, and the standard practice journalists often follow to avoid conjecture and speculation of personal opinions. The complexity of Colbert’s satire, however, also surely contributes to this hesitation to draw conclusions.

Does it Constitute Political Advocacy?

Regarding the question of whether Colbert’s effort with the Super PAC project constitutes activity which could be considered political activism or advocacy, reactions from journalists were mixed. During several of the interviews, journalists commented that they viewed Colbert as engaging in “education” with the Super PAC effort, but because he wasn’t explicitly advocating for any certain policy changes and wasn’t instructing his fans to take any specific actions, it didn’t quite cross the line into true political advocacy. A notable comment regarding this question was made by David Carr from the *New York Times*, who argued that the distinction between education and activism hinged on how Colbert actually used the money that was contributed to the Super PAC. Alternatively, Paul Blumenthal from the *Huffington Post* argued that Colbert actually *was* engaging in political advocacy because the Super PAC project was, in a way, “organizing people” and resulting in individuals being motivated to take action on their own. Blumenthal argued that “people get the whole tongue-in-cheek character” in Colbert’s satire — and that they realize he is being sarcastic when he praises Super PACs and unlimited campaign spending as great things. Commenting on how Colbert’s fans understand that they *should* take action and that Colbert is nudging them in that direction, Blumenthal said: “they are learning (about the issue) and they’ll follow suit, even if they are doing the exact opposite of what he (Colbert’s character) is telling them to do.”

It should also be noted that the interviews conducted in this research all took place before Colbert had introduced the “Colbert Super PAC Super Fun Pack” kits as part of the Super PAC effort. The instructional “how to” kits, for forming a do-it-yourself Super PAC entity, are arguably a much more direct form of advocacy in that the process involves encouraging fans and supporters to take personal action and initiative — and is steering individuals toward a more overt form of political activity. However, it should also be noted that even in promoting the kits (which are *sold* through the ColbertSuperPAC web site) Colbert still doesn’t seem to ever convey to his fans any specific purpose or objective for how he feels they should be utilized. Instead of directing his supporters toward a specific policy agenda, he leaves it up to them to decide how to proceed.

In the end, it seems the answers journalists provided to the question about Colbert’s efforts being considered a form of political advocacy mostly hinged on their own individual definitions of what actually constituted “advocacy” or “activism”. Because Colbert never seems to explicitly state that he has a goal he hopes to achieve with the Super PAC project, and because his efforts don’t fit cleanly into a traditional template of political activity (such as promoting a specific piece of legislation, or organizing support for a candidate or party), several of the journalists interviewed were hesitant to describe his project as crossing a certain imaginary line from education into advocacy. Alternatively, some of the journalists interviewed felt that the education Colbert was providing to his viewers regarding the realities of campaign finance laws was in and of itself a form of political advocacy.

Colbert’s Humor as Unique Motivation for Political Action

Paul Blumenthal, from the *Huffington Post*, had an interesting perspective on how Colbert’s fan base, of younger, tech savvy, and often more politically cynical individuals, might find a unique motivation for becoming politically involved through the complexity and ambiguity

of Colbert's humor. Speaking to how Colbert, through the faux conservative character he plays, resonates with certain individuals, Blumenthal continued:

I mean it's lots of younger people who are involved and people get that message from [Colbert]. I mean, he is not as direct as Jon Stewart in his sort of public and media criticism, where Jon Stewart sort of sometimes comes across as just another cable TV news pundit. Stephen Colbert has so many layers that sort of protect him from becoming like that, but I think people are more comfortable engaging with the outside world as he engages with it, you know, outside of his show.

... I think that because he isn't who he is, Stephen Colbert is different than the character that is on TV... And I think that that whole fact that people are sort of watching somebody play a character that is a caricature of what people are like on TV makes it easier to engage in political activism through that. It's sort of a way of breaking through people's cynicism, I think. It presents a way for people to do something without necessarily feeling that they have to be out in the street protesting, but there's some amount of fun to it.

Paul Blumenthal, *Huffington Post*

Expanding on this notion of how Colbert's complex satire, and the political messages found within it, can help to break through people's cynicism, Blumenthal describes an online community that is willing and often motivated to become politically involved — as long as it is fun and done in a “tongue in cheek” manner. Instead of being interested in neighborhood door-knocking or otherwise volunteering in a traditional manner, these individuals, many of whom, according to Blumenthal, are active within the online community “Reddit,” want to become involved in politics on their own terms. Colbert's satire, especially with the Super PAC project, gave many of these individuals an avenue for participation:

... and people love Stephen Colbert... I mean, the entire website of Reddit is basically his community and those people are incredible engaged and want to take part in society at large, but sort of in a “tongue-in-cheek” kind of way....

... Particularly Reddit, which is largely liberal community of people, they get riled up over political issues, but they also get riled up over cat videos or other funny things. And Stephen Colbert... sort of bridges that gap where you can be politically active and it isn't just sort of shouting in the streets, it's like a fun element to it.

Paul Blumenthal, *Huffington Post*

Beyond helping to make political engagement more fun and entertaining, Blumenthal seems to be saying that Colbert's satire serves to cut through some people's cynicism toward politics — and maybe, with the Colbert Super PAC effort, helps to make it seem, especially among certain online communities, more “cool” and socially acceptable to be politically active. In saying that you support the Colbert Super PAC effort, with its satirical complexity and relatively ambiguous message, it is a way of conveying to the broader community that “Yes, I care about this issue,” but I'm also “in on the joke” (and not overly naïve or idealistic).

Colbert's Faux Persona, Authenticity, and Sincerity

Several of the journalists interviewed made comments about how Colbert's character, the faux-conservative persona he typically portrays on the show and in public events, provides Colbert with an “unfair advantage” in insulating him from the consequences of what he says, allowing him to claim that he is “only joking” if ever criticized or pressed for serious comment about his true meaning or motivation. Discussing an incident during the South Carolina Republican primary race in which *NBC News* political reporter Chuck Todd publicly expressed criticism toward Colbert and his participation in the South Carolina election, Dahlia Lithwick notes how Colbert is essentially *shielded* by his character:

... one of the unfair advantages Colbert has is... the ability to toggle back and forth between serious criticism and then to disavow and say, “Oh, I was just kidding.” And so for a serious journalist to go after Colbert is never going to be a successful strategy, because it always looks like, you know, “Really, [you are] going to beat up a comedian?”

Dahlia Lithwick, *Slate*

Other interviewees who discussed Colbert’s character also reflected on how the fake persona Colbert plays could be viewed as a broader satirical commentary about the fakeness and insincerity of so-called serious news media figures, politicians, and the American political system itself. Expanding on this point, Paul Blumenthal discusses Colbert’s character and perceptions of authenticity and sincerity:

...I think just by having that character, [Colbert] just sort of sends up politics in general, as we all know that politicians aren’t exactly the people who they really are, that they present to us. And that goes doubly for media personalities who have cable TV shows, like Bill O’Reilly or Glenn Beck. I mean, they are sort of... these guys start playing a character on TV and that’s what... *they* are supposed to be authentic. But Stephen Colbert is absolutely *not* authentic, but maybe he is more authentic than they are because we know that he is just, it’s just a joke.

Paul Blumenthal, *Huffington Post*

Similar in message to comments made during the interview with Lithwick, in which she speculated that one of the messages of Colbert’s fake news show is really that politics itself is “an unserious news show,” Blumenthal’s offers the conclusion that Colbert — through his fake persona — is really offering fans a more authentic, or sincere, perspective on politics than the serious and supposedly sincere political pundits he lampoons.

Potential Risks

Several of the journalists interviewed provided interesting comments regarding whether they viewed there being any potential “risks” to Colbert’s satire and his participation in the political process with the Colbert Super PAC project. For the most part, those interviewed didn’t

hold major concerns regarding Colbert's activities causing an increase in political cynicism or otherwise "hurting" the American political system. Everyone agreed that the public generally understood his antics to be humorous and satirical in nature, and that someone would need to be very unfamiliar with Colbert and his character not to realize that he was being sarcastic when he offered praise for unlimited campaign donations and the Citizens United Supreme Court decision. *Christian Science Monitor* reporter Peter Grier offered an emphatic response to the question of whether Colbert's satire might have a negative influence:

... I just don't see this as a stain on the otherwise pure political process. The American political process is a huge loose amalgam of bizarre characters and strange issues and unusual responses and I think Colbert sits entirely within that tradition. Look what happened to him in the South Carolina primary. That whole thing ...that, to me, went nowhere. The actual political process... absorbed his interference with equanimity.

Peter Grier, *CS Monitor*

Alternatively, when asked a similar question about whether he had any concerns regarding Colbert's satirical participation in the political process, Charles McGrath from the *New York Times* offered a thoughtful response, noting that he believed that if it were to go "too far," satirical antics such as Colbert's could potentially have a negative "destabilizing" effect:

Yeah, I mean a little bit. On the one hand I love it and it makes you laugh, but there is a little part of me that thinks... that there's an element of irreverence in almost, it could be destabilizing... if it gets carried too far. I mean, if you just keep pointing out how absurd the whole thing is, then people may just completely stop believing in it and that's an extreme case, but there is a kind of, I don't know... It's part of what makes it so brilliant in a way is that there is an element of unease that it creates. Because here you have something that's comedic and ... satiric and there it is, it's right there with all this other ostensibly serious stuff. It is destabilizing. I mean, it's meant to be, but it... do we want to destabilize all our institutions? I mean, I guess that's what satirizers like to do but...

Charles McGrath, *New York Times*

Trailing off from this interesting reflection during the interview, McGrath seems to be saying he didn't view Colbert's current efforts with the Super PAC project as being harmful to the political process — but that he could imagine a scenario in which satirical efforts such as Colbert's, within the democratic process, could either reduce people's belief in the political process and their own ability to positively affect change (i.e., political efficacy), or otherwise serve to damage public trust in useful and important political institutions. (An alternate view of this notion regarding the issue of trust might argue that Colbert, through his satire, is actually *trying* to reduce the public's belief in the effectiveness of certain political institutions, namely the FEC, and is attempting to alter a general assumption that the campaign finance system “works fine” — instead promoting the idea that the system is broken and absurd, and needs to be changed.)

During the interview with Dahlia Lithwick, the *Slate* journalist expressed similar hesitations regarding Colbert and the subversiveness of his humor. Lithwick predicated her comments by saying that she is “a huge Colbert fan” and noting that she believed Colbert and Jon Stewart had done important work in educating and engaging Americans with projects such as the “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” on the national mall. Discussing her concern about a societal focus on humor and entertainment over sincerity and a substantive political debate, and the possible proliferation of Colbert's style of satire, Lithwick continued:

... I don't know that raising a generation of 20-somethings on the proposition that nothing is true, nothing is real, nothing is urgent, nothing matters but the punch line, is in the end sort of a healthy end for our democracy. And so, I am a huge Colbert fan. I've done his show. I am a huge Jon Stewart fan, I think that what they have done to educate Americans, and to engage Americans is absolutely irreplaceable, but I think that that said, to not worry about, you know, at the end of the day, one's ability to sort of absolve oneself of responsibility by saying, “Oh, but it's all just a joke,” does worry me a little.

And so, I think I might be the last like bastion ... of holding out a belief in a little bit of good ennobling earnestness. You know, that to actually stand for something and to believe in it and to not be able to duck away from the implications of what you are doing is also a value. And I guess, I worry a little bit as this becomes a more and more and more successful formula for how to talk

about things, that there is a net loss in how grating, you know, good old fashioned earnestness is.

Dahlia Lithwick, *Slate*

Similar to the comments made by McGrath, Lithwick's thoughtful reflection of Colbert's efforts seem to be somewhat conflicted — between being supportive of Colbert and his satire, and fearful of the broader implication that it could breed disillusionment, apathy and cynicism.

Unintended Consequences

During the interview with *NPR*'s Peter Overby, the veteran campaign finance law journalist made several interesting comments regarding the topic of potential unintended consequences specifically related to Colbert's satire with the Super PAC project. Overby speculated that in their pursuit of an advisory opinion from the FEC regarding a request for a media exemption for Comedy Central and *The Colbert Report*, Colbert and his lawyer Trevor Potter might have somewhat inadvertently found themselves in the position of possibly helping to *weaken* existing campaign finance regulations. Overby said he believed some staff members of the Campaign Legal Center, the "pro-regulation" non-profit organization Potter himself had founded, had initially felt frustrated with Potter for going down this path and viewed the advisory request submitted by Colbert as a dangerous move, which could result in legal changes that were in direct opposition to the group's mission. Discussing the June 30, 2011, FEC hearing in which Colbert learned the commission's decision related to his request, Overby described the situation as potentially "blowing a hole" in existing campaign finance regulations:

Yeah, [the hearing] was the end of June of last year. And the question that he (Colbert) raised there, if the commission had ruled in his favor, would have blown a huge hole in the campaign finance laws.

Peter Overby, *NPR*

As was discussed earlier, the FEC ended up ruling that Comedy Central and *The Colbert Report* would be granted the equivalent of a *partial* exemption — and the nature of the commission’s judgment regarding the relatively unique circumstances of Colbert’s particular request was such that it was likely to have minimal significance to the broader realm of campaign finance regulation. What is unknown, however, is how Colbert and Potter personally viewed their role in the process, and whether at any time they felt concerned about potentially contributing to the loosening of existing regulations.

Agenda Setting

During most of the interviews conducted for this research, interviewees were asked to provide their perspective on whether Colbert’s Super PAC efforts had significantly influenced the broader news media’s coverage of campaign finance issues, and had served an “agenda setting” function. While the specifics of the academic notion of agenda setting, originally put forth in the seminal *Public Opinion Quarterly* article by McCombs and Shaw (1972), were not discussed in significant detail with individuals interviewees, each respondent seemed to have a general notion of the concept — and answers were thus based on their own personal understanding and perspective on the idea. Arguably there could be some debate as to whether Colbert, within his capacity as a comedian with his own program on Comedy Central, operates *within* or *outside* the broader news media. Again, these dynamics were not discussed during the interview conversations. One possible perspective is that as a member of the broader media community, Colbert’s activities with the Super PAC project have served to influence the news coverage produced by members of the so-called “traditional” news media. Another reasonable perspective is that Colbert, especially with his Super PAC activities, is operating outside the news media sphere — and is thus engaged in what might be considered “reversed agenda-setting,” a notion which is typically thought of as when the *public* agenda serves to set the media agenda. Some

academic research has explored this idea of reverse agenda setting (Kim & Lee, 2006), and McCombs has also written about the phenomenon (2004).

Of the eleven journalists who were interviewed, opinions regarding any agenda setting effects of the Colbert Super PAC project within the broader news media environment were somewhat mixed. Similar to the case with interviewees' personal understanding of the notion of "political advocacy," individual journalist's responses to questions regarding Colbert's efforts and the existence of any agenda setting influence regarding news coverage of campaign finance issues seemed to vary depending on that individual's understanding of the concept of agenda setting. Most of the journalists interviewed agreed that Colbert *had* likely increased the overall amount of public attention on the topic of Super PACs and the larger issue of campaign finance. Several interviewees noted that they believed the coverage of Colbert's Super PAC project certainly resulted in a net increase in the overall volume of news stories written or produced about the broader topic of Super PACs — because in writing specifically about Colbert, at least some additional context of the campaign finance system was usually required within the article. Interestingly, *NPR*'s Peter Overby and Nancy Marshall Genzer both felt that Colbert's efforts hadn't really contributed to an increased amount of media attention regarding the issue of Super PACs — both arguing that the topic was so integral to current political news that it would have generated roughly the same total volume of coverage regardless of the comedian's activities. Others who were interviewed argued that Colbert's efforts likely only caused an increase in the volume of media coverage regarding Super PACs within lower-tier, regional and local newspapers and news outlets, which likely wouldn't have otherwise tackled a topic such as campaign finance law without the unique and entertaining angle of Colbert's humorous participation.

During the interview with Chris Good, the *ABC News* journalist offered some interesting reflections regarding the topic of agenda setting. Similar to the perspectives held by Overby and

Marshall-Genzer, Good didn't think Colbert's Super PAC project likely triggered a significant increase in the volume of media coverage about Super PACs produced by traditional political journalists — but he did stress that Colbert, by drawing more public attention to the issue, might have served to influence the decision making process of media executives who control the prominence of specific news stories. Discussing this dynamic, Good continued:

...I think on the bigger question what we are looking at is, does the news coverage of Colbert promote campaign finance to be a larger part of what the news media covers? Like after covering a Colbert story, does the news cycle then focus more on campaign finance not related to Colbert? ...

...I don't know. I don't think so. I think the answer to that is maybe a little, but I think that people are already interested in Super PACs. In terms of just political media, you know, every media organization works differently and different people make the decisions and they make those decisions in different ways. So, in just political media people are going to write about Super PACs no matter what. The fact that Colbert did all this didn't make Super PACs a bigger story in the 2012 election to them.

Now, if Colbert made it a bigger story it would be by, you know, by influencing news executives and decision makers who drive what the focus of the coverage is and producers who are not necessarily "all politics, all the time" people. And so, if there is a news executive somewhere at a major network who becomes more interested in Super PACs because of Colbert, and then becomes more likely to bump a story about Super PACs into a more prominent broadcast slot, then the answer is yes... and I could see a world in which that happens and probably not in a way that that fictitious news executive would advertise or maybe even admit, but it might be true, but I just don't know.

Chris Good, *ABC News*

Good's comments here somewhat align with the earlier discussed idea that Colbert's focus on Super PACs may have helped to bring the topic into greater focus especially within the "non-political" media environment. The notion that the Colbert Super PAC project could have helped influence the decisions of high level media executives is also intriguing in that late-night comedians are typically thought of as offering one-line zingers regarding politics and the news of the day — and not necessarily steering media coverage, and thus the national debate, at a high level.

Coverage Decisions Regarding Colbert

Perhaps some of the most interesting conversations with the journalists interviewed for this research focused on the newsroom decisions that were made regarding whether and how to cover Colbert and his Super PAC project, and debates about whether his comedic activities should be included among the other political news stories being produced. During several of the interviews, journalists commented that in creating the Colbert Super PAC, Colbert had essentially “forced them to cover him” in that Colbert had essentially transformed himself into a “news maker” within the political sphere. Kenneth Vogel from *Politico* discussed how there was occasionally internal debate within the newsroom regarding whether Colbert’s activities should be included with the other so-called “serious” political news of the day. Vogel discussed how *Politico* covered Colbert’s announcement that he would be running for the “United States of South Carolina” as a “breaking news story” on the news outlet’s web site:

(Regarding Colbert’s South Carolina candidacy)... we ran it as, like, a breaking news story... I’m pretty sure we issued a breaking news alert that we blasted out to our subscriber list, which is pretty extensive and it’s usually reserved for things like the passage of a budget or a candidate winning a primary or something like that. So, you know, you grapple with it (coverage decisions) like other media outlets have as well. And it’s not like everything else, it’s not quite so clear cut, whether it’s like, “Should we treat it as news in the way we treat serious news, or as a joke?”

Kenneth Vogel, *Politico*

Continuing on Vogel noted that as a political news reporter, once the Colbert Super PAC began running actual TV ads — and similarly, when Colbert announced that he would appear at a political rally with former presidential candidate Herman Cain — the lines between Colbert’s humor and the traditionally serious realm of political news were blurred, and journalists in his position were essentially forced to cover Colbert’s activities as news. Describing this dynamic, Vogel argued “the media’s hand is forced a little bit, even if you didn’t want to cover it... when

you start appearing with a candidate or former candidate, like he (Colbert) did with Herman Cain, it's not quite so clear cut.”

Later in the interview, Vogel discussed how coverage of Colbert is often among the most popular, and well-read, items on the *Politico* web site — and how editorial decisions are frequently made in the newsroom related to providing a balance of “important news” which is often less popular among readers (such as the passing of a budget), and more fun and entertaining items, such as news about Colbert, which generally drives significant traffic on the web site. Vogel described this balance between providing serious news and more popular and entertaining content as similar to giving someone broccoli compared to ice cream, when ice cream is the preferred choice of the consumer:

... it's like the broccoli. We want to give them the broccoli (serious news), but what they really want is the ice cream sundae and the Colbert news is like the ice cream sundae.

Kenneth Vogel, *Politico*

During the interview with Vogel, it was pointed out that coverage of Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC project had recently dominated the *Politico* web site's home page. Considering this popularity, it seems as though news editors at media outlets such as *Politico* have likely faced an occasionally challenging decision in determining how much coverage and attention to allocate to Colbert. (During the interview, Vogel did not delve into the topic of advertising revenue for online media outlets such as *Politico*, and the obvious fact that the popularity of coverage about Colbert would help drive traffic to the site, and thus increased advertising profits.)

Laudatory and Admiring

As was noted above, several of the journalists interviewed expressed that they believed Colbert, with his Super PAC project, had singularly done more to educate the public about campaign finance law than *anyone* else in the media. This notion was offered up, unprompted,

during several of the interviews that were conducted — with perhaps the most laudatory comments coming from Peter Overby, who repeatedly mentioned that he thought Colbert’s efforts had been uniquely successful in “pulling back the curtain” and educating viewers. Several interviewees praised how Colbert had successfully “broken down” and explained the intricacy and complexities of complicated campaign finance laws, and had *showed* his audience what is actually possible within the current legal system. The comment below, in which Charles McGrath argues that Colbert successfully changed many Americans’ perceptions about campaign finance, provides an example of this sort of sentiment:

... first of all, he’s explained to a lot of people how it really works. I mean, most people in American were completely ignorant of how it works, either by choice or by passivity or whatever. And I mean he’s clearly shown the light right on it. I mean by doing this himself he has dramatized to the American people how this works. And that is a much more effective way than writing about it or talking about it. He’s dramatized it and it seems to me there’s no question that he’s changed perceptions.

Charles McGrath, *New York Times*

Also, as noted earlier, several journalists who were interviewed commented that Colbert’s efforts had helped members of the news media by providing them with a framework in which to address and discuss the issue of campaign finance laws and Super PACs within their news stories.

Performance Art and Breaking New Ground

Many journalists described Colbert as engaging in a form of “performance art” through his ongoing promotion of the Colbert Super PAC project. By describing Colbert’s actions as “art,” it often seemed as though the interviewees were alluding to the fact that Colbert was certainly making a political statement through the Super PAC project — but similar to understanding a piece of art, the message wasn’t always necessarily explicit or obvious, and it was somewhat left up to the viewer to interpret on their own. The comment below from Peter Grier helps capture this perspective:

I think Colbert is an artist. Artists use what they do to try to make a larger point. His art is comedy but it kind of verges on performance art, as I've said a couple of times in my stories. So in that sense, what he's doing is using the opportunities available to him because of his fame and show to illustrate to people something that he believes is inane about the American political system. As you know, he uses [the Super PAC] to really illustrate what he feels to be the absurdity of the structure of those Citizens United campaign finance laws because by illustrating all the non-coordinated coordination absurdities and such with handing the Super PAC back and forth to John Stewart, he goes right into the logical weak points of the system and makes fun of them... for everybody to see.

Peter Grier, *Christian Science Monitor*

Beyond the notion of performance art, several of the journalists who were interviewed as part of this research agreed that Colbert's efforts with the Colbert Super PAC project were indeed representative of a new and unique form of political satire. This idea that Colbert, in actively *participating* in the political process, instead of just making fun of and satirizing it from the outside, was "breaking new ground" within the realm of political humor is perhaps best encapsulated through the quote below:

... it's a new kind of satire because I mean, traditional satire seems to be merely poking fun at things really from the outside. I mean, the satirist is just by definition a kind of outsider. And this thing as he is doing it from within, he is not just making fun of Super PACs, he *has* one. And he has one that is a real Super PAC. It has real money. Real people have given to it, have contributed to it. And he's actively trying to insert his PAC into the process. The very process that he's extensively making fun of, he is also a part of. And so, it's like it's 'participatory satire.' Or it's satire raised to the point of performance art. I think it is something different.

Charles McGrath, *New York Times*

It should be noted that McGrath's comment, in dubbing Colbert's efforts as "participatory satire" — which is the title of this dissertation — was not the result of any prior suggestion from the author, but instead could either be considered just a coincidence or perhaps evidence of the aptness of the term. Several interviewees were asked their perspective on whether they expected this unique style of participatory satire to become a trend among future political humorists.

Generally, responses focused on the unique persona Colbert had created for himself and the difficulty in replicating such a character (or a satirical political entity) without being viewed simply as a “copycat.” Discussing his thoughts on the likelihood of imitators to what Colbert has done with the Super PAC project, McGrath speculated that similar future efforts would likely be less successful:

...you know, the entertainment business is nothing if not a copycat business and I am sure you'll see other people trying to do it. Whether it can be done again, I don't know. I mean, part of what makes this so great is its uniqueness, that we've never seen anything like this. And if you have a bunch of people trying to do it the impact would be diminished. Don't you think?

Charles McGrath, *New York Times*

McGrath's comments, again, speak to the general uniqueness of Colbert's activities with the Super PAC project, and a perspective that the initiative is unlikely to be easily or successfully replicated in the future.

Media Coverage Analysis

In an effort to also explore media coverage of the Colbert Super PAC from a more quantitative perspective, a content analysis of news stories discussing Colbert and the Super PAC project was conducted using the LexisNexis Academic search engine (www.lexisnexis.com). An initial cursory search, conducted on July 10, 2012, within the “U.S. Newspapers and Wires” category of the LexisNexis database — using the combined search terms of "Colbert PAC" or "Colbert Super PAC" or "Colbert SuperPAC" — identified a total of 213 unique print articles focused on the topic, appearing between April 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012. In order to further refine the search, a follow-up query (using the same search terms) was then also conducted restricting the media outlets to only “Major Newspapers” within the United States, a category which includes the country’s top 50 newspapers by circulation. This search produced a listing of 55 unique newspaper stories discussing the Colbert Super PAC effort, between June 24, 2011 and June 30, 2012.

After preliminary examination of the 55 newspaper stories, a general coding system was created to categorize the content of the various articles. In an effort to ensure accurate coding, a graduate student assistant was trained using the author’s basic coding guidelines and then paid a nominal amount to conduct a duplicate coding of the 55 articles. A rough inter-coder reliability of 77% was achieved (for the general coding categories), which was calculated by dividing the number of articles which were coded in full agreement against the total number of articles considered. Eight of the articles were removed from the analysis, typically because of abnormal format — such as “letters to the editor,” or because the item was only a short, passing mention of the Colbert Super PAC project, often within a “media gossip” or “news brief” style column. Of the 47 remaining news articles, each was then coded based on its general content. Thirty-two of the 47 articles (68%) were categorized as focusing primarily on the Colbert Super PAC project, while 15 of the articles were determined to have been focused on other topics and typically only

included a brief reference to the Colbert Super PAC. (The majority of those 15 articles were news stories written about the general impact of Super PAC entities on the 2012 election, or the state of political fundraising and campaign strategies — and the articles would usually have only one or two sentences near the end of the piece briefly mentioning the Colbert effort.) The pie chart in Figure 1 shown below provides a quick visual representation of this broad categorical breakdown of the 55 articles:

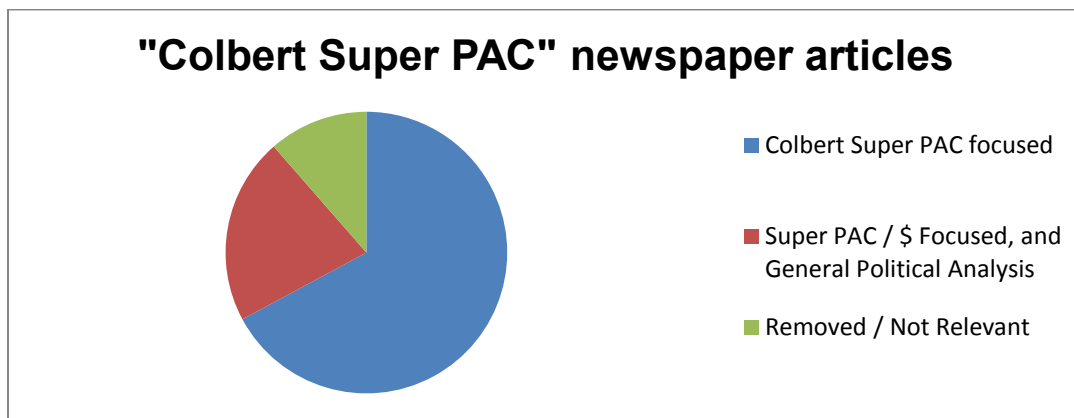


Figure 1. Colbert Super PAC newspaper articles. This figure shows the distribution of articles referencing the Colbert Super PAC, appearing in the 50 largest circulation U.S. newspapers.

A more in-depth examination was then conducted of the 32 major U.S. newspaper articles which were determined to have been focused primarily on the Colbert Super PAC effort. Four categories were created to capture the general themes and content of newspaper coverage focused on the Colbert Super PAC: articles primarily reporting Colbert’s appearances before the FEC or the FEC’s ruling on Colbert’s advisory request (7), articles reporting Colbert Super PAC fundraising information (7), newspaper columns and editorials focused on the Colbert Super PAC effort and discussing its critique of campaign finance regulations (5), and general articles either broadly discussing Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC project, or reporting on other specific elements of the effort (13). Again, the bar chart below in Figure 2 offers a simple visual representation of the number of articles within each of these categories:

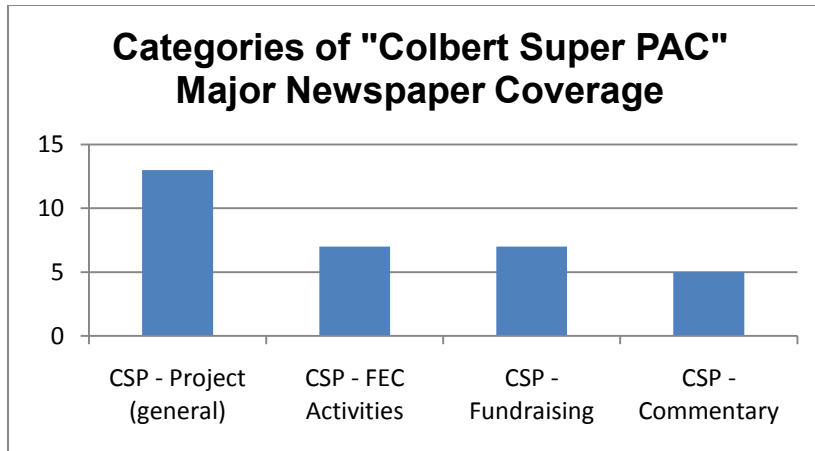


Figure 2. Categories of “Colbert Super PAC” Major Newspaper Coverage. This figure illustrates the number of articles, from major newspapers, focusing on a specific element of the Colbert Super PAC project.

General Project Coverage

Thirteen of the 32 newspaper articles in the secondary analysis were categorized as either generally covering the Colbert Super PAC project, or as focusing on a specific element of the effort. Five of the 13 articles in this group appeared in the *New York Times*, while the remainder included stories from a range of newspapers across the country. Multiple news articles discussed certain developments in the progression of the project, such as the Super PAC’s placement of real television ads in South Carolina during the state’s Republican presidential primary, or Colbert’s transfer of control over the PAC to his comedian friend, Jon Stewart. A January 20, 2012 story appearing in the *New York Times* included the headline “Colbert and Cain to Join Forces at South Carolina Rally,” and provided some detail regarding the former Republican presidential candidate’s decision to participate in the upcoming political rally Colbert was staging at the College of Charleston. A couple of the articles included in this category likely reported on the Colbert project primarily due to a local connection, such as a piece in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

which focused on the fact that four students from the University of Pittsburgh had been the winners of the Colbert Super PAC “Super FUN Pack” treasure hunt — and that the school would be receiving a future visit from Colbert. The majority of the articles in this category, although often incorporating humorous quotes from Colbert, framed the Super PAC effort relatively seriously — and treated developments in the project as “news,” frequently providing at least some general background and context regarding the project’s evolution and the campaign finance laws Colbert’s satire was targeting.

Included in this category of the analysis was the lengthy *New York Times* profile of Colbert, written by Charles McGrath, which is discussed at length in the “Selected News Coverage and Journalists’ Perspectives” section of this research. McGrath’s profile of Colbert (with the headline, “How many Stephen Colberts are there?”) goes into considerable detail regarding the comedian’s background and personal life, along with exploration of the origins and motivations behind the Colbert Super PAC project. Similarly, another piece written by Jason Zinoman, which appeared in the *Times* on January 14, 2012, focused on the complexity and seriousness of Colbert’s satire with the Super PAC project. With the headline, “Beneath a deeply silly campaign, a deeply serious performer,” the article outlines several developments of the Super PAC effort and discusses the interplay between the real world of politics and the news media, and the surreal and “fantasy” world of Colbert’s satirical humor. Discussing this dynamic, Zinoman argues in the article that, “Mr. Colbert is a serious performer playing a silly character, while the media and political world are deeply silly but pretending to be serious.” As is evident from this particular excerpt, beyond simply covering Colbert’s Super PAC effort from a one-dimensional news perspective, at least some of the media attention the project garnered also inspired a kind of deeper “self-reflection,” within the media itself, as to the meaning and intent of Colbert’s satire.

FEC Activities

The group of seven newspaper articles which primarily focused on Colbert and his Super PAC related activities at the FEC all ran in the period immediately following his June 30, 2011 appearance in front of the Commission in Washington, D.C. Among the stories within this category, while several newspapers incorporated a basic, straightforward headline reporting the recent developments at the FEC — such as a *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* story, with “Colbert’s PAC Approved” and a *Buffalo News* piece, with “Colbert OK’d for super PAC; Can raise funds, run ads on show” — other papers’ headlines either directly, or somewhat obliquely, referenced Colbert’s status as a comedian and satirist, and the relative *seriousness* of his Super PAC endeavor. A July 1, 2011 headline from *USA Today* declared, “Colbert takes his politics seriously; Comedian can form ‘super PAC,’” while headlines from two separate stories appearing in *The Washington Post* respectively read, “Waiting for the punch line,” and “Seriously, folks, Colbert gets his Super PAC.”

Several of the articles focused on Colbert’s appearance before the FEC began with some sort of reference to how serious the business conducted at the federal commission typically is — and how Colbert’s request before the regulatory body, although somewhat humorous in nature, was really “no laughing matter.” Between the two different pieces appearing in *The Washington Post*, the first began with a line which read, “Stephen Colbert learned an important lesson in Washington on Thursday: Even a gifted comedian can’t make the Federal Election Commission funny.” The beginning of the other *Washington Post* piece was strikingly similar: “The Federal Election Commission does serious issues. It does complex debates over mind-numbing campaign laws. It does not do funny.” (This last piece, however, then transitions into an explanation of how the FEC had unwittingly become part of “a very public joke,” which was being orchestrated by Colbert.) Most of the articles within this category went into considerable detail explaining the regulatory issues at the heart of the FEC ruling regarding Colbert’s Super PAC, discussing

Viacom's legal concerns and the notion of a media exemption. Several articles incorporated quotes from a member of the Commission discussing the complexity of the legal issue which Colbert's advisory request had brought forth. FEC Commissioner Ellen Weintraub was quoted in one of the *Washington Post* articles saying, "If we had viewed this as just a funny request, that would have been a lot easier." Finally, all but one of the seven articles within this category included humorous quotes from Colbert — often excerpts of his speech outside the FEC immediately following the hearing. Four of the seven articles incorporated some variation of the exact same joke which Colbert had used in his post-hearing "stump speech," during which he had declared to the crowd, "I don't know about you, but I do not accept limits on my free speech. I don't know about you, but I do not accept the status quo... But I do accept Visa, MasterCard and American Express." Along with being humorous, it is apparent that this particular quip from Colbert's speech was viewed by many journalists as succinctly capturing the message of Colbert's satire.

Fundraising

Among the seven major U.S. newspaper stories which specifically focused on the Colbert Super PAC's fundraising activities, most included a headline or lede which referenced the significant amount of money that Colbert had raised — and often some variation of the idea that while Colbert was a comedian, his Super PAC project "was no joke." Included among these articles is a *Washington Post* piece with the headline, "Colbert's rolling in super PAC donations," a *New York Post* story with the headline, "Colbert PACs a punch," and a *Baltimore Sun* article with the headline, "Colbert wasn't joking: Super PAC pulls in \$1M." The first line of the *Washington Post* piece reads, "Stephen Colbert's sway in the presidential election might be a joke, but he's got some real financial muscle." A similar line appearing at the beginning of a *New York Daily News* story declares, "Stephen Colbert's candidacy is a joke — but his fund-raising prowess is real." Several of the articles in this category focused specifically on the identity of

Colbert Super PAC donors, information which was available to journalists via FEC financial reporting records. A February 12, 2012 story appearing in the *Houston Chronicle* reported that a larger number of Texas citizens had contributed money to the Colbert Super PAC than had donated to the pro-Mitt Romney “Restore Our Future” Super PAC. Similarly, a January 31, 2012 piece in the *San Jose Mercury News* highlighted the fact that the Colbert Super PAC had raised more than \$1 million, and the fact that included in that amount was a \$500 contribution from California’s lieutenant governor, Gavin Newsom. Generally speaking, the articles within this category were relatively short and — while often incorporating one or two of Colbert’s humorous lines about the project — provided little background context or analysis related to the origins or motivations for the Colbert Super PAC effort.

Commentary

The analysis of media coverage identified a total of five unique newspaper editorials or opinion pieces, which specifically focused on the Colbert Super PAC effort and typically offered both a discussion of the project and a corresponding critique of the country’s campaign finance regulations. For the most part, these commentary pieces were quite supportive of Colbert — and often seemed to focus attention on the Super PAC project primarily as an opportunity to publish a critical editorial regarding the negative impact of the Supreme Court’s Citizens United ruling. Most of these columns and editorials included a headline conveying a general notion that Colbert’s message with the Super PAC effort was actually very serious, such as the August 22, 2011, column written by David Carr in the *New York Times* with the headline, “Comic’s PAC is more than a gag.” A piece by Dana Milbank, which appeared in the *Washington Post* on July 3, 2011, included a similar headline: “Colbert’s PAC and the real parody.” Focusing on how distorted and ineffective campaign finance laws had become, Milbank’s column began with the following introduction:

The comedian Stephen Colbert flew down to Washington this week to parody the nation's campaign finance laws. But there was a flaw in his plan: The campaign finance system already is a parody.

Dana Milbank, *Washington Post*

Later on in the piece, Milbank argues that Colbert's over-the-top satirical efforts "to prove how flimsy campaign finance limits have become" since the rule changes brought on by Citizens United, are actually much *less* egregious than the real, and often secretive, political fundraising activities being orchestrated by Karl Rove and the "American Crossroads" Super PAC. Milbank ends the column arguing that, "when it comes to making a mockery of campaign finance law, American Crossroads is way ahead of Colbert Nation." Along with its harsh critique of the campaign finance system, an implicit message within Milbank's commentary is that Colbert's satire is both apt and worthwhile.

A similar editorial, which ran in *The Houston Chronicle* on July 7, 2011, used the headline, "We're not laughing; Colbert's Super PAC satirizes Supreme Court's troubling campaign finance rulings." The piece, which highlighted humorous portions of Colbert's June 30, 2011 speech outside the FEC, criticized the Supreme Court for helping to allow "special interests to buy elections" and declared that, as opposed to Colbert's humor, "there's nothing funny" about the impact of the Court's recent judgments. Additionally, in the earlier referenced piece by David Carr, the *New York Times* columnist argued for the importance of Colbert's satire through the Super PAC project, and stressed that the effort had such value (as an educational tool and political critique) in helping to address the problems of campaign finance law, that Colbert should be cautious not to let the project only be a humorous stunt:

Maybe the whole system has become such a joke that only jokes will serve as a corrective. But if Mr. Colbert succeeds only in drawing out more humor, then the whole idea is a failure... it would be a shame if this is only fun and games.

David Carr, *New York Times*

On the whole, opinion writers seemed to embrace the Colbert Super PAC effort — and expressed support for the satire. While newspaper commentaries critical of issues within the campaign finance system are arguably relatively common, it is debatable whether any of these particular opinion columns or editorials would have appeared had it not been for Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC project. In an editorial which appeared in *The Philadelphia Daily News* on January 23, 2012, the paper offered significant credit to Colbert and the Super PAC effort, for educating the public and focusing attention on the issue:

Much of what we know about campaign-finance laws we learned from Stephen Colbert. Which is appropriate, since Stephen Colbert is a comedian and this country's campaign-finance laws are a farce. Exactly two years ago, the Citizens United Supreme Court decision dismantled what few limitations there had been on corporations (or unions, although they have far less money) from contributing to political candidates.

Over the past year, the show has taken “Colbert Nation” on a journal into the world of loopholes, technicalities and legal fictions that govern the way we elect our leaders today.

... [Colbert] has done an extraordinary public service by focusing on the need for a constitutional amendment to undo Citizens United.

Beyond just gaining plaudits from those within the news media, these examples of positive commentary also certainly provided a unique credibility — and helped to significantly amplify and extend Colbert's message with the Super PAC effort.

Perspectives from the “Pro-Reform” Advocacy Community

In an effort to gain an understanding of the perspective of members of the so-called campaign finance “reform” community, and to explore their attitudes toward Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC effort, individual phone interviews were conducted with three leading campaign finance reform advocates. The first of these interviews took place on February 3, 2012, with Fred Wertheimer, who is the founder and president of Democracy 21. Democracy 21 describes itself on its web site as “a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works to strengthen our democracy and promotes government integrity, accountability and transparency measures to accomplish its goals” (www.democracy21.org). Wertheimer is a well-known, veteran activist — and his status as a leading expert within the reform community is prominently highlighted on the Democracy 21 web site:

[Wertheimer] has been described by *The New York Times* as “the country’s leading proponent of campaign finance reform,” and “the dean of campaign finance reformers,” by *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne as “the eminence grise of the campaign reform movement,” and by *The Boston Globe* as a “legendary open-government activist.”

Democracy 21 actively works to convey its message to members of the media and the general public regarding what the organization views as the negative consequences of the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision, and Wertheimer is the frequent author of guest editorials and op-ed pieces discussing weaknesses and problems with campaign finance laws. The organization also regularly distributes emails to journalists and the broader community, promoting specific pieces of reform legislation and noteworthy editorials, news articles and reports which are favorable to its cause.

During the phone interview, Wertheimer offered laudatory comments toward Colbert and expressed support for the Colbert Super PAC project, saying that it had served to draw attention to the issue of campaign finance and had helped to educate the American public:

Well, he (Colbert) is doing a great job of educating the American people on the enormous damage that the Supreme Court has done to our political system. Ridicule and satire is always a very powerful form of communication. We rarely

get it in the campaign finance world in which I live. So, what Mr. Colbert has done here is bring a whole new perspective and voice to the issue that is reaching a segment of the public that normally doesn't engage in or pay that much attention to the issue. He is doing a supreme job of communicating what a disaster we have on our hands ... as a result of the Citizens United decision and related court decisions.

Fred Wertheimer, *Democracy 21*

Wertheimer said that he believed most people in the campaign finance reform community were "very supportive" toward Colbert's efforts, especially because it was helping to increase the amount of attention paid to the issue "by average Americans."

However when asked what he believed to be Colbert's personal intent or motivation behind the decision to spearhead the Colbert Super PAC project, Wertheimer was hesitant to speculate on the matter, saying "I can't get inside of his (Colbert's) motivation." Expanding on this notion, Wertheimer stressed that instead of focusing on Colbert's intent with the project, he preferred to examine the results:

...it is very hard to attribute motivation or intent to people. We could look at the results of what he is doing. And he is educating a wide audience that goes beyond simply his viewers about very fundamental problems for our democracy. I would think he knows he is doing that. And he is doing it in such an entertaining way that he has been drawing vast attention to the message he is communicating, that goes beyond, way beyond, the people who watch his show. I've had journalists for foreign publications raise the issue of (the) Colbert effort with me. So, I think this has become not just a national means of communicating, nationally, but also internationally.

Fred Wertheimer, *Democracy 21*

Wertheimer's comments about Colbert are striking in that they convey his perspective regarding the significant impact and reach that the Colbert Super PAC has had in educating and raising awareness toward campaign finance issues. Although he agreed that Colbert had received significant free media coverage related to the Colbert Super PAC effort, Wertheimer argued that coverage of "the disastrous Citizens United decision would be at the center of political coverage for the 2012 elections," regardless of Colbert's activities.

Asked whether he felt there were any risks or dangers to Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project, Wertheimer reflected on the possibility that Colbert's satire, if it were to go too far, could potentially cause people to view politics as just a big joke — or possibly decrease the public's perception that they could enact positive change within the system. Wertheimer discusses these thoughts below:

Well, there's always a fine line here and if [Colbert's] efforts were to reach a stage where people concluded that this was just a joke rather than a core problem for the country, or if they concluded that, "Well he is just telling us, by showing all these loopholes, that there is nothing we can do about it," that would become problematic. I don't think that's happened. I don't think that he is... the fact that he is treating this as a matter of humor and satire... [it isn't] being communicated in a way that says the whole thing is a joke and doesn't matter. I don't think that is going on, nor do I think what he has done to date has (been) communicating that, "Well, we just have to live with this." But that's the line that one would hope doesn't get crossed here.

Fred Wertheimer, *Democracy 21*

Following these comments, Wertheimer again stressed that he didn't think Colbert's satire had crossed into the territory of causing people to conclude that there was nothing that could be done to improve the system — but he argued if it ever did cross that line, it "could be counter-productive to the larger needs of the country to deal with this issue" of campaign finance.

Instead of focusing on these types of concerns, however, Wertheimer emphasized that he felt that Colbert's Super PAC efforts had largely been "helpful" to the campaign finance reform community's cause — and that, although he couldn't say for sure, he felt Colbert probably intended for his project to help in solving the problems of campaign finance:

Yes, I think he (Colbert) has been very helpful to the cause of solving a huge problem for the country, solving that problem is a difficult battle but a battle that can be won. I think his efforts have been very helpful regardless of what his intention is, because I don't know what's in his head. But as I said, I have a feeling that that is his intention. I have no way of knowing.

Fred Wertheimer, *Democracy 21*

Following these comments, Wertheimer also went on to discuss Colbert's involvement in the South Carolina Republican presidential primary election, saying that he doubted Colbert's

activities would have any significant effect on the race. Wertheimer's general reluctance to speculate on Colbert's motivation, or intent, behind the Super PAC project, even as he voices support for Colbert's efforts, is interesting and echoes similar comments made by several of the journalists interviewed for this research.

Another phone interview was conducted on February 16, 2012, with Bob Biersack, a campaign finance transparency advocate who serves as a senior fellow at the Center for Responsive Politics. Perhaps the most high profile project coordinated by the Center for Responsive Politics is the web site OpenSecrets.org, which tracks and posts information about federal campaign contributions and provides lobbying data to the news media and general public. The organization outlines its mission on its web site:

The Center for Responsive Politics is the nation's premier research group tracking money in U.S. politics and its effect on elections and public policy. Nonpartisan, independent and nonprofit, the organization aims to create a more educated voter, an involved citizenry and a more transparent and responsive government.

Highlighting on the site that it aims to provide the public with unbiased information, the Center for Responsive Politics hopes to inform citizens about the influence of money within politics — and advocates for “a transparent and responsive government.” Before becoming a senior fellow with the organization, Biersack worked for thirty years in various positions within the Federal Election Commission, among them, coordinating the design for FEC disclosure processes, as well as serving as the organization's statistician and press officer.

During the interview, Biersack discussed his perspective on Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC effort. Explaining how he felt regulatory systems can become ineffective and illogical over time, often due to incremental changes implemented by court decisions which had the effect of making the original system less consistent and coherent, Biersack said that he felt Colbert was attempting to highlight “absurd situations” within the realm of existing campaign finance law. Similar to comments from Wertheimer, Biersack also argued that it was difficult to discern what Colbert's true intent was with the Super PAC effort. Biersack stressed that he

thought Colbert’s primary goal was “to make money” by having a successful television program, and he questioned how the various humorous activities of the Super PAC helped to further any specific political agenda. Arguing that Colbert’s satire primarily served to highlight the absurdity of various aspects of the campaign finance system, Biersack agreed that Colbert’s project *was* serving an educational role to a portion of the public — and was showing how parts of the system such as rules about coordination were “silly” — but, he stressed, he didn’t see how the effort could be considered political advocacy:

... I think that’s certainly an educational point of view [Colbert’s] trying to make and he is doing it in a way that brings it home to people who certainly aren’t going to sit around and read about court decisions and arcane rules. But they’ll watch [the show] and they’ll get the point. And it certainly is a legitimate point in a political context, but as far as going further and trying to mobilize people to rise up and stop this, maybe... but I don’t... I am not sure how I see that happening.

Bob Biersack, *Center for Responsive Politics*

Biersack noted that he wasn’t personally opposed to Colbert’s efforts with the Super PAC project (and was, in fact, somewhat supportive), and believed that sometimes governmental systems “deserved some cynical perspective” be focused on them — and that “it’s always healthy for people to look skeptically at how these kinds of processes work...” Continuing on, Biersack also said that he thought many members of the campaign finance reform community held “some admiration for the cleverness” of what Colbert was doing with the Super PAC project.

Later on in the interview, Biersack discussed how early on in the evolution of the Colbert Super PAC project some members of the campaign finance community which had worked to oppose regulations were supportive of the Colbert effort, as they believed it was helping to show the unnecessary bureaucracy and ineffectiveness of the campaign finance legal system.

Explaining this notion below, Biersack said:

It’s interesting that some of the leaders of that group, who thought deregulation was the answer, were kind of happy with Colbert in the beginning too — because their sense of this was that what he was showing is how bureaucratically arcane and stupid this is and what we should really do is get rid of the bureaucracy and that means deregulate, so they were not uncomfortable with it in the beginning.

I'm not sure they still feel that way, but there's that point of view too. So yeah, that goes back to your notion that you can't tell really what's the goal here. It seems to work for both sides.

Bob Biersack, *Center for Responsive Politics*

The dynamic Biersack describes here is interesting, in that it implies that at least initially, campaign finance advocates on polar opposite ends of the policy spectrum (the pro-reform/regulation groups vs. the anti-regulation and “free-speech” communities) were both supportive of Colbert’s Super PAC efforts, and viewed the project as being helpful to their respective causes.

Biersack also discussed the role that former FEC Commissioner Trevor Potter had played, as Colbert’s personal lawyer and a legal advisor to the Colbert Super PAC. As part of a continued conversation regarding whether or not Colbert’s efforts could be considered political advocacy, Biersack noted that he felt that there needed to be a clear connection between the Colbert Super PAC’s actions and some specific political or policy outcome (in order to classify it as advocacy). Regarding Potter’s participation in the project, Biersack noted that Potter serves as the head of the Campaign Legal Center — an organization which had declared specific policy objectives related to campaign finance reform — but also stressed that he (Biersack) believed the Super PAC project hadn’t really demonstrated anything to show itself as overtly engaging in advocacy, and also that he didn’t think that it was Potter who was “driving” the initiative.

Expanding on this idea below, Biersack said:

Trevor (Potter) is [Colbert’s] lawyer and Trevor wants to change the system... (but) I think Trevor feels like he is along for the ride. That this has gotten way beyond him and he doesn’t know what’s going to happen next either. And that just takes me back to, at the end of the day, what these people are about are having a successful television show.

Bob Biersack, *Center for Responsive Politics*

Reiterating his earlier point, that he believed the primary motivation for Colbert and his staff was to make money and increase viewer ratings for a successful show, Biersack stressed that the only way he felt there could be certainty regarding Colbert’s intent with the Super PAC was

through asking the comedian about it directly. Discussing the role that fellow campaign finance reform advocate Trevor Potter was playing in the initiative, Biersack commented again that it required looking at “who’s driving who” — and that from his viewpoint, he didn’t think that Potter was the one driving Colbert:

... if they (Colbert and the show’s producers) want to do something and they want to make sure that it’s within the bounds, that it’s legal, that he’ll guide them that way. I don’t think this is a great conspiracy where Trevor figured out where to do this and Colbert’s following along. Probably quite the reverse. But then again, what do I know? I have no idea. In that process, I am no better or worse observer than anybody else who sees it.

Bob Biersack, *Center for Responsive Politics*

Biersack’s perspective clearly indicates a hesitancy to categorize Colbert’s efforts with the Super PAC project as being intended to influence public opinion regarding campaign finance laws, or as an attempt to promote political change — and he views Trevor Potter’s role within the initiative as primarily serving within a traditional legal advisor capacity, versus supporting or engaging in any form of overt advocacy.

On February 16, 2012, a third phone interview was conducted with John Wonderlich, who is the policy director for the Sunlight Foundation, an organization which works within the realm of campaign finance law by advocating for greater transparency and “open government.” The organization’s activities, and its focus on technology, are described below, as posted on the Sunlight Foundation’s web site:

The Sunlight Foundation is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization that uses the power of the Internet to catalyze greater government openness and transparency, and provides new tools and resources for media and citizens, alike. We are committed to improving access to government information by making it available online, indeed redefining “public” information as meaning “online,” and by creating new tools and websites to enable individuals and communities to better access that information and put it to use.

During the interview with Wonderlich, who views himself as a campaign finance transparency advocate, he commented that he had initially been “weary” of the Colbert Super PAC effort —

out of concern that Colbert's satire would only serve to make campaign finance regulation seem absurd and like a big joke — but that he had eventually come to view the project as a very positive phenomenon. Discussing his changed perspective toward the Super PAC project, Wonderlich said:

I think it's been an overwhelmingly positive phenomenon. And I would say as it was first starting to happen and became clear how "all in" Colbert was going with this project, then I was a little bit weary of how his treatment of the subject matter would end up impacting the public discussion of it.

There is a little bit of concern that, you know, maybe it would backfire and cause campaign finance regulation itself to become the butt of the jokes — which sometimes it certainly is, the butt of his jokes — but that's turned out to be totally fine and overwhelmingly, the impact of his satire has been to raise public awareness of the dangers of deregulated and secret campaign spending. So on balance I would say that his involvement has been overwhelmingly positive.

John Wonderlich, *Sunlight Foundation*

Wonderlich's comments clearly convey a general level of support for Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project, and a belief that it had been helpful in increasing "awareness" of the "dangers of deregulated and secret campaign spending," — a comment which could certainly be interpreted as meaning it was viewed as altering public opinion about the issue.

Wonderlich was also asked about his perspective on Colbert's motivation for creating the Super PAC project. Contrasting with responses from Wertheimer and Biersack, Wonderlich offered a confident opinion that Colbert indeed viewed himself as "a reformer" and was using his satire as a "tool" to help fix problems within the (campaign finance) system. Discussing his thoughts on the topic, Wonderlich commented on Colbert's motivation for advancing his unique form of satire:

Well, I think there's a couple of different levels of motivation here. First, I think... he's (Colbert) a bit of a reformer and thinks that the (campaign finance) system has problems that should be fixed and satire is the tool to achieve that.

But I think that's sort of derivative of a more primary motivator, which is that Colbert himself is a sort of performance artist or something... it's sort of some

kind of new designation of the way that humor functions. If you remember his, like, intent to run for president that happened before, and his willingness to act out a real life version of something in satire... if someone wants to don false identities, in order to take on significant problems in our political system, then ... (people will see) there are serious problems with our political system — that comes from people assuming fake identities and creating false organizations — then [campaign finance is] a really perfect topic for the kind of performance art, or humor, that he is pursuing...

John Wonderlich, *Sunlight Foundation*

Wonderlich's comments above convey a relative certainty that Colbert is himself a "reformer" and has motivations to use his satire for political change. In addition, in his description of Colbert's satire — as "some kind of new designation of the way that humor functions — Wonderlich offers support for one of the key questions within this research effort: whether Colbert's satire can be considered uniquely innovative and groundbreaking, in its use of humor for political activism. Similar to other interviewees, comparing Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project as a form of "performance art," Wonderlich's comments also convey a perspective that Colbert is intentionally targeting specific "problems with our political system" and using his satire to promote change.

Wonderlich went on during the interview to discuss how he believed that although Colbert, and his comedy partner Jon Stewart, often claimed that their respective programs were simply just entertainment (and not a form of activism) — he viewed both comedians as having a "pretty clear intent and view on how things should be changed and what it is that is ridiculous about the system." Expanding on this notion, Wonderlich described Colbert as seeking out adversaries for his satire:

... I think when [Colbert's] sitting down and figuring out what direction the whole thing should take, he's thinking about the value in the humor but also what's a worthy political adversary for his humor. And the corrupting influence of money in politics seems to have registered as a worthwhile adversary for him.

John Wonderlich, *Sunlight Foundation*

Later in the interview, Wonderlich discussed how he agreed with the notion that Colbert's humor served a journalistic function and had helped to educate the public about campaign finance issues. Specifically describing particular program segments where the Super PAC project had focused on anonymous political contributions from 501 (c) 4 organizations being transferred to a Super PAC entity, Wonderlich noted that Colbert's humor had become a useful tool, for himself and others within his organization, for explaining complex elements of the campaign finance system:

That whole episode (with the 501(c) 4 segment) has become the easiest way to explain that non-profits can be used to launder contributions and effectively anonymize them... as a person in an organization that is constantly trying to figure out ways to explain what these vulnerabilities look like, and how people are hiding their influence in their money in politics, an explanation like that is invaluable to be able to point to and say, "Here is an example. Here is how easy it is. Do you remember when Colbert did this? Well that's what's actually happening now with Priorities USA, or whatever, of these Super PACs."

John Wonderlich, *Sunlight Foundation*

Wonderlich's comments indicate that — again, similar to journalists who had discussed the Colbert Super PAC as being a useful explanatory tool — he viewed Colbert's efforts as helpful to his organization's efforts in providing an easy (and "invaluable") way to explain complex regulatory issues.

Wonderlich also discuss his perspective regarding media coverage of campaign finance issues. Noting that while he believed Colbert's project had generated some additional media attention, Wonderlich argued that "the media is naturally interested in the Super PAC issue" because journalists have a tendency to be interested in how money flows through the political system. Discussing the media's gravitation toward the role money plays within political campaigns, Wonderlich argued while Colbert's project had likely only minimally increased the overall amount of news coverage, the Colbert Super PAC effort had had a larger impact in helping to make media coverage about campaign finance issues more "relevant" to many people

who had a better understanding of Super PACs only because of Colbert's efforts. This notion is conveyed in Wonderlich's comments below:

... Super PACs get a lot of coverage because the media naturally cares about how this influence is affecting who's running for office. I think maybe Colbert has added to that, but I don't know. I think there is a lot of coverage of Super PACs, and I think that's good, but I am not sure that Colbert has added *that* much to the amount of overall coverage.

What he's done, though, is made that coverage relevant to far more people, for whom "campaign finance" is just a set of words, suddenly it's the thing that Colbert is focusing on, that they have some toe-hold to understand what a Super PAC is. So if hasn't expanded the amount of media coverage, he's expanded the reach of the media coverage that's there, certainly.

John Wonderlich, *Sunlight Foundation*

Later in the interview, Wonderlich also discussed his perspective on whether he felt that Colbert's Super PAC efforts carried any dangers or risks to his organization's efforts toward campaign finance transparency and reform. Responding to this notion, Wonderlich again offered comments similar to those from Wertheimer and Biersack, mentioning the potential for Colbert's satire to cause people to "feel hopeless" regarding the regulatory system and to simply decide that "everything is ridiculous." Expanding on this point, Wonderlich stressed that he hoped that those who encountered Colbert's satirical take on campaign finance laws realized "that there are things that we can do to address this, like new disclosure laws" — otherwise, the greater risk was that people "might just lose faith in politics altogether and just decide that it's not worth it" to try and fix the system.

Part of the interview with Wonderlich focused more broadly on the current state of campaign finance regulations, and the way in which the pro-transparency and reform communities often invoked the recent Citizens United Supreme Court ruling, and just the term "Citizens United," as a general "symbol" to convey the larger combination of recent changes to campaign finance law. Discussing how the current reality of campaign finance regulation was

based on a mix of decisions, not only related to the Citizens United case but also the Speech Now ruling and lesser regulatory decisions made by the FEC, Wonderlich reflected on how he and others within the pro-reform community used this simplified rhetoric — and discussed his views regarding the bleak state of campaign finance law and its detrimental impact on democracy:

... I just tend to describe Citizens United in the context of all the other court decisions and FEC decisions that have followed it. So speaking that way, Citizens United as the popular symbol for those different things that have been handed down... I would say it's been a disaster, for the way individual people feel involved and can be empowered to determine the outcomes of their own elections.

...

And so, elections are significantly diminished in their value and role, when not only is there unlimited money flowing into our elections, but it's unlimited and often undisclosed money, which could be foreign, which could be coming from any interest who just wants to hide what they are doing. So I think it's just a totally disastrous opinion, and it's a decision that we're only just starting to see what the kind of effects of it are.

John Wonderlich, *Sunlight Foundation*

Near the end of the interview, Wonderlich emphasized that the negative impact that recent changes to campaign finance regulation had already had on American politics was impossible to estimate. Noting especially the nefarious relationship between unlimited money and the potential for anonymous contributions, Wonderlich warned that fearful politicians were already likely making political decisions strongly influenced by “the threat of secret, unlimited money flowing” into their upcoming re-election campaigns.

Colbert's focus on “secret” political money through the Colbert Super PAC — especially with the project's “Colbert Super PAC S.H.H.” 501(c) 4 element and the heavy emphasis on “non-coordinated coordination” efforts (as discussed in the “Detailed Timeline” in Chapter 2) — seems to closely align with many of the key concerns Wonderlich highlights regarding the current campaign finance system. Similarly Colbert also frequently adopts a similar rhetorical strategy to that described by Wonderlich, frequently using the term “Citizens United” as shorthand for the

broader mix of recent regulatory changes to campaign finance law and as a symbolic generalization for a number of issues with the system. Most members of the campaign finance reform community seem to have been highly supportive of Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC effort. Discussing this notion during the interview, Wonderlich commented that the view was “almost unanimous” among the pro-reform community that Colbert’s efforts with the Super PAC were “a very strong force for good.”

Perspectives from “Free Speech” (Anti-Regulation) Community

Several phone interviews were conducted with conservative leaders within the self-labeled “Free Speech” community — which generally advocates against government regulations of campaign finance activities — in order to gauge attitudes regarding Colbert’s satire and to gain an understanding of their perspectives toward the Colbert Super PAC effort. The first of these three interviews was conducted on February 21, 2012, with Brad Smith, the founder of the Center for Competitive Politics, an organization which is widely viewed within Washington, D.C. as among the most vocal and powerful opponents of campaign finance regulation and government restrictions on political spending and fundraising activities. The Center for Competitive Politics, which publishes the web site www.campaignfreedom.org, outlines its organizational mission below:

Our mission is to promote and defend citizens’ First Amendment political rights of speech, assembly, and petition. CCP opposes so-called reformers’ efforts to limit campaign contributions, taxpayer funded political campaigns, the “fairness doctrine” in talk radio and other limits on citizens’ ability to support the candidates and causes of their choice.

CCP is the only organization dedicated solely to protecting First Amendment political rights. We seek to do this by educating the public and government leaders on the dangers of so-called campaign finance reform, the real impact of money in politics and the benefits of a more free and competitive political system.

The site goes on to explain the group’s opposition to proponents of campaign finance “reform,” an effort which is described as “an assault on the First Amendment and a transfer of power from citizens to incumbent politicians.” Members of the “pro-reform” community are characterized by the Center for Competitive Politics as being “opponents of free speech” — and campaign finance regulations are viewed as “ever more burdensome” restraints upon an individual’s right to speak out regarding his or her own government and political leaders. The organization’s web site warns that the reform community it opposes is well financed and must be fought in an effort to protect the First Amendment:

These “reformers” are well financed, and if left unchallenged, will ultimately destroy a pillar of our American republic: a free and competitive political process anchored on robust debate and free speech.

Political donations are not just a form of speech, they are crucial to allowing political speech to flourish. That’s why eliminating, or even limiting, the right to make a donation to a candidate is a violation of our First Amendment rights.

As is evident in this message above, The Center for Competitive Politics is in general agreement with the notion that political donations should be viewed as a form of “speech” — and that limits to campaign contributions constitute an infringement upon a citizen’s freedom of speech.

During the phone interview with Mr. Smith, who served as an FEC Commissioner between 2000 and 2005 (and is also currently a legal scholar and professor of law at Capital University), he discussed his perspective regarding Colbert’s efforts with the Super PAC project. Smith said he believes that Colbert, along with “intending to get some laughs and boost his ratings,” [with the Super PAC project] generally views campaign finance laws as “silly” and thinks that significantly more regulation is needed. Smith repeatedly stressed during the interview that he supported Colbert’s right to speak out, and “to say what he wants to say or do what he wants to do,” but conveyed that he viewed Colbert’s efforts as “not serving any purpose” and unhelpful to the larger debate about campaign finance laws. Early on in the interview, Smith compared Colbert’s role as a satirist to that of a rodeo clown — and went on to criticize his participation in the political process:

Let’s put it this way... rodeo clowns serve a very valuable purpose in the rodeo and it’s not only to entertain but is to assure the sort of good functioning of the rodeo at different times, but in order to do that, they periodically have to get out of the ring and let the cowboys and the bucking broncs take over — and I kind of feel like Colbert has lost that distinction. I do *not* think it is helpful in any way for the United States... to have candidates who are truly joke candidates whose goal is simply to gum up the system... It’s not serving any purpose.

Brad Smith, *Center for Competitive Politics*

Smith’s comments seem to convey a perspective that with the Super PAC effort, Colbert activities are unhelpful and generally inappropriate for the larger, *serious* political debate

regarding campaign finance regulations. The notion that Colbert's efforts are not serving any purpose, and that — beyond providing humorous political entertainment and commentary — he should “get out of the ring,” seems to closely parallel the notion of “boundary maintenance” discussed in the earlier reviewed research by Jones, Baym and Day (2012). Smith's comments express a view that the Colbert Super PAC project offers little value, and is not a valid form of advocacy — but instead is only an attempt at general mischief.

Smith also expressed concerns that Colbert's activities were unnecessarily taking up the time of staff and commissioners at the FEC, and had the potential to confuse voters. Arguing that he believed Colbert was intending to use his satire to “enlighten, inform, or shape public opinion” — Smith contended that the comedian's efforts had done little to actually enlighten or inform his audience, and likely had minimal impact on public opinion regarding campaign finance laws. Instead, Smith argued, the public already disliked many aspects of politics, and Colbert's satire hadn't helped to educate them about the process:

I don't think it has [changed public opinion] very much, because... all the evidence shows that people didn't like Super PACs before, and this is not surprising to me, you know, that people don't like PACs. They don't like money and politics. They don't like political candidates. They don't like political ads. They don't like political campaigns. Most Americans would give anything to live under a system in which there were no campaigns, except actually living under a system in which there were no campaigns. Which is sort of like Churchill's line, you know, that democracy is the worst of all forms of government except for every other one, and I think that's sort of how it is.

So in that respect people already didn't like Citizens United... I doubt that he's moved the needle much. What (Colbert) has made it hard, harder to do I think, is for people to actually understand what purpose Super PACs serve, what line of reasoning got the Supreme Court to make its decision with Citizens United... I don't think he's actually served to enlighten or inform.

Brad Smith, *Center for Competitive Politics*

Continuing on, Smith argued that Colbert's Super PAC segments had “not always gotten the law right” and had thus likely made it *harder* for people to understand the Supreme Court's judgment in the Citizens United case. When asked to provide examples of how Colbert had depicted

campaign finance laws inaccurately, Smith discussed segments which had highlighted “coordination” activities between Colbert and Stewart, when Stewart had ostensibly been in control of the Colbert Super PAC. Discussing a particular scene in which Colbert and Stewart were both communicating with (and thus, *through*) Trevor Potter, Smith pointed out that such a situation was “probably a violation of law” and that Colbert and Stewart were likely guilty of breaking coordination rules — even though the sketch was implying that such activities were technically legal. In addition Smith argued that Colbert’s satire had suggested that there is less required disclosure of Super PAC donors than is actually the case, and also that most of what Colbert had done through his Super PAC effort didn’t involve large corporate contributions, and therefore would have been legal *before* the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision allowing for Super PAC entities.

Later in the interview, Smith stressed that he felt that some viewers could find an alternative interpretation to Colbert’s satire with the Super PAC project — focusing instead on how “the system is rigged in favor of those with power and influence,” and that it was only through Colbert’s wealth and influence as a popular comedian and national media figure (and the fact that he had the backing of a major corporate legal team from Viacom, as well as Potter, “one of the most expensive campaign finance lawyers in Washington, D.C.”) that he had been successful in creating a Super PAC as a vehicle for his political speech. Smith makes his argument regarding this alternative perspective below:

... Colbert’s whole message seems to be that, ‘Boy, the system is really stacked against the little guys because we don’t regulate it enough,’ but if you really looked at it, you will be sitting there saying ‘Holy Cow! Boy, Colbert is lucky. He’s got power and influence so he can navigate all this regulation.’ And again, people would draw what they want; people can come to different conclusions. People could certainly watch this and come to the conclusion that I’ve just tried to lay out.

Brad Smith, *Center for Competitive Politics*

Smith claimed that at least some viewers would interpret Colbert's portrayal of his own experience with the Federal Election Commission's regulatory process as evidence that there should be *less* regulation of political speech, since it appeared to require someone with a national media platform and political influence such as Colbert's to utilize the system. Smith admitted, however, that few viewers were likely to land upon this alternative interpretation, compared to those who agreed with the "hints" given within Colbert's satire, that more, and not less, regulation is needed.

Smith generally criticized the news media's coverage on the topic of Super PACs as being "very poor" in overall quality, and also argued that Colbert's efforts had likely contributed to an increased notion among the public that politics isn't serious and instead is a kind of "fun spectator sport" often focused more on "horse race aspects" than important substance. Discussing how Colbert had influenced media coverage and public attention regarding the topic, Smith agreed that Colbert's activities with the Super PAC had probably caused a portion of the public to become more interested in campaign finance laws, which, he said, was at least theoretically a good thing. However, Smith also argued that Colbert's satire had done a disservice to the public's understanding of campaign finance law, largely because it frequently inaccurately simplified the issue.

I don't think Colbert has simplified the issues in a helpful way. I think he's probably simplified the issues in a way that creates less understanding of how Super PACs work, and again, why they work, and thus has probably not been good. ... simplification can be good or bad in terms of helping people to understand an issue. If you simplify something in a way that gives them the incorrect understanding, then you haven't advanced the ball and I fear that that's been the case with this series...

Brad Smith, *Center for Competitive Politics*

Later in the interview, Smith provided further explanation for why he viewed Colbert's portrayal of campaign finance laws as often overly simplified and inaccurate.

Discussing how long standing disclosure laws, written years before, had not kept pace with changes to the presidential primary calendar (meaning that, in some cases, publicly available information regarding political donors was not required by the FEC until *after* the date of the primary election), Smith argued that Colbert had intentionally implied through his satire that such problematic issues within the system were somehow directly linked to the Citizens United and Speech Now Supreme Court rulings. Smith argued that instead of being caused by any issues inherent to the judicial rulings (as, he contended, Colbert's satire had inaccurately conveyed), the timing and regulatory glitch was in fact due to an inability (or unwillingness) within Congress "to make a relatively simple statutory change" requiring the FEC's reporting calendar to be updated. Smith reasoned that such a misconstrued portrayal of details within the regulatory system could cause "an increasing cynicism of government" among Colbert's viewers, when in fact, he argued, it should instead compel individuals to question the general effectiveness of regulatory agencies within the government.

Arguing that within Colbert's satire, "People are not given any enlightenment as to what's going in the law," Smith contended that the comedian's sketches had at times conflated aspects of the Citizens United ruling with general problems within the FEC's regulatory process, and had otherwise frequently made inaccurate "insinuations" regarding the specifics of campaign finance rules. As an example of this, Smith discussed the portrayal of Colbert's "Shell Corporation" 501 (c) 4 entity and its ability to essentially "launder" anonymous political donations made to his Super PAC organization by sidestepping disclosure rules. Smith stressed that the donor arrangement Colbert portrayed during his show "probably is illegal," because it constituted "making a campaign donation in the name of another," which is prohibited by campaign finance law. Continuing on, Smith also noted that there was a long history of such non-profit organizations having been involved in politics without donor disclosures, and argued that Colbert and others who were advocating for reform were purposely, wrongly insinuating that

certain aspects of the current regulatory situation were the direct result of the Citizens United and Speech Now court rulings, as part of a larger effort to portray a crisis situation and promote a sense of urgency in the need for broader campaign finance reform. Below, Smith discusses this dynamic:

... the idea that C4s don't disclose their donors is not anything new, and the idea that they are involved in politics is not anything new. Now again, if what you were just trying to do is to say "Well boy, that's a problem. We ought to look into it," I would be pretty sympathetic. But I think that the message that comes out of the Colbert effort, and frankly out of all of the various reform groups as well [is] this is a problem that was caused by Citizens United and Speech Now, (and) never existed before and therefore those decisions need to be rolled back, and that's just not true. That's just not right...

... by making the allegation in that way, what they are trying to imply to people is always that things are much worse than it used to be, when in fact, things may not be any worse than it used to be. And why does this matter? Because if people think that a problem is worsening, they want to take action. If they realize "Oh, this is just the norm," ... people are much less likely to be upset by it and they're much more likely to realize, "Hey, you know, I don't think campaigns were any better or any worse now than they were in the past"... So, I think there's an effort to create this misleading sense of something new and something that is a crisis.

Brad Smith, *Center for Competitive Politics*

Along with his accusation that Colbert and others within the pro-reform community were falsely promoting a sense of urgency in the need for reform, Smith argued that Colbert and Potter had been intentionally "misrepresenting the law" and were conveying "a misleading interpretation of what the law requires" within certain portions of the Colbert Super PAC segments. At a different point during the interview, discussing the broader reform community's messaging, Smith argued a similar point, saying "I think that they have been very ranging, from disingenuous to intentionally dishonest, in their description of Super PACs on multiple and repeated occasions and of the campaign finance law generally."

Smith's perspective, then, of the so-called reform community (of which, he views Colbert as being a part of) was one of general skepticism and distrust. At one point during the interview, discussing how many advocates of campaign finance reform were supportive of Colbert's project,

Smith referred to such reform groups, saying “I’m not inclined to give them a lot of good faith to be honest. When it comes to their efforts, I think they will say what they think needs to be said to try to make people upset with Super PACs.” Smith’s attitude toward the campaign finance reform community could be described as somewhat derisive, and his negative tone toward Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC efforts seemed to grow as the interview progressed. Smith ended the interview by stressing that he primarily took issue with Colbert and the reform community for promoting the notion that the Citizens United and Speech Now cases had so drastically altered the landscape of campaign finance law, when in fact the majority of states in the country had “already allowed unlimited corporate expenditures in political campaigns” before the two rulings were handed down by the court. Smith explains his perspective on this notion below:

... the whole image you get (with Colbert) is “My God, look at what we’ve done with Citizens United,” when in fact, that is how 26 states were operating beforehand and it was no big deal. And in fact, many of those states were states that were doing extremely well in politics. So, that would be just an example of what I would say is the, you know, my sort of overarching theme on this and why I think in some ways it’s not helpful... I think it’s created this idea that there is something new and uniquely different and horrible about this and I think that it is just not true.

Brad Smith, *Center for Competitive Politics*

Here Smith seems to be arguing that Colbert and those within the reform community are unfairly portraying the impact of the Citizens United decision as being greater than it actually is, and that this effort is part of a larger intentional strategy to convince the public that there is a new and worsening crisis situation when it comes to money and politics, while in fact there really isn’t.

The general perspective Smith is promoting is that things aren’t actually that different (post Citizens United and Speech Now), and because people weren’t overly concerned about unlimited donations before the ruling, they really shouldn’t be that upset now. At one point, even in noting that he personally (as well as his organization) had been involved in helping to advance the two legal cases, Smith then seems to downplay their importance and significance:

Citizens United and Speech Now are very important cases, don't get me wrong. They are very important, you know, we put a lot of time and effort into litigating the one and organizing the amicus based on the other. So, I've been heavily involved in that. You know, I don't want to downplay their importance.

On the other hand, what I've sometimes pointed out to people is, at the time Citizens United was decided, 26 states, the majority of the states, encompassing the majority of the US population, already allowed unlimited corporate expenditures in political campaigns, which could be undisclosed in the same way the reformers now talk about them being undisclosed.

You could give it to a group and you wouldn't necessarily know exactly what's behind what group or whatever. And you know, nobody was going around... I mean, the reform people had their arguments and they wanted more regulations and so on, but nobody was going around talking about that as the major problem, that that's the big issue.

Brad Smith, *Center for Competitive Politics*

This argument made by Smith is particularly interesting in that it doesn't seem to address the substance of the concerns held by the reform community — regarding the influence of unlimited individual and corporate campaign contributions, or even the potential for groups to make major political expenditures largely anonymously — but instead it focuses on the idea that the reform community and the general public is *overreacting* to the legal changes brought on by Citizens United and Speech Now, and that concerns about the influence of money within political campaigns are largely overblown. Along with taking issue that Colbert had inaccurately simplified details of campaign finance law within his satire, Smith stressed in the interview that he felt Colbert hadn't properly conveyed to his audience the history and details of campaign finance law — and was doing the public a disservice by implying there was more of a new “crisis” situation facing politics than in fact was the case.

On March 2, 2012, a phone interview was conducted with James Bopp, a prominent and nationally recognized conservative attorney and advocate against campaign finance regulations. Bopp has spent several decades working against regulations on campaign spending (Salant, 2011) and perhaps most notably served as a key legal advisor to Citizens United, helping to bring the organization's case (against the FEC) before the Supreme Court in 2010. Describing Bopp and

his noteworthy role in shaping campaign finance law, *National Public Radio* journalist Peter Overby wrote the following about the attorney in his June 22, 2011 story:

Bopp brought the *Citizens United v. FEC* case and breached the wall between corporate money and partisan politics; he unraveled major provisions of the McCain-Feingold law; he has helped to make state judicial elections more expensive; he's fighting to undo mandatory disclosure of donors; and now, he says he's found a way for federal candidates to ask corporations for cash.

In the article, Bopp is depicted as a Washington, D.C., outsider and legal innovator who has repeatedly pushed the boundaries of what is allowed in campaign finance law.

During the phone interview with Bopp, he began the conversation about Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC project by stressing that he does not watch *The Colbert Report* program, and thus was only generally aware of Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC through the news coverage that he had seen about it. Emphasizing that he wasn't "terribly informed" regarding the details of the Colbert Super PAC, Bopp did say that he had mixed opinions regarding the project: "...I haven't studied it, but based on what I've seen I think it's been helpful in some respects and not helpful in others." Throughout the conversation, Bopp echoed several of the same arguments which had been made by fellow conservative lawyer, Brad Smith. In close alignment with one of the comments made by Smith, Bopp similarly contended that television viewers of the Colbert Super PAC project could interpret Colbert's satire as demonstrating that current campaign finance laws were too complicated and restrictive for individuals to successfully navigate without the assistance of expensive lawyers. Bopp makes this parallel argument to Smith's suggestion below:

...the casual observer would see that it is impossible to participate in federal campaigns without hiring a high-priced Washington lawyer, and even in that case, there is at least... he (Colbert) can't figure out what is legal and what is not without asking permission from the government. And that's helpful (to the cause) because it is true that the regulations and restrictions and limits are so onerous and complex and massive that you can't participate in politics without a lawyer and even they can't figure out what can be done without asking the government for permission.

James Bopp, *conservative lawyer*

It could be argued that what is missing from Bopp’s discussion of Colbert’s appearances in front of the FEC is a recognition, or an admission, of Colbert’s highly unique situation, in that his “advisory request” regarding the formation of Colbert Super PAC was related to his status as a television host and Viacom employee — and his application for *The Colbert Report* to receive special “media exemption” status related to existing campaign finance laws. It seems clear that Colbert’s request and appearance in front of the FEC is not something a “typical” individual would generally encounter in forming a Super PAC.

When asked whether he viewed any elements of Colbert’s portrayal of the Citizens United court ruling (and subsequent campaign finance laws) as having been inaccurate, Bopp discussed what he described as a “major distortion” within Colbert’s satire in the depiction of money from a 501 (c) 4 organization being given anonymously to a Super PAC entity.

“Representing that a (501(c)4) group could give all their money to a Super PAC without disclosure is absolutely false,” stressed Bopp. Below, Bopp discusses in greater detail his perspective on what he refers to as this “distortion”:

...the area where I see a significant distortion is when they have described how and when the groups can contribute to Super PACs. They have portrayed it as a group could give, a donor could give money to a C4 or corporation and then they could essentially give all that money to a Super PAC without any disclosure, and of course, that’s not true. The group would be, if they spent that money on politics, would be deemed to be a political action committee and would have to report all of their contributors and all of their expenditures. They can only give, I would think, when you combine by both the IRS requirement and the federal campaign requirement, they couldn’t give more than 30% of their money to a Super PAC, not all of it. So that has been a major distortion.

James Bopp, *conservative lawyer*

With this comment, Bopp is focusing on a relatively specific element of campaign finance law — an allowable percentage of an organization’s budget which can be legally contributed to a Super PAC entity — as an area in which Colbert’s satire had not been accurate.

Somewhat related to the issue Brad Smith had also highlighted regarding Colbert's portrayal of 501 (c) 4 money being transferred to his Super PAC (which, he argued, is technically illegal), Bopp's focus here is on Colbert's depiction of such an organization giving "all" of its money to a political action committee, when in fact it is technically only legal for contributions of up to 30% of the group's total budget. It perhaps could be argued that the activities of the Colbert Super PAC (and the supposed contributions from the related "Colbert Super PAC S.H.H." 501(c) organization), as they were depicted in segments of *The Colbert Report*, did not provide enough detail to determine whether certain budgetary percentages or thresholds were ostensibly breached, and would thus technically be illegal — but Bopp made clear that at least from his perspective, Colbert and his team had been intentional in inaccurately portraying a distortion of what is actually allowed by campaign finance law. An alternative perspective on this issue, however, could also argue that Bopp's claim that Colbert had portrayed a "distortion" is based primarily on a contextual technicality within the law.

Discussing his thoughts on other "distortions" of campaign finance law which had been portrayed through the Colbert Super PAC project, Bopp stressed how Colbert (along with most liberals, as well as the broader news media) had typically only emphasized the fact that the Citizen United ruling eliminated political contribution limits on *corporations*, when in fact the Supreme Court's ruling on the case had also similarly lifted donation restrictions on labor unions. Bopp argued that the failure to highlight the loosened restrictions of the activities of labor unions, along with corporate entities, was largely politically motivated — and an intentional omission by Colbert. Below, Bopp discusses this dynamic in depth:

... another distortion is emphasizing corporations rather than also explaining that this has now freed up labor unions to do the same thing (with political donations). And of course, labor unions, every one of their contributions, the identity of donors is shielded — and this is an equal effect of Citizens United that is never mentioned. And I assume that it is never mentioned because... liberals are talking about it and liberals like labor unions... and they are partisan,

most of them are partisan Democrats. So, they are going to talk about corporations and not unions...

... maybe that's the most pervasive distortion, not only in how Colbert treats it, as I see reflected in the media, but also how the mainstream media, liberals generally, Democrats generally, specifically talk about Citizens United — is even though it had an equal effect in legalizing participation by corporations and labor unions in ways that they were prohibited before, they never talk about the effect on unions. And even in terms of disclosure, because all you see is 'Local 186 Steelworkers Union,' you don't see the fat cats that gave to that union in order to shield their identity for the spending that is then done. You know, you never see that and so that's the most pervasive distortion of all, which is talking about corporations rather than also talking about unions as well.

James Bopp, *conservative lawyer*

Bopp's comments regarding Colbert's Super PAC efforts, as well as the broader news media's coverage of Super PACs in general, convey his perspective that the topic is highly polarized along party lines, and that Colbert and liberals are selective in how they discuss and portray elements of campaign finance law in a strategic attempt to help promote a liberal agenda. Discussing this notion, as he had done earlier in the interview, Bopp emphasized that he views Colbert as primarily an entertainer (who wants to make jokes and be funny) — but also that he thinks Colbert's efforts are politically motivated:

I mean look, this guy (Colbert) is an entertainer. He wants to make jokes. His primary purpose is to get people to watch, but he may have, it'd be fair to infer I guess, that he has a political agenda as well, and anybody that thinks they are going to get an accurate depiction from somebody like him is just foolish.

James Bopp, *conservative lawyer*

Continuing with this argument, Bopp stressed that he thought it wasn't necessarily Colbert's responsibility, as a comedian, to always be "fair and balanced and accurate" — and that some of what he perceived as Colbert's "distortions" related to his portrayal of campaign finance law were likely simply motivated by a larger drive to be funny. Discussing Colbert's distortions, Bopp argued "... in order to make good jokes you've got to distort the truth because if you don't distort the truth it is not so funny."

Although, with these comments, Bopp seemed to imply that he does not take Colbert's activities very seriously, later in the interview Bopp argued that he felt Colbert intentionally used his fake conservative persona to gain rhetorical "latitude" and distort the truth within his satire. Claiming that Colbert uses his character in the same way that a ventriloquist uses his dummy to say certain things and then be able to disavow the fact that it was said, Bopp said he believed Colbert was likely attempting to influence public policy through his satire, but that "he doesn't want to be bound by the requirements of truth and accuracy and all that, so he puts on this façade." Contrasting him with traditional commentators who appear on news programs and are then held to account for what they say, Bopp argued that Colbert intentionally uses his persona "to be able to distance himself from the truth of what he's saying." Continuing on with this notion, Bopp argued:

... Colbert has shielded himself from criticism and therefore has more latitude in being inaccurate and avoids criticism. He can avoid criticism by saying, "Well that's not me. I was just pretending to be a commentator on TV."

James Bopp, *conservative lawyer*

The above argument made by Bopp, regarding Colbert's unfair tendency to *shield* himself through the use of his faux conservative character, is strikingly similar to comments made in the earlier discussed interview with Dahlia Lithwick. While Lithwick, who was generally supportive of Colbert's Super PAC effort, described Colbert as having a unique advantage (and layer of protection) in debates by employing his persona at will (but was not overly critical of this tactic) — Bopp clearly views Colbert's tendency to screen himself through his conservative character in a much more negative light, and as a tool for allowing factual inaccuracies and distortions.

Near the end of the interview, Bopp discussed the broader topic of campaign finance reform and his perspective that much of the motivation driving those within the "pro-reform" community (as well as much of the supportive news media) was fueled by basic self-interest.

Bopp argued that many of the political leaders who support the limiting of campaign contributions are incumbent politicians who are primarily focused on ensuring their own re-election. Newspapers and other media outlets, he argued, are also generally in favor of campaign finance reform efforts because “they would rather set the agenda and be the only ones speaking” — instead of having to compete with well-funded citizens groups which would then have the ability to set their own agenda. Referring to journalists within the news media, which Bopp noted are often “employed by multibillion dollar corporate international conglomerates,” Bopp argued that members of the media were driven by self-interest because “they know that they are in competition if other people get to speak, so they prefer everybody else to be shut up and they then be free to speak themselves.”

Bopp continued with this general argument, next focusing on what he viewed to be the intrinsic self-interest of what he referred to as the “campaign finance reform industry” — a community which, he argued, is funded by wealthy benefactors and is as much concerned with self-perpetuation and political relevance as it is concerned about changing policy. Arguing this perspective below, Bopp said:

...So yeah, there is a lot of self interest in this, a lot of self-interest. Also the campaign finance reform industry is being funded by some \$150,000,000 of contributions from the largest, the wealthiest individuals and foundations in our country. And if they (reformers) exist because of those, they were created by and exist because of those contributors, and so if they decided to stop talking about campaign financing or stop proposing laws or whatever, they would be defunded.

So, you know, they want to continue getting the money ... they will always make allegations and always come up with new laws, otherwise they would be defunded. They wouldn't have existed in the first place and wouldn't continually exist in the second place — so they have a huge self interest in condemning every new Supreme Court case, screaming about illegalities and corruption and all this and saying, “We need more laws.” So, there is a lot of self-interest. It is all over the place.

James Bopp, *conservative lawyer*

Bopp ended this portion of the interview discussing how he felt it was ironic that the campaign finance reform community frequently made many of their policy arguments regarding the need for reform based on the rationale that political actors (politicians, financial contributors, etc.) acted primarily driven by their own self-interest, but that members of the reform community didn't ever seem to acknowledge that they themselves were also prone to the same types of influence. Discussing his opponents within the so-called reform community, Bopp articulates this idea below:

And the irony is all they talk about is people's self-interest and this is why they do things. And then they pretend that they don't have any, as if they are aliens, not human beings. They are from a different planet where all the self-interest is washed away. They condemn anything that Congress does as being motivated by self-interest and then pretend that when they pass campaign finance laws that they are not acting in their own self-interest. It's ridiculous.

James Bopp, *conservative lawyer*

Bopp's perspective toward those he viewed as opponents within the campaign finance legal community was particularly interesting. During the interview, similar to Smith, he conveyed an occasionally derisive tone toward the so-called reform community — and was generally dismissive of their motivation and ideology. At one point, when asked his opinion regarding the Disclose Act, which Colbert had promoted with Nancy Pelosi on *The Colbert Report*, Bopp quickly dismissed the legislation as “just a big effort to stifle... people's political activity...”

Later in the interview, discussing his negative view toward the legislation, Bopp argued that “people can only do so much, and these have been the rules for decades, written by all these reformers that we've been talking about here... written by the reformers who are now bitching about their own disclosure rules.” Bopp's tone, at times, toward members of the reform community bordered on disdain — and he seemed to squarely group Colbert as a member of that community. Regarding his perspective on Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC, although he had stressed at the beginning of the interview that he know relatively little about the effort, Bopp was

both dismissive of Colbert (as just a comedian trying to be funny) and simultaneously critical of how Colbert had inaccurately portrayed specific details of campaign finance regulations, accusing the project of promoting distortions and an unbalanced reflection of the law.

On March 5, 2011, a phone interview was conducted with a third member of the self-labeled “free speech” community, Sean Parnell. Parnell had previously served as the president of the Center for Competitive Politics (CCP), and had appeared for an interview on *The Colbert Report* (during the July 18, 2011 episode) as a representative for the organization and the broader anti-reform, free-speech community. Parnell’s interview had been shown on Colbert’s program opposite of an interview with Sheila Krumholz, the executive director of the Center for Responsive Politics (a pro-reform group). Although Colbert’s individual interviews with Parnell and Krumholz were both humorous and silly examples of the show’s unique style of humor (and Colbert’s ability to subtly mock interviewees and twist their own words), Colbert’s treatment of Parnell in the edited interview segment arguably depicted the anti-reform advocate in an embarrassing light. Perhaps the most memorable and painful moment of the interview, as discussed in the “Colbert Super PAC Events Timeline,” comes when Colbert puts Parnell on the spot, repeatedly asking him to recite the First Amendment to the Constitution (the first several word of which are prominently featured on the CCP web site and in the organization’s materials). Parnell is shown struggling in the interview, awkwardly unable to remember the wording of the amendment.

Discussing his experience with Colbert in a blog post on the Center for Competitive Politics web site the day after the interview appeared on the show, Parnell described the encounter as “one of the more unusual experiences I’ve ever had,” and provided a number of bullet points addressing the various elements of the televised interview. Regarding his failure to answer Colbert’s question regarding the wording of the First Amendment, Parnell wrote the following on his organization’s web site:

On that pesky First Amendment – that came about half an hour into the interview, after a lot of very aggressive and – odd, let’s say – questioning by Mr. Colbert. What can I say – I got flustered for about 30 seconds, and my mind went blank.

Parnell’s tone within the post is good-natured, as opposed to bitter, regarding the interview experience with Colbert. Further down within the same blog posting, Parnell also discussed how Colbert had focused on the issue of corporate money in politics, while largely ignoring the similar influence of “union and individual money.”

Similar to the argument made by James Bopp discussed earlier, below Parnell outlines his perspective regarding the reform community’s selective focus on the ills of only *corporate* money — and his view that Colbert had perpetuated this biased perspective in conducting the interview:

As most ‘reformers’ have done in the wake of *Citizens United*, Mr. Colbert focused almost exclusively on corporate money in politics, as though there is something unique and distinguishable from union or individual money. At one point I’m asked whether there’s anything particularly corrupting about corporate money, and the obvious answer is no – there’s no reason to believe that money from corporations is any more or less corrupting than money from unions or individuals. They both spend the same, after all. Also worth noting is that there is very little academic evidence that contributions from any source, whether corporate, union, or individual, have much influence in how politicians behave in office.

With this post, Parnell is articulating two of the key arguments made by the “free speech” community: that political contributions, regardless of their source, are all equivalent in potential corrupting power over politicians — and that money, generally speaking, has minimal influence over the behavior of political actors regardless. Near the end of the blog post, Parnell discusses his view of Colbert’s role as a “reformer” and how the comedian’s perspective (regarding the inherent connection between corporate money and political corruption) is aligned with the reform community:

...if someone believes, as most ‘reformers’ do (and Mr. Colbert is a ‘reformer,’ whatever the persona he adopts for his show) that money in politics is by

definition corrupting, and corporate money is especially so, it's not difficult to imagine why he simply assumed the existence of significant corruption related to corporate political money.

Through the excerpt above, and other portions of the blog posting, Parnell comments about the potential for political corruption and generally argues that little connection exists between campaign money and corruption and scandal.

During the March 5th phone interview, Parnell discussed his experience in having been interviewed by Colbert. Asked about his understanding of Colbert's personal motivation for creating the Super PAC project, Parnell said that Colbert had been clear to him during the interview that his intent was to focus attention on the Citizens United court case and to influence public opinion against the ruling. Discussing Colbert's motivation, Parnell referenced several moments during his interview in which Colbert left character and made comments indicating his sincere perspective:

Well, he (Colbert) actually made it clear to me, literally told me when he was interviewing me that he wanted to bring this to people's attention and get them to believe, as he does, that Citizens United decision is a bad decision.

... I was there for an hour and a half on tape with him and generally, I would say 95% of the time he was in character and then about 5% of the time, I think, he kind of slipped out for a second to say something to me or whatever. And at one point he just said, "I am trying to make a point here with all of this. You understand that, right?" And then I said, "Yeah, I understand you are trying to make a point with all of this." And I mean it's very obvious that his point is that Citizens United was a bad decision and bad for democracy...

... it was very clear that his point, on the Super PAC shtick that he's got going on, is he thinks it was a bad idea and he's trying, through his considerable comedic talents, to bring this issue to people's attention and get them to agree with him...

Sean Parnell, *former president Center for Competitive Politics*

Parnell said that he would certainly categorize Colbert's efforts with the Super PAC project as a form of political advocacy, stressing that he strongly believes "Colbert has a political agenda" — and that Colbert "has been able to use his show to advance that political agenda by mocking, by engaging in satire that makes his basic points."

Continuing on in the interview, Parnell argued that he believed Colbert was "hands down, without a doubt," trying to swing public opinion on campaign finance laws — and was hoping to promote change regarding the Citizens United court case and additional campaign finance reforms. Parnell contended that among members of the free-speech community, there was "no ambiguity or uncertainty" regarding what Colbert was hoping to communicate with the Super PAC project, and that they viewed Colbert's efforts as being both strategic and wholly one-sided. Elaborating on this point below, Parnell argued:

They (viewers) understand that he is mocking and ridiculing people who disagree with him on this issue. They understand that he is making fun of people like me, people like Brad Smith, people like Jim Bopp who believe that Citizens United was a good idea. I mean, I don't think there is any ambiguity on that point. And again, that is not a complaint. That's just sort of an observation. He has his view. He has his considerable talent and he is using them to promote his agenda.

Sean Parnell, former president Center for Competitive Politics

Parnell went on to contend that Colbert, in making fun of those within the free-speech community, is trying to push a specific point of view — and that through his satire, Colbert is indeed engaging in a form of political advocacy. Parnell described Colbert's television program as an alternative medium for political speech, and also argued that the comedian's humor was largely partisan and rarely mocked those in the liberal community.

Asked whether he felt Colbert's portrayal of campaign finance laws and the Citizens United ruling on *The Colbert Report* had been generally fair, Parnell argued that while "in sort of some very broad strokes it's been accurate," there had been many cases in which Colbert had been inaccurate. Closely mirroring similar comments made during interviews with Brad Smith

and James Bopp, Parnell argued that the Citizen United ruling's impact on loosening the fundraising and political spending restrictions for unions (as well as corporations) had been "almost entirely absent from the discussion" — and said he believed that this exclusion was due to the fact that Colbert was more sympathetic to the left and viewed unions as being allies to Democrats.

Beyond highlighting Colbert's omission related to union spending, Parnell also argued that Colbert's Super PAC segments frequently ignored an "important contextual element" in regards to the fact that individual citizens had had the ability to spend unlimited personal funds promoting candidates well before the 2010 Citizens United ruling. Referring to the 1976 Supreme Court decision *Buckley v. Valeo*, which ruled that individual citizens could "spend as much money as they wanted to" on political speech, Parnell noted that he had never seen Colbert provide his audience with this historical context in regards to campaign finance law. Instead, Parnell argued, Colbert had only used "very broad strokes" to describe the system — which did little to contribute to public knowledge or add to the debate.

Parnell also discussed what he viewed as a significant inaccuracy in how Colbert had portrayed his interactions with the FEC. Citing how Colbert had framed the situation to his audience as needing "to go to the FEC to get permission to open a Super PAC," Parnell claimed that Colbert's portrayal of the legal situation was "100% inaccurate" and that there was never a legal question as to whether Colbert was allowed to start a Super PAC. Instead, Parnell pointed out, Colbert's appearance in front of the FEC was related to "some very specific, technical requests related to the fact that he wanted to use Viacom property" in some of his PAC activities. Arguing that Colbert's true concern in front of the FEC was only linked to questions regarding how to file disclosure reports, Parnell claimed that Colbert's portrayal of his FEC appearances (as being a matter of gaining permission) was misleading to the audience. Parnell described

Colbert's depiction of his interactions with the FEC as "a dramatic oversimplification, and frankly a misrepresentation of what the law was, and what he could and couldn't do."

During the interview with Parnell, he also discussed his belief that — again, echoing comments made by Brad Smith and James Bopp — Colbert's satire had likely demonstrated to many people just how unnecessarily complicated and "convoluted" the campaign finance system has become. Outlining below this perspective on Colbert's Super PAC activities (and his FEC appearances), Parnell argued:

One of the things that I think Stephen Colbert has actually winded up doing... I think he's actually made the point to a lot of people just how convoluted and crazy our campaign finance laws are... He's made it clear to a number of people that if you want to speak about politics, you really ought to have a good lawyer because otherwise you can wind up in a lot of trouble. And from somebody like myself, who puts the high value on the First Amendment, I don't think you should have to have a campaign finance attorney in order to speak. And that may actually be one of the lessons that Colbert has unintentionally taught people.

Sean Parnell, *former president Center for Competitive Politics*

The extreme similarity in Parnell's statement here to the same arguments, outlined earlier, by fellow free-speech advocates Smith and Bopp is striking. Although it wasn't discussed during any of the interviews, and therefore isn't confirmed by this research, it certainly appeared as though members of the anti-reform community had likely communicated with each other regarding promoting this specific message in response to questions about Colbert Super PAC activities.

Parnell said he didn't believe Colbert and the Super PAC effort had done much to increase the amount of media coverage focused on campaign finance laws and the Citizens United case, beyond perhaps providing some journalists with "a news hook to give them an excuse to write about it." Discussing news coverage of the complex world of campaign finance

law, Parnell also argued that Colbert hadn't likely influenced the tone of media coverage on the topic:

Campaign finance law is a very intricate and arcane subject and the media who regularly cover it, they understand that. I mean, I have talked to a number of these people and they are like, "Yeah, yeah, Stephen Colbert, he is funny and all, but tell me really, what's the story with this?" I mean, I don't think they look at him as a source of information. They may on occasion look at him, again, as a news hook to write about it — or something that can sort of be injected into an article to lighten things up and make it a little humorous, but no, I don't think he has really had that much influence in terms of how the media covers it or what they are writing...

Sean Parnell, *former president Center for Competitive Politics*

During the phone interview, Parnell did spend some time discussing his experience being interviewed by Colbert for *The Colbert Report* program. Parnell explained that he had been required to sign an agreement with the program's producers beforehand, allowing them to use clips of his interview in whatever way they wanted — and that he had agreed to the relative risk of being interviewed by Colbert because it provided "an interesting opportunity to reach an audience that might otherwise not be reached." Discussing the experience in greater detail below, Parnell describes how uniquely difficult it was to conduct the interview with Colbert while the comedian was in character:

Well, it was an hour and a half. It was extremely grueling and his questioning was very aggressive, which is fine. I mean, generally I thought that for about 98% of the interview, the hour and a half, I did fine. Of course there was that one moment, about only half an hour into the interview, was where he asked me to recite the First Amendment, which of course I do know. But, he obviously got me a little flustered there.

But aside from that, I think it went okay. I mean, his intent very clearly was to say, "Hey look, here is this weird person who thinks corporations should be able to buy elections," and that is his shtick, at least with me that is what it was.

Would I do it again? I think the answer is 'no' just because I think that on any subject, doing an interview with somebody... and I have to be very careful with the way I've said it... I understand that he is in character. I mean, that's what makes this show work and very funny and that's fine. But, because he is in

character he can literally say anything regardless of whether he believes it to be accurate or relevant or noteworthy. I mean, it doesn't matter, he is able to say, oddly, anything.

... especially when it's a recorded interview, and so he can cut that out if doesn't get the response that he is looking for, but because of that it was a very difficult interview. I mean, being interviewed by the media is something I had a lot of experience with and I've been interviewed by hostile reporters in the past and that is fine. I never had any problems with that, but when somebody is in Colbert's position — and he might be the only one that's able to do this — so when they are in that position, and they can literally say anything, then it's extremely difficult to even keep track of the conversation and the question that was asked. Partly because you are laughing so hard at half of the stuff that he says, but given that, I would not do it again just because ultimately I don't think it was useful for me or for the general cause of explaining the (Citizens United) decision to people. So, yeah I guess those are my thoughts.

Sean Parnell, *former president Center for Competitive Politics*

Beyond being extremely candid, Parnell's comments about his experience having been interviewed by Colbert are interesting because they echo a sentiment offered by several other research interviewees who discussed Colbert's unique ability to "say anything" (regardless of his actual beliefs), without being held accountable for the accuracy or message of his own comments. Similar to the notion put forth during the previously discussed interview with Dahlia Lithwick (who has also been a guest on Colbert's show), in describing his experience, Parnell seems to be discussing an "unfair advantage" that Colbert has when he interacts with others while in character. Parnell stressed during the conversation that he "can't complain" about how he was treated by *The Colbert Report* (or how the interview was edited for broadcast), and that he felt portions of his intended message about the benefits of Citizens United were successfully conveyed during the segment that ran on the show. Interestingly, Parnell said that he viewed Colbert as an *opponent* while he was being interviewed for the program — and made this telling comment about their interaction together: "I knew this going in, but it was very evident that I was the person there specifically to be skewered."

Perspectives of the F.E.C. and Campaign Election Law Experts

As part of this research effort, three interviews were conducted with campaign finance law experts. Two of those interviewed, both having served as commissioners on the Federal Election Commission, have direct knowledge and understanding of the organization's operations. Current FEC commissioner, Cynthia Bauerly, joined the organization in 2008 and served as its chair in 2011, and Trevor Potter served as a commissioner from 1991 to 1995, including a year as chair in 1994 (<http://www.fec.gov/members/formermembers.shtml>). (As discuss in the Chapter 2 detailed timeline, Potter has also served as Colbert's personal legal counsel in the formation and administration of the Colbert Super PAC, and has appeared as a guest on the program multiple times to discuss the legal issues surrounding the formation of the PAC.) Along with Bauerly and Potter, a third interview was conducted with Dr. Richard Hasen, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine, and expert in the area of campaign finance law. Hasen is the lead author of Election Law Blog, a prominent online venue and resource for campaign finance policy analysis and discussion (<http://electionlawblog.org/>).

The Colbert Super PAC phenomenon has received significant attention within the broader campaign election law and academic law communities. Details of Colbert's project have been written about in "Westlaw Insider," a legal blog published by Thomson Reuters which provides subscribers with an aggregation of top legal news (Byellin, 2011). Multiple university faculty members have already published brief law journal articles outlining how they have successfully used the Colbert Super PAC project as an in-class teaching aid, for instructing courses in election law and political science (Douglas, J., 2012; Garrett, R., 2012). Additionally, Colbert and the Super PAC project were prominently featured during a recent presentation ("Stephen Colbert is Right to Lampoon Our Campaign Finance System (and So Can You!)") given during a special symposium about the Supreme Court's ruling in the Citizens United case, organized in March of 2012 by the University of St. Thomas Law Journal (Shapiro, 2012).

The interview with Commissioner Bauerly was conducted in person, at the offices of the FEC in Washington, D.C., on October 19, 2011. Bauerly is affiliated with the Democratic Party, and was nominated to the FEC by Democratic Senator Harry Reid before being appointed to the commission. (She explained during the interview that there are currently three Democrats, two Republicans and one independent serving on the commission — and that the law states that no more than three individuals from the same party can serve on the commission.) Bauerly was asked near the beginning of the interview what she viewed as being Colbert’s intent or motivation with the Colbert Super PAC project. Responding that she had been “asked that question frequently all summer long” (following Colbert’s FEC appearances), Bauerly said that she had “no idea” regarding Colbert’s motivation or intent for the project — and that the question would need to be posed directly to Colbert to know for sure. Bauerly referenced some of Colbert’s past satirical activities and commented that she thought that “the government can be good fodder” for comedians — but also speculated that Colbert had initially begun the Super PAC effort with more minor intentions focused on humor, but that it had since become something that he was “more invested in” and that, she guessed, Colbert “sees this as an opportunity to do something more like education, in addition to just comedy.” Bauerly’s comment that Colbert might be hoping to *educate* his audience, along with entertaining them, closely mirrors many of the suggestions put forth by other interviewees.

Stressing that she really couldn’t know Colbert’s motivation for the project, Bauerly also emphasized that the comedian’s reasons behind forming a Super PAC were irrelevant to how she and her FEC colleagues viewed his advisory request — and that, regardless of the fact that Colbert was a comedian, the FEC treated him just as they would any other citizen with a PAC organization:

(Regarding Colbert’s motivation) ...yeah, who knows? And frankly, from my perspective, from the FEC’s perspective, it doesn’t matter. He has a PAC that is registered with us. They are treated (just) like...we don’t have an exception for

satire... There's no different rules, depending on whether you're straight or you're snark. It doesn't matter to us.... He has registered a committee with us. They have to file their reports just like anyone else. He's not going to get any different treatment because he has a show in addition to having a PAC. He has a PAC, that's all we really care about.

Cynthia Bauerly, *Chair of the FEC*

Bauerly's emphasis here is that the FEC did not treat Colbert and his advisory request any differently than any other citizen or group would have been treated. Noting that Colbert had "asked [the FEC] a serious question and we gave him a serious answer," Bauerly discussed in detail the legal and regulatory specifics of Colbert's particular request — explaining (as is also outlined in the detailed timeline document) that the issue revolved around Colbert's use of Viacom corporate resources to support the PAC and whether they would be required to be reported as political contributions.

Discussing the FEC perspective on Colbert's usage of Viacom resources for Super PAC activities, Bauerly explained that the legal distinction hinged on whether the political advertising content which was being produced (with Viacom staff and equipment) was being created specifically for "just the PAC" or if it was being produced primarily for use on the show, and then *also* being used as paid political advertising content being broadcast on other programs and networks. Outlining the FEC's restrictions for qualification for the media entity exemption, Bauerly explained the commission's ruling regarding Colbert's unique legal question:

...the opinion we reached was that if you're creating it (advertising content) for the show, you're creating it for the show and that's a media exemption. If you're creating it for an ad to run in Iowa and not for use on the show, then that's different. That would be a contribution to the PAC from the corporate entity...

Cynthia Bauerly, *Chair of the FEC*

Bauerly was hesitant to comment on the veracity of Colbert's comparisons (during segments of his show) regarding parallels between his own situation, with Viacom, and the activities of Karl Rove, who, Colbert had highlighted during past segments of *The Colbert Report*, frequently appeared as a paid commentator on Fox News programs while also discussing the activities of his

American Crossroads Super PAC organization. (Bauerly explained that, since the regulatory distinctions were “so fact-sensitive,” and each situation was unique, she didn’t want to make generalizations regarding a specific media outlet.)

Bauerly did talk about how there were some unique and humorous elements to Colbert’s interactions with the FEC. She explained that Colbert’s decision to physically deliver his advisory request documents to the Commission was something that is rarely done, and instead “most people just fax them in.” (It can be speculated that this decision was primarily driven by the program producers’ desire for footage of Colbert’s interactions with the FEC.) Bauerly also noted that the large number of people who came to watch Colbert’s appearances in front of the Commission constituted a highly unique situation, and created some logistical challenges for the organization: “The day he dropped off his request, there were about 300 people outside waiting for him... And I would have to say that’s the first time that’s ever happened with an advisory opinion.”

She discussed how staff at the FEC worked with Colbert’s producers in order to coordinate the logistics of accommodating the large crowd of Colbert’s fans who attended the hearings, and even set up an “overflow room” elsewhere in the building: “it’s a public meeting, so we wanted everyone to be able to, as many people to be in there as possible.” Discussing some of the “funny logistical issues” Colbert’s visits had created, Bauerly also mentioned having to deal with a fan of Colbert’s who had come to the FEC hearing in costume: “...somebody showed up dressed as a bear... but we can’t have the bear costume in the hearing room, because it’s going to block someone else’s view.”

Along with stressing the fact that Colbert’s FEC appearances were largely procedural as far as members of the FEC approached them (focusing on the regulatory issues at hand in his advisory request), Bauerly also commented that although there were some mixed reactions to Colbert’s visits to the Commission — and internal acknowledgement that the organization was at risk of becoming the target of Colbert’s humor — for the most part, she felt as though Colbert’s

interactions with the FEC had gone smoothly and had also helped to promote the important work done within the agency:

...there are 350 hardworking civil servants who come to work (at the FEC) every day and do this job and know what they do is important, but recognize that a lot of people in the country don't even know they exist. So I think, for some, it was nice to be... to have the agency front and center. I think our staff handled the whole media frenzy, the hundreds of people who wanted to come really, really well. We didn't have incidents about guards. Everyone was great. I think that, on the day that the particular event went well... But we also recognized that, odds are, if [Colbert's] coming to your federal agency, there's a chance he's going to make fun of you and he did. He made a little fun of us, mostly for being boring...

Cynthia Bauerly, *Chair of the FEC*

Bauerly discussed how she had watched *The Colbert Report* for a long time and had seen Colbert's past satire of governmental institutions on the show, and noted that she thought that the FEC had been portrayed relatively kindly in the sketches related to his visits to the organization. Bauerly said, "Frankly, from all the possibilities, I thought we came up great..." — and noted that she had seen other federal agencies and administrators skewered by Colbert's humor "more viciously than they did for us."

Continuing on, Bauerly stressed that while there was likely some minor trepidation within the organization regarding the handling of Colbert's request, overall the process went smoothly because the FEC was only able to react to the issue from a serious regulatory perspective — and that, for the most part, Colbert's request and appearance before the agency was simply business as usual:

... certainly, federal agencies have been a core group of the entities that [Colbert] makes fun of, so we certainly had some trepidation and hoped that it went well. I think frankly, it did, in some ways because we don't have the capacity to deal with this in any other way other than as a serious group of questions. He asked for an advisory opinion, we provided him with an advisory opinion. That meeting, like I said, although it had more people in the room and more cameras in the room than we usually have, was a regular business meeting of the agency, so I think we handled it in the only way we could...

Cynthia Bauerly, *Chair of the FEC*

Stressing the complexity of the various regulations, Bauerly commented that her primary concern with having Colbert's satire focused on the activities of the FEC rested on a worry that his humor would only highlight quirks and issues within the system (ignoring the fact that the agency does for the most part successfully do its job, especially in administering important disclosure efforts), and thus could serve to increase cynicism and damage public confidence in the campaign finance regulatory system. Below, Bauerly discusses this concern about Colbert's satire:

One concern I do have is that, in part because these are complex laws, the tendency to make fun of or mock the elements that seem sort of outrageous, I worry in the long run will undermine the public's confidence in the system. ... So I just worry that some of the really solid parts of our law ... they never get covered because they are not funny...

Cynthia Bauerly, *Chair of the FEC*

Beyond mentioning these concerns, however, Bauerly agreed during the interview that the Colbert Super PAC project had "brought a lot of awareness to the issue" and was helping to expose some members of the public to issues of campaign finance law for the first time. Some people, Bauerly commented, likely hadn't ever heard of the FEC before seeing Colbert's segments on his show. Expanding on this notion, Bauerly explained why she viewed the increased education and awareness that Colbert was helping to drive with the Super PAC project as important:

I think, certainly, awareness is always a good thing because I do think... the campaign finance laws are fundamental to our whole election system and I think it's important for voters to know what the rules are, so that they can educate themselves. If they want to know who's giving into the particular candidate or who's giving into the political action committee, they can come into our website and find out. And I think that a lot of people don't necessarily know that.

Cynthia Bauerly, *Chair of the FEC*

Bauerly was asked if there were any concerns within the FEC regarding the fact that Colbert would likely be appearing in front of the Commission "in character," as the conservative

political blowhard he plays on *The Colbert Report* — and whether any of the commissioners took issue with the fact that he arguably wasn't appearing before them as a sincere personality.

Responding to this question, Bauerly again stressed that the FEC viewed its role in responding to Colbert's request as a purely regulatory matter and treated the question as a legitimate legal issue, regardless of Colbert's sincerity:

[Colbert] filed a question with us. It was a legal question well within our jurisdiction. To us, it doesn't matter... people file requests all the time. We don't ask them what their motivation is. We don't ask them whether they truly intend to take this path... We don't ask them, "Are you sure you're really going to do this?" ...

We don't have the capacity to treat sarcasm differently than anything else. And he asked us a legitimate legal question and we gave him an answer. And so nothing about that process was any different than any other requester coming in. He was asked "What kind of ads you're planning on running?" and he said, I think he said ... something like, "I don't know. Give me a Super PAC and I'll find out." And I don't think... I don't assume that people who sit in our hearing room lie to us. So, you know, whether his character didn't know or he personally didn't know, or neither of them knew, I don't know. It doesn't matter.

... we don't second guess what people tell. They give us a request, we look at the request. We don't ask whether they really mean it.

Cynthia Bauerly, *Chair of the FEC*

Bauerly's comments are interesting in that she discusses Colbert and his conservative comedy persona almost as though they are two different people. She indicated that the Commission accepted Colbert's advisory opinion at face value, and that the agency has no capacity or interest in considering an individual's motivations or level of sincerity in considering regulatory issues.

Beyond discussing how Colbert's efforts had increased public awareness of campaign finance issues, Bauerly also more generally discussed her perspective regarding the implications of the Supreme Court's Citizens United ruling. Some of Bauerly's comments about the ruling's impact were clearly guarded, focusing on the fact that the full implications of the case "remain to be seen" and that the public will need to determine whether it is happy with the changes to the political process:

The long term impact of Citizens United and Speech Now, I think... have shifted the spending, I think probably in an irrevocable way, from the entities who were designed for campaigns. Candidate committees, political parties now have all the restrictions and these outside spenders don't have any of those same restrictions in terms of what people can contribute to them.

Whether that's good or bad, I think, will remain to be seen — but I think it is a significant shift away from the organizations who are solely designed to participate in elections, and have for most of our history been the main focus of elections, now are being simply dwarfed in their spending by these outside groups. And voters will have to figure out whether that's something they're happy about or they think is a problem.

Cynthia Bauerly, *Chair of the FEC*

Later in the interview, Bauerly spoke more candidly about her attitudes toward the implications of the recent Supreme Court rulings. She emphasized that she was concerned about issues of disclosure and making sure “meaningful information” was available to voters regarding who was spending money to influence campaigns and elections. Noting that the FEC's role is to enforce the law as it reads, Bauerly also spoke about her thoughts on potential amendments to the law to improve issues of disclosure:

Yes. Here at the commission, these are the decisions that we enforce. I have personally some serious concerns about the amount of disclosure that's going on, about what people really have access to in terms of meaningful information. The Supreme Court has said that voters are entitled to this information so they can weigh different speakers and different messages, as they go about making their own voting decisions. And I think, that's sort of fundamental towards our democracy, is that voters get to decide and so I think there's some limitations in our disclosure system that hinder voters' ability to do that, and I think that's a concern. Whether the law will be amended to address that or other things will take place that change that, I think is happening in a number of different arenas...

Cynthia Bauerly, *Chair of the FEC*

Although it wasn't discussed specifically during the interview with Bauerly, it could be argued that “disclosure” has been a major theme of the Colbert Super PAC effort with much of the project's focus on potential loopholes within the law that could potentially allow for anonymous campaign contributions.

Commissioner Bauerly reflected some on the history of campaign finance regulations, and what she referred to as a swinging pendulum within the debate over political speech and regulations. Bauerly discussed how “the debate about free speech versus regulation (and) disclosure has been ongoing in this country...since the time we first started putting any of these restrictions in place...” in the early 1970s. Continuing on, Bauerly also discussed the conservative perspective of the current Supreme Court and stressed that often new regulations are only triggered by major scandals — and that it is especially difficult to pass any new laws through Congress which are seen as restrictions of speech:

And so this “push-pull” on these issues has been going on for a very long time and this, the pendulum swings, I think it’s fair to say ... the independence speech approach of this court is certainly even broader than the original Buckley, court which was pretty skeptical of a lot of regulation. But we’ve probably been here before, the Congress usually takes some sort of scandal to make any significant change in the law. It was Watergate then it was the party soft money as of the late 90s that spurred [McCain Feingold] into passage.

Unfortunately, that’s when it seems to garner enough attention and enough need to do anything. Otherwise, frankly, you’re relying on the people who are regulated by this system to take action and it’s very difficult to get anything done in Congress these days, let alone something as publicly contentious as this is... because even members who are being attacked by these large Super PACs, if they feel strongly about the value of independent speech, they’re going to be reluctant to put any restriction on it.

Cynthia Bauerly, *Chair of the FEC*

Following these comments, Bauerly discussed whether she thought Colbert’s efforts with the Super PAC project were partially intended to steer public opinion regarding issues within campaign finance law, and to motivate people to work toward changing the system. Responding to this question, Bauerly again said that she was not sure what Colbert’s personal motivation was — but also noted that he had successfully demonstrated “a history of being able to move people to action” with various fundraising efforts and public events, and that she was impressed with how many people had signed up to support the Colbert Super PAC. Discussing the popularity of the project, and how Colbert had managed to gather “a pretty significant number of email addresses fairly quickly,” Bauerly commented on public support for the comedian’s initiative:

“...he’s certainly communicating with a huge group of people. How much he can motivate them long term is probably hard to say, is hard to know. But he certainly has an audience.” Although clearly hesitant to comment definitively regarding Colbert’s intent, Bauerly’s remarks also seem to indicate a viewpoint that the comedian was intending to use the Super PAC project to “motivate” his audience regarding the broader issue of campaign finance.

On March 12, 2012, a phone interview was conducted with Dr. Richard Hasen, an academic expert in the area of election law and campaign finance regulation. Along with serving as the lead writer on the web site “Election Law Blog,” Hasen has written multiple books and authored numerous op-eds and commentaries about various issues of election law, appearing in national publications such as the New York Times (Hasen, 2011) and Washington Post (Hasen, 2012). In a March 5, 2012 column written for the media outlet *Politico*, Hasen specifically examined Colbert’s activities with the Super PAC project. In the column Hasen wrote that Colbert had “illustrated the absurdity of the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision and Federal Election Commission’s coordination rules” through the various elements of the project, and also discussed the possibility that Colbert could actually attempt a run for the presidency as a third-party candidate (Hasen, 2012).

During the interview, stressing that he believed Colbert’s mission was always to lampoon politics, Hasen discussed his perspective regarding the comedian’s motivation for the Super PAC project:

...I think [Colbert’s] Super PAC and his campaign finance coverage, more generally, is meant to criticize the Supreme Court through satire and to present what he sees as the absurdity of some of the Supreme Court and Federal Election Commission’s rulings in this area.

Richard Hasen, *Election Law Blog*

Hasen was also asked whether he thought that Colbert had a goal of shifting public opinion with the Super PAC project, and whether he felt the effort constituted a form of political advocacy.

Hasen responded affirmatively to both parts of the question, and argued that he personally didn't "see a difference between the two" ideas:

I think that [Colbert] is trying to shape public opinion while also trying to entertain. And I think that, for trying to shape public opinion in a political area... that is a form of political advocacy... I would say, as one of his goals, it would be to push for reform. As another goal, it would be to undermine the legitimacy of the Supreme Court's work in this area.

Richard Hasen, *Election Law Blog*

Hasen's comments here show a strong opinion that Colbert's efforts are clearly intended to change public opinion about campaign finance laws — with the goal of pushing for reforms — and that his satire could be considered a form of political advocacy.

Discussing later in the interview whether he viewed Colbert's satire with the Super PAC project as having been a "fair and accurate" portrayal of campaign finance laws, Hasen explained that he felt Colbert had probably taken some "poetic licenses" during certain segments of the show, particularly within some of the sketches which supposedly showed "coordination between a candidate and a Super PAC." Discussing this particular series of sketches, Hasen said:

...I don't think that was a literally accurate portrayal of the kinds of cooperation that a candidate and a Super PAC would have, but through absurdity he was able to illustrate the various ways by which there can be cooperation without running afoul of the FEC's rules on illegal coordination.

Richard Hasen, *Election Law Blog*

Highlighting the specific January 12, 2012 sketch from *The Colbert Report*, in which Colbert demonstrates "coordination" by ostensibly communicating with fellow comedian, Jon Stewart, through their joint legal counsel, Trevor Potter, Hasen's focus here is on the same particular segment that was brought up by free-speech advocates Brad Smith and James Bopp as having been an inaccurate depiction of the law.

Unlike Smith and Bopp, however, who argued the segment was an outright mischaracterization of what is legally allowed, Hasen indicated that he viewed the sketch more as

“hyperbolic presentation,” as opposed to blatantly inaccurate. Below, Hasen discusses his perspective on the particular segment:

Well, you know, sitting there with Trevor Potter, between Jon Stewart and Colbert, translating it, to what’s okay and what’s not, after each setting, is not the way that Super PACs and candidates are going to communicate with one another. They may get legal advice but they are not going to be sitting there like that ... asking their lawyer each sentence that they could say. That is what I mean in terms of absurdity as hyperbolic presentation. But, the fundamental legal point about what’s allowed and how it might work, I think, was illustrated through that hyperbolic presentation.

Richard Hasen, *Election Law Blog*

Hasen’s comments here are particularly interesting when contrasted against the earlier discussed interviews with members of the free-speech advocacy community. At one point during the interview, Hasen commented that he was “politically aligned with what [Colbert] is trying to do,” and he also indicated that he felt Colbert’s efforts were “generally positive” — because they provided an educating function that brought issues of campaign finance law to a wider audience, and helped “to undermine the legitimacy of the Citizens United approach.” Clearly Hasen views himself as sharing a general political ideology with Colbert, in regards to their perspectives on problems with the campaign finance system. The stark difference in attitudes regarding the *fairness* of Colbert’s satire — between Hasen (who is “aligned” with Colbert’s perspective), and Smith and Bopp (who obviously both disagree with Colbert’s perspective) — is interesting, especially when this dynamic is considered within the context of political psychology theories of motivated processing. (This particular phenomenon will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter.)

During the interview with Hasen, he also discussed how he viewed much of Colbert’s satire to be a form of “performance art,” which went beyond just humorously describing or providing commentary on society, and instead was actively participating within and *changing* the world it critiqued. Echoing the responses of several other interviewees who also described

Colbert as a performance artist, Hasen’s comments below perhaps provide the best articulation of this notion:

... Colbert is less to me a comedian and more of a performance artist. That is, he doesn’t just make jokes the way a Jon Stewart or a Jay Leno might about political events. He actually engages in certain activity through his engagement. He illustrates how the world works, to the fact that he is able to raise a million dollars for his Super PAC using his celebrity, using his television show.

He illustrates the fundamental truth about the campaign finance process in a way that’s demonstrative rather than, you know, illustrative of what can happen. So, instead of just describing the world, he is actually changing the world.

Richard Hasen, *Election Law Blog*

At the core of Hasen’s comments here is the notion that Colbert is unique in how he uses his satire to “engage” in political activities, instead of just critiquing and making fun of politics like a traditional comedian. Hasen’s description of Colbert being fully *demonstrative*, rather than simply illustrative (in regards to the campaign finance process), is also strikingly similar to the comments made during the interview with ABC News journalist Chris Good, who argued that “Colbert is the only one showing and not telling,” in regards to the intricacies of campaign finance law. In addition, Hasen’s comment that Colbert is “actually changing the world” seems to acknowledge that the comedian’s activities with the Super PAC go beyond the usual satirical critique, to having the effect of altering the political landscape.

In a related vein, Hasen talked some about what he viewed as the potential dangers of Colbert’s participatory approach to satire. Hasen referenced Colbert’s recent efforts, particularly with the Ames Straw Poll (as discussed in the Detailed Timeline), as having the potential to “have actual effect on the political process” and possibly influence the presidential nomination process. Additionally, Hasen brought up the possibility that some viewers might draw the “opposite” conclusion from Colbert’s satire, an argument which had also been put forth by interviewees from the free-speech advocacy community:

...by illustrating the absurdity of the rules, some campaign finance opponents draw the conclusion that there should be even fewer rules, as a way of dealing with the absurdity of the situation as described by Colbert.

Richard Hasen, *Election Law Blog*

Discussing this line of reasoning, Hasen indicated that he didn't necessarily agree with these arguments from the free-speech community about Colbert's satire. Hasen said he took issue with the notion from those within the free-speech community that Colbert's Super PAC project (including all of its focus on the necessary legal representation and FEC paperwork involved) served to illustrate that the current regulatory system was too complicated and onerous to navigate. Hasen stressed that unlike most people who form a Super PAC, the average person has few limitations on their political speech activities:

... I think that if you want to run a fancy Super PAC... you need legal counsel, but the average person is not trying to run a Super PAC. The average person who wants to get involved in an election doesn't have the kind of money that Super PACs, at least the successful ones, are able to accumulate or gather.

And so, I think there are very few impediments to small scale grassroots political speech by the average person. And what Colbert is talking about is a much higher end, "American Crossroads" height, justification... which is far removed from the experience of the average person when it comes to participating in campaigns or even giving money to campaigns or political committee.

Richard Hasen, *Election Law Blog*

With the above comments, Hasen is effectively discrediting one of the core responses free-speech advocates offered in response to Colbert's Super PAC project — that it was actually serving to demonstrate the onerousness of political participation.

Later in the interview, Hasen also discussed the impact that the Colbert Super PAC project had had on public awareness and media coverage on the campaign finance topic. Discussing Colbert's efforts Hasen said, "I totally think he put the issue on the public radar screen," and noted that he had recently written in his blog that he believed that "Colbert has done more to educate the public about campaign finance than anyone else," including those within the traditional news media. Regarding the overall volume and tone of news coverage about

campaign finance issues, however, Hasen expressed that he didn't believe Colbert had served "any agenda setting function with the media except to the extent that there has been a lot of media coverage of how Colbert covers campaign finance." Hasen maintained that frequently, "Colbert himself becomes the story," and noted that there were certainly more news stories that were written about the topic because of Colbert's project. While the project had helped "cause the public to become more educated about the Super PAC phenomenon," Hasen said that he didn't believe it has otherwise significantly altered the media's coverage of campaign finance issues.

On October 11, 2011, a phone interview was conducted with former FEC Commissioner Trevor Potter. Along with serving as Colbert's personal attorney for the Super PAC project, Potter is the founder and president of the Campaign Legal Center, a nonprofit organization in Washington D.C. — and he also leads the political law practice in the Washington D.C. law firm Caplin & Drysdale. Considered "one of the nation's top election-and-campaign-law experts," Potter is a Republican and served as general counsel to Senator John McCain's 2000 and 2008 presidential campaigns (Kashino, 2011).

During the phone interview, which took place relatively early on within the evolution of the Colbert Super PAC project, Potter discussed his experiences having served as Colbert's lawyer. Asked about his personal motivation for becoming involved in the project, Potter responded by noting there were "several answers" to that question — foremost among them was the simple fact that Colbert had hired him as his lawyer: "I am being paid to provide him with advice on federal election law and related matters concerning the PAC and these activities." Additionally, however, Potter also acknowledged that he held some ideological motivation for his involvement in the project. Referencing his work as head of the Campaign Legal Center and experience advocating for stronger campaign finance laws, Potter said it was an issue that he cared a lot about.

When asked if he would comment about his perspective regarding Colbert's motivation for the Super PAC effort, and what he thought Colbert was hoping to accomplish with the project,

Potter politely refused. Referencing his client relationship, Potter said he wouldn't speak to Colbert's motivation:

The answer is short: no, I will not be willing to comment or speculate on it... One of the issues with being actually [Colbert's] lawyer on this is that I am constrained by legal ethics and my client's directions, which are that he likes to be the spokesperson for himself and the PAC and the show, and to the extent anyone speculates on his motivations, he would like to be the one doing the speculating. So that's just a subject that I stay away from... He likes to be his own spokesperson.

Trevor Potter, *former FEC Commissioner*

Refusing to discuss Colbert's motivation for orchestrating the Super PAC project, Potter's response seems to indicate that — beyond simply observing lawyer-client confidentiality standards — he had also been asked by Colbert not to speak to others about the specifics of the project and its goals.

Potter was willing to discuss some of his own personal experiences as part of the project, and talked about the origins of his involvement, saying that he'd originally received a phone call from staff at *The Colbert Report*, which was then followed by a personal call from Colbert himself:

I became involved because I got a phone call from his staff initially and then from him. And they were beginning to talk about PACs on the show. As you may have seen, there was a... they did a spoof of the Tim Pawlenty PAC ad last spring and it internally raised a question, at least, as it was described to me. Mr. Colbert said, "What is a PAC? I need somebody who can talk to me about this."

So they found me and I talked to the staff and then to Mr. Colbert personally and went through what a PAC was and he said, "Would you be willing to come on the show and do it?" And I said, "To discuss this?" and I said, "Sure." And so I did and after I had, we'd had the filming and it was over, he came back to where I stood and said, "I really would like to do this and I have a sense that there are a range of legal issues that are going to have to be addressed so I am going to need a lawyer and would you be willing to be my lawyer?"

Trevor Potter, *former FEC Commissioner*

The relatively spontaneous nature of the formation of Potter's relationship with Colbert is somewhat interesting, especially as it might be assumed that Potter's involvement in the Colbert Super PAC project was more orchestrated and intentional, considering his status as veteran advocate of campaign finance reform. Instead it seems the partnership between Colbert and Potter for the project was more organic, and more or less unplanned.

During the interview, Potter was asked whether he felt the Colbert Super PAC effort was serving to educate viewers about campaign finance law and the Supreme Court's Citizens United ruling. Responding, Potter argued that most people knew little about the implications of Citizens United — and that he felt the Colbert Super PAC project was helping to illustrate its practical effects:

... most people don't really know what the effect of the case is. They've heard something about the court saying that corporations are persons, and that doesn't help them much and they don't understand necessarily what that translates to, as a practical matter in our elections.

So I think what the PAC is able to do is illustrate in a very specific way, the effect of the decision in terms of corporations being allowed to spend money on independent expenditures, and then as a result of the FEC's decision on Super PACs, people being able to give to independent expenditure groups collectively and have that group with its name, like Colbert Super PAC, make the expenditures — and then of course the extension to the 501(c) (4) world.

Trevor Potter, *former FEC Commissioner*

With the above comments, discussing what he views as the project's educational function, Potter is succinctly describing several complex campaign finance issues which are highlighted by the Colbert Super PAC. Further explaining his own role in the project, Potter continues by stressing that much of the effort was focused on showing Colbert's viewers how the current regulatory system allows for unlimited political contributions, the donors of which aren't necessarily always disclosed:

What I am trying to explain on the show, when I go on and am asked questions about this, is how money flows through the system, sometimes disclosed sometimes not disclosed. The effect of Citizens United is that corporations can now spend unlimited amounts in U.S. elections. And the effect of various FEC rulings in action, and the peculiarities of the tax code, is... it's unlimited money, both corporate and individual, (which) can now be spent and sometimes not disclosed...

Trevor Potter, *former FEC Commissioner*

Potter's comments above convey his concerns with the regulatory system, especially the issue of disclosure. As is outlined in the Detailed Timeline, a significant portion of the Colbert Super PAC effort is focused specifically on disclosure and the potential for large anonymous political donations.

Asked to speak about his personal opinions regarding the Citizens United ruling, Potter offered a lengthy response, noting that he had filed an "amicus brief" with the Supreme Court urging against the eventual ruling — and that he was "on the record as thinking that it's a very bad idea." Potter explained his rationale for believing that the law should treat individuals and corporations differently in regards to political speech. Discussing how a corporation is inherently "very one dimensional," and has the exclusive "purpose... to make money for its executives and shareholders," Potter argued that the law should not view citizens and corporate entities as equivalents. Below Potter provides some of the rationale for this perspective, and his opposition to the court's ruling:

...the whole point of [a corporation's] existence is one dimensional — to make money —and that's not true of citizens. Yes, we all want to do well economically, but we also have political interests, we have religious interests, we care about the future of children's schooling or the environment, we have foreign policy views that relate to whether we want to go to war or not. Corporations don't have those stakes. The individuals in them do as citizens, but the corporation only has this stake of making more money. And that seems to me a very dangerous single purpose reason to go spend money in elections. That, to me, underlies everything else.

Trevor Potter, *former FEC Commissioner*

Following these comments, Potter stressed that he doesn't think there's anything wrong with corporations and that he believes society benefits greatly from a legal structure that allows for corporations, and the liability limits they provide — but also that “there are appropriate limits that can be placed on their political activity.” The Supreme Court's ruling (in the Citizens United case) regarding the political speech activities of corporations, essentially allowing corporate entities the same political speech rights as citizens, is one of the key topics of Colbert's satire throughout the Colbert Super PAC project. As is discussed in the Detailed Timeline, the notion that “corporations are people” grew to become a major theme within series, with Colbert highlighting the idea especially during his interview with Frank Luntz during the “message framing” episode on October 24, 2011, and his discussion of attempts to include the phrase on the South Carolina presidential primary ballot during the December 7, 2011 episode.

Potter went on during the interview to discuss whether he personally hoped to influence public opinion regarding the need for campaign finance reform, and if he viewed his role in providing legal counsel to Stephen Colbert and the Colbert Super PAC as helping to serve that purpose. Potter's responses to these questions were particularly interesting, in that he again stressed that his interactions with Colbert primarily constituted a business, and legal advisory, relationship. Acknowledging that he does personally “spend a lot of time talking about campaign finance reform,” Potter was hesitant to directly connect his own political stance on the need for campaign finance reform with the legal services he was providing Colbert:

I would say that I think my appearing on *The Colbert Report* and answering questions provide additional information to the public and specifically information about campaign finance and how the system works. I don't view my role as campaigning for reform, because I'm there to answer his questions. I'm never sure exactly what his questions are going to be. So my role is to provide information.

I do hope that the information I provide will educate Americans more about our campaign finance system and, in general when I am out speaking, I talk about why we need reform. But I want to be careful not to say that I view the program

as a platform for me to campaign for reform because it's really his program and my job on that and my job as his lawyer is to answer his questions and to tell him what he can do and describe how the system works.

Trevor Potter, *former FEC Commissioner*

Potter's comments seem to strongly support the postulation put forth during the previously discussed interview with Bob Biersack, from the Center for Responsive Politics, who had said that he thought Potter was largely "along for the ride" with Colbert's Super PAC project and that the comedian was generally determining the direction of the project. Stressing that he didn't view his own role as "campaigning for reform" through his involvement with the Colbert Super PAC, Potter perhaps hints but doesn't overtly indicate whether he believed that to be Colbert's goal with the project.

Later on in the interview, Potter talked about several elements which had been surprises related to his role as Colbert's personal lawyer for the Super PAC effort. Potter explained that he hadn't originally anticipated that the project would involve direct interaction with the FEC and the creation of an advisory opinion request to the agency, but that it eventually became clear that the unique questions Colbert's organization was asking — regarding disclosure requirements related to Viacom staff and resources — would require such an inquiry. Below, Potter discusses this unexpected development:

Well, I think certainly... when we got in (to the project) I didn't know that we were going to be in a situation where we would end up going to the FEC and getting a full-blown advisory, having a full-blown advisory opinion request process. But it became clear, partway through, that that was going to be the only way to answer the question of what the PAC had to report, which is what we cared about. So that was something that was surprise.

Trevor Potter, *former FEC Commissioner*

Potter's comments above are interesting in that, similar to other remarks discussed earlier, they suggest that much of the progression for the Colbert Super PAC effort truly was relatively "unplanned," in that there didn't seem to have been any master plan or narrative arc that the

program's producers had in mind, and instead, Colbert and his staff and legal counsel were generally following the project where it led them. It should be noted that much of the news coverage and earned media attention that the project received was focused on Colbert's interactions with the FEC, and the fact that he had filed an actual advisory opinion with the agency. It could be argued that the FEC request, and Colbert's appearances in front of the Commission in Washington, D.C., resulted in many more citizens becoming aware of the project than otherwise would have been the case. (Whether gaining this additional exposure for the Super PAC effort was a strategic consideration, in the decision to file the FEC request, by Colbert and the show's producers, is unknown.)

Reacting to the notion that some observers might have viewed Colbert's appearance in front of the FEC skeptically, believing that the comedian's intentions in filing the advisory request were disingenuous or somehow dubious, Potter was emphatic in arguing that Colbert's inquiry to the FEC was legitimate and based on a real legal issue. Below Potter discusses the dynamics of Colbert's request before the Commission:

... I don't think that the Colbert advisory opinion request was in anyway disingenuous or dubious or a front for anything else. There were real legal issues that had to be addressed in terms of what role the network (Comedy Central) could play. The network needed reassurance that what it was doing was going to be permissible, and the only way to accomplish all that was an advisory opinion request. Obviously, the show played it and gave it a lot of attention.

... there were people who said "All of this is just a joke," and "Why is the FEC playing along?" It was a serious legal question which deserved and got a serious legal answer, which enabled him and the network to go forward.

Trevor Potter, former FEC Commissioner

Clearly Potter's perspective regarding Colbert's appearance before the FEC is that it was solely based upon a serious legal question, and the need for a specific regulatory clarification, as opposed to having been in any form a publicity stunt. Later in the discussion, Potter was also asked whether there had ever been any concerns raised regarding the fact that Colbert could be

perceived as appearing before the Commission “in character,” essentially acting, through his conservative persona — and that some would question the comedian’s level of sincerity.

Responding to this notion, Potter declined to speculate on issues of sincerity, and stressed that Colbert “was fully involved in the advisory opinion request,” and that “he knew what we were asking and knew the issues that were before the commission.”

Potter was asked whether he had ever been concerned that his involvement with Colbert and the Super PAC project could serve to damage his professional and legal reputation among his peers. Instead of hurting his reputation, Potter responded saying that he felt his linkage to Colbert had likely enhanced his professional credibility. Following these comments, Potter went on to praise Colbert’s intellect and compliment how *The Colbert Report* had helped to simplify complex campaign finance issues for its viewers:

I think the short answer is that I have found it has, in some ways, added to my professional credibility because I have an opportunity to discuss these complicated issues with a pretty broad audience. And thanks to the very sharp mind of Stephen Colbert, the questions get asked in a way, and my answers are focused enough, so people can understand these issues.

There’s a real temptation to have people’s eyes glaze over and just say, “Oh, it’s also complicated,” and I think what *The Colbert Report* has been able to do is to distill it in a way that it’s not so complicated and people can understand what’s actually happening. So that’s probably been a benefit for me, to be part of an exercise to explain this in... straightforward terms.

Trevor Potter, *former FEC Commissioner*

Potter’s comments above echo the sentiment of many of those who were interviewed for this research, who had stressed that they viewed Colbert’s satire as successfully simplifying, or “distilling,” complex campaign finance laws into a way in which it could be understood. Later in the interview, Potter described encountering people who typically weren’t engaged in the world of campaign finance regulation complimenting him on the Colbert Super PAC effort and telling him “that they found it really clear and they, for the first time, understood what was going on.”

Describing the reaction of his fellow colleagues within the campaign finance reform community, Potter said that he believed generally their reaction to the Super PAC project has been very positive: “People find this a good discussion of the issue and helpful in understanding what’s going on.”

Although Potter clearly did not want to characterize his participation in the Colbert Super PAC project as akin to his other advocacy efforts within the campaign finance reform community, it could also be surmised that he would not allow himself to be involved in such an arrangement if he didn’t agree with the aims of the effort — and perhaps, also view it as helpful to the broader reform cause. It is clear that, in some ways, the former FEC Commissioner and campaign finance reform advocate largely “fell into” his important role within the Colbert Super PAC effort — and that he viewed his function within the project as advisory versus directive. During the interview with Potter, he discussed his personal perspective on Citizens United, saying that he disagreed with the logic used by the Supreme Court in the ruling and that he felt “the court should be aware of the great controversy and turmoil this decision has caused...” While Potter clearly holds strong opinions about Citizens United and the current state of campaign finance laws, in regards to the Colbert Super PAC project it seemed clear that Potter was in no way *leading* the effort, or serving as a “puppet-master” for Colbert. Instead, through the interview with Potter it was evident that Colbert, along with his staff, was the one directing the initiative — and was strategically using Potter’s unique credentials and expertise to support his cause.

Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

Intended as an allusion to broad conceptions of the idea of participatory democracy, the term “participatory satire,” as used in the title and throughout this research, is meant to convey the notion that what Stephen Colbert has created through the Colbert Super PAC project represents a new, unique, and groundbreaking form of both political satire and political participation. As is evident within the detailed timeline compiled for this research, which examines the entire progression of the Colbert Super PAC project, the sheer complexity, level of policy detail, and overall ambitiousness of Colbert’s initiative sets it far apart from other political comedy “stunts” or satirical efforts. Additionally, through the twenty in-depth interviews conducted during this study, as well as examination of the significant amount of media coverage generated by the Colbert Super PAC, it is evident that Colbert has substantially influenced the news media and broader public’s understanding of campaign finance laws — and has thus also impacted the real world political debate about the need for regulatory reforms. Going far beyond simply critiquing or making fun of certain aspects of the campaign finance system, Colbert’s project has become a real, operating part of the political system, in order to simultaneously skewer and *demonstrate* the absurdities of the law. Part educational civics lesson, part satirical farce, and arguably, part idealistic political campaign for change, the Colbert Super PAC project signifies an innovation in social commentary and political activism.

Before discussing specific findings, several general limitations to this research should be acknowledged. The foremost shortcoming of this study is that it unfortunately lacks the direct perspective of Mr. Colbert or any of the members of his staff at *The Colbert Report* or with the Colbert Super PAC project itself. As was discussed earlier, multiple attempts were made to coordinate interviews with Colbert and his staff. Especially within explorations of personal motive or intent, a direct interview with the individual is obviously the ideal approach. However since such an arrangement was not possible, the research presented utilized close examination of

Colbert's satire — as well as analysis of his statements in public speeches and during the few media interviews he has conducted since the launch of the Super PAC project.

Similarly, in an effort to gain an understanding of the news media's perspective toward Colbert and the Super PAC project, 11 individual phone interviews with different journalists were conducted. While this number of interviews is substantial, and required significant time and effort, a larger number of conversations would have obviously contributed additional viewpoints to this study — and an argument could be made that the journalists who were willing to make time for a phone interview to discuss Colbert were also more likely to have been supportive of his initiative. Another limitation of this research is the relatively limited number of interviews conducted from both the “pro-reform” and “free-speech” advocacy communities, with three participants from each group. However, as will be discussed below, there was typically relative agreement among the interviewees from each of these opposing communities regarding their reactions and attitudes toward Colbert and his activities. Lastly the majority of this research was conducted from a primarily qualitative perspective, which requires significant personal judgment related to which specific elements to highlight and emphasize — and which to ignore. While it must be generally acknowledged that the author personally enjoys Colbert's humor, efforts were made throughout the process to avoid bias both in conducting, as well as attempting to neutrally present, the various elements of this research.

Discussion of Findings

Revisiting the research questions which were outlined near the beginning of this dissertation, the first set of questions focused on broadly understanding the Colbert Super PAC — and exploring the evolution and parameters of the project. Beyond consideration of the content and political arguments embedded throughout the 16-month effort, this research also sought to

explore Colbert's personal intent, or motivation, for the Super PAC initiative, and to investigate the various educational or persuasive messages within the satire. The detailed timeline of Colbert Super PAC activities presented in Chapter 2 provides an overall understanding of the initiative's progression and addresses these individual research questions. Beyond the obvious humor which Colbert has intertwined throughout the Super PAC effort, perhaps the most dominant overarching theme has been the project's highly educational tone. As was discussed earlier, past academic research has supported the notion that political humor can serve to increase political knowledge (Baum, 2003; Hollander, 2005). In focusing hours and hours of late-night comedy programming on the esoteric subject of campaign finance law, a subject considered by many to be hopelessly complex and boring, Colbert has provided his audience with an unusual level of policy detail and education related to the legal parameters of how money flows within politics and how the government regulates campaign donations.

As outlined in the timeline, *The Colbert Report* has included frequent discussions of the regulatory impact of the Supreme Court's ruling in the 2010 Citizens United case. During eight separate program appearances (to date) by Colbert's lawyer, and former FEC Commissioner, Trevor Potter, Colbert has humorously explored the intricacies of campaign finance laws — and the various loopholes often strategically used to circumvent them. Explaining to viewers the FEC's interpretation of the Citizens United ruling, which opened the door for corporations, unions, and individuals to legally spend unlimited amounts in support of, or against, political candidates and causes, Colbert demonstrated the simple paperwork process required to create an "independent expenditure-only committee," otherwise known as a Super PAC. Repeatedly focusing attention on the large donor fundraising activities of former Bush Administration political operative, Karl Rove, and the American Crossroads Super PAC, Colbert's satire has exposed how political organizations have recently pushed the envelope of what is allowed within

existing campaign finance laws (Vogel & Friess, 2012) — as well as highlighting the ineffectiveness of FEC enforcement mechanisms, for those who simply ignore the law.

Much of the Colbert Super PAC project has focused attention on the political activities of so-called “social welfare” non-profit groups, created under Section 501 (c) (4) of the IRS tax code. Colbert has shown his audience how such organizations (whose efforts theoretically fall within the category of “issue advocacy”) are increasingly engaging in overtly political activities, including the production and placement of what appear to the average viewer to be typical political TV ads which support and oppose particular candidates. In addition, through the creation of his own humorously named 501 (c) (4) organization — dubbed “Colbert Super PAC SHH!” — Colbert has demonstrated how such groups can potentially be used to facilitate the transfer of major anonymous political donations to Super PAC entities, thus allowing wealthy individuals to secretly influence election campaigns.

Perhaps the most significant focus of the satire within the Colbert Super PAC project has been its frequent mockery of the FEC’s rule against “coordination” between Super PAC organizations and individual candidate campaigns. In multiple segments of the show, Colbert has noted that a key rationale for the Supreme Court’s ruling in the Citizens United case was related to an assumption (held by the justices in the majority) that the law would only allow for unlimited political spending (by either corporations, unions, or individuals) which was *independent* of the activities of political candidates’ election campaigns. Through the satire of the Super PAC project, Colbert has repeatedly skewered the FEC’s arguably very narrow interpretation of this aspect of the law — and ridiculed the seemingly coordinated, but still technically legal, activities of candidate-specific Super PAC entities, formed solely to raise money and provide strategic assistance to Republican presidential primary candidates. Highlighting the apparent absurdity of campaign finance laws that supposedly ban coordination, while still allowing Super PACs to be run by close associates of the candidates being supported (and to sometimes even engage in

certain types of joint fundraising and operational activities), Colbert has used his satire to communicate a basic message that the reality of our existing campaign finance system is far from what the Supreme Court justices had ever envisioned.

Having focused much of the Colbert Super PAC satire on the impact of the Citizens United ruling, Colbert has repeatedly conveyed a message to his audience that is highly critical of the Supreme Court's logic in the landmark decision. Perhaps the clearest articulation of Colbert's perspective on this issue came during his lengthy speech on January 20, 2012, in front of a large crowd of supporters at the University of Charleston. During his speech, which was loaded with sarcasm, Colbert outlines the Court's rationale for allowing unlimited corporate and individual political donations — based on the view that corporations should have the same speech rights as individual citizens, and that money spent on political advocacy is a form of speech, and therefore (due to First Amendment protections) cannot be restricted. (Throughout the Super PAC project, Colbert has frequently declared, sarcastically, that “corporations are people” — and that the rights of corporate people must be protected.) Although previously highlighted, the excerpt below from Colbert's South Carolina speech again provides the clearest insight into the comedian's ultimate message with the Super PAC project:

Citizens United vs. the Federal Election Commission — in it they (the Supreme Court) ruled that since corporations are people, and people have the right to free speech, and money equals speech... therefore corporations have the constitutional right to spend unlimited money in political speech. ...

But these wise men knew that there had to be some reasonable restrictions, to protect all that innocent money from the corrupting influence of politicians. And so they declared that the unlimited corporate and union and billionaire bucks had to be completely independent from the campaigns, and lo, Super PACs were born unto us...

The pundits have asked, 'Is this all some joke?' ... And I say, if they are calling, being allowed to form a Super PAC, and collecting unlimited and untraceable amounts of money from individuals, unions, and corporations... and spend that money on political ads and for personal enrichment, and then surrender that Super PAC to one of my closest friends while I explore a run for office... If *that* is a joke, then they are saying our entire campaign finance system is a joke!

Stephen Colbert

Beyond this overarching critique, that our existing “campaign finance system is a joke,” several elements of the Colbert Super PAC project have also promoted specific messages regarding the need for reform. The most overt example of this occurred on February 22, 2012, when Colbert interviewed Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. Pelosi’s primary purpose in participating on Colbert’s program was arguably to promote the DISCLOSE Act, federal legislation which would implement additional disclosure requirements related to political campaign contributions. Many of the previous Colbert Super PAC segments had focused on the potential for anonymous, or secret, political donors. Near the end of their discussion of the bill, Colbert briefly left character and, appearing strikingly sincere, expressed to the audience his support for the legislation, declaring “The DISCLOSE Act, it’s gotta happen!” Although this moment appears to represent one of the only times in which Colbert clearly steps outside of the character he plays on his program, and explicitly signals support for a specific reform initiative, close examination of the entirety of the Colbert Super PAC project revealed frequent moments when the implicit message of Colbert’s satire was that significant reform is needed within the country’s campaign finance laws. With repetitive ironic quips and sarcastic jokes throughout the long running progression of Super PAC segments, Colbert made clear to his fans and regular viewers his sincere perspective on the ineffectiveness and inadequacies of campaign finance laws — and the need to reform and strengthen the regulatory system.

Journalist Perspectives

The second set of research questions focused on how journalists and those in the news media perceived the Colbert Super PAC project, and whether it has been viewed as having influenced media coverage of campaign finance issues. As was discussed in detail in Chapter 3,

members of the media typically reported that they believed Colbert's primary ambition was probably to entertain his audience and boost the ratings of his show — but most also felt that Colbert sincerely intended to use the Super PAC project to educate his audience about the realities of the campaign finance system, and “shine a light” on its problems. Several journalists noted that it seemed as though the Super PAC effort had started as a small gag on the show and had naturally evolved into the significant, real world initiative it became. Surprisingly, several journalists were quite hesitant to speculate regarding Colbert's intent and motivation with the Super PAC effort — and claimed to have no idea as to Colbert's likely personal attitudes regarding campaign finance law. Considering Colbert's recurring, mocking discussions of various campaign finance regulatory issues and frequent ironic statements of support for the Citizens United decision, it seems unlikely that any journalist who followed the effort even somewhat closely would fail to understand Colbert's sarcasm. Instead, it seems probable that some of the journalists interviewed were simply unwilling to engage in speculation regarding the topic of Colbert's personal motives and beliefs, or the intended messages of his often complex satire.

A significant portion of the journalists who were interviewed expressed what could only be considered admiration for Colbert's ability to educate his viewers and successfully communicate the intricacies of campaign finance laws through the Super PAC segments on his show. Several interviewees commented that Colbert had done more than *anyone* else in the media in educating the public and focusing attention on the issue of campaign finance law. Responses were mixed among journalists regarding whether Colbert's effort with the Super PAC project could be considered political advocacy, with some arguing that the initiative could only be considered educational, since no specific directives for political action were being issued to Colbert's viewers. Others who were interviewed argued that Colbert's effort to educate his fans was by itself a form of political advocacy, and that Colbert was using the Super PAC project to

motivate viewers and subtly encourage them to become involved and take political action. An interesting notion was put forth during one of the interviews: that Colbert's particular style of ironic satire resonates especially well among certain individuals who are otherwise politically apathetic and cynical — and that the fun and “tongue in cheek” nature of the Super PAC project was particularly effective in motivating those people to become engaged and get involved.

Several interviewees from the journalism community reflected upon their understanding of the broader social commentary of Colbert's satire, discussing their belief that Colbert used his character to skewer the fakeness and insincerity of the very political media establishment that they themselves were a part of. Others discussed the notion that many viewers perceive Colbert, including his faux conservative persona, as offering a more sincere perspective than the supposedly serious politicians and figures in the media he imitates. Several journalists discussed their views on the potential risks and unintended consequences of Colbert's forays into political participation, some voicing concern that Colbert's satire could increase cynicism among viewers — or have a “destabilizing” effect, reducing people's belief in the democratic process or perceptions of their own political efficacy. As was discussed within the literature review, past scholarship has found at least some evidence supporting the idea that political satire can increase cynicism (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006), and decrease viewers' trust in political institutions (Baumgartner, 2007).

The notion of agenda setting, as it relates to the Colbert Super PAC, was discussed with each of the journalists interviewed. Considering the traditional academic understanding of agenda setting theory, in which the phenomenon is thought to primarily occur when content within the media serves to increase the salience, or focus, of particular topics within the broader public's consciousness (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), most of the journalists interviewed agreed that Colbert's Super PAC initiative had likely increased the overall amount of public attention focused on the issue of campaign finance laws. Exploring the potential for agenda setting from an

alternative perspective, interviewees were also asked whether they believed that the Super PAC project itself had served to influence the news media environment, altering the overall tone or volume of coverage focused on campaign finance issues. As discussed in Chapter 3, this particular notion could be thought of as “reverse agenda setting” — but it is largely dependent upon how Colbert’s role is viewed within the broader media environment.

Some journalists believed that there likely wasn’t any increase in the overall volume of news coverage written about campaign finance issues because of the Colbert Super PAC, arguing that the impact of the Citizens United case and the increased influence of Super PAC organizations would have been the dominant political story of the year regardless of Colbert’s initiative. Others noted that considering even just the media coverage focused solely on Colbert’s efforts, there was a net increase in the total amount of news stories written about campaign finance laws and the issue of Super PACs, since nearly all coverage about the project included at least some policy background. It was speculated during one interview that the additional attention Colbert had drawn to the issue of campaign finance law also could have subsequently influenced the decision making process of top news media executives, perhaps causing them to increase the prominence of other news stories that were focused on the topic of campaign finance.

Finally, several journalists discussed their own decisions to cover Colbert and the Super PAC initiative — and the internal newsroom debates that occurred regarding whether or not the project should be considered newsworthy. One journalist, from the political news outlet *Politico*, argued that Colbert, through the real world political activity he had undertaken, had essentially “forced” the news media into covering him and the Super PAC project, since he had become a “newsmaker” by inserting himself into the political process. The notion described here is arguably related to the previously discussed idea of reverse agenda setting, a theoretical concept which has been explored recently by some scholars (McCombs, 2004; Kim & Lee, 2006) in which public concern for a specific topic helps to influence the media agenda and focus on that

particular issue. The argument made by the journalist from *Politico* seems to imply that Colbert might have been somewhat deliberate and intentional in strategically using the activities of the Colbert Super PAC in attempting to steer media attention toward the issue of campaign finance reform.

The potential for this type of scenario seems to have been hinted at within comments made by Colbert during a particular segment of *The Colbert Report* that ran in late October, 2011, in which he discussed the letter he had received from two young children (Charlie and Grace), asking him to explain what the Colbert Super PAC “stands for.” Joking to his audience about the kids’ curiosity regarding the larger aims of the Super PAC initiative, Colbert proclaimed that “Kids ask the darn-dest questions, that the press generally doesn’t...” With this somewhat flippant comment, Colbert seemed to signal that he was cognizant and interested in how the news media was covering the Super PAC project — and was perhaps even disappointed in how some in the media had dismissed the seriousness of the initiative. Although obviously speculative, especially considering the above comment, it is quite possible that Colbert hoped to use the Super PAC initiative to influence both public opinion as well as media coverage regarding the issue of campaign finance regulation.

Media Coverage

As was reported in Chapter 3, the Colbert Super PAC initiative generated a significant amount of original news coverage focused both on the satirical project itself and on the broader issue of campaign finance law. Specifically examining newspaper articles from the largest circulation papers in the United States, several major categories of coverage about the project were identified. The majority of the news articles focused on a particular aspect of the Colbert Super PAC, such as articles about Colbert’s appearances before the FEC in Washington, D.C., reports regarding the amount of money the Super PAC had raised, or pieces related to the TV ads

which had been produced and run by the organization. Many of the newspaper articles incorporated humorous quotes from Colbert's public appearances, including his speech in front of the FEC and the political rally held at the University of Charleston. However, much of the news coverage also framed the Colbert Super PAC project as being a "serious" endeavor, and discussed how the initiative was meant to focus attention on the campaign finance system. The vast majority of stories written about Colbert and the Super PAC effort were either neutral or positive in tone. Of particular interest was a group of newspaper pieces which fell within the category of "commentaries," several of which seemed to use the Colbert Super PAC project as an opportunity to editorialize on the issue of campaign finance law and to criticize the Supreme Court's ruling in the Citizens United case. In some of the newspaper coverage, Colbert was applauded and given credit for having educated the public and for bringing attention to the issue of campaign finance regulation.

Pro-Reform Perspectives

The third set of research questions focused on the perspectives of members of both the so-called "pro-reform" and "free-speech" advocacy communities toward Colbert and the Super PAC project. As discussed in detail within Chapter 4, the three members of the pro-reform community who were interviewed all expressed a general level of support for the Colbert Super PAC initiative. Fred Wertheimer, president of Democracy 21, noted that the project had increased the level of public attention focused on the issue of campaign finance and that he felt Colbert was "doing a great job of educating the American people." Members of the pro-reform community reported that they viewed Colbert's efforts as "helpful" to their overall cause, and stressed that the project was showing the public the absurd situations that were currently allowed by campaign finance law. Bob Biersack, from the Center for Responsive Politics, said he thought

that many people within the reform community held “some admiration for the cleverness” of the Colbert Super PAC. Among the members of the pro-reform community who were interviewed, none expressed significant concerns regarding the accuracy of Colbert’s satire and its portrayal of campaign finance laws.

Several comments, however, were made by interviewees within this group regarding minor concern that Colbert’s satire might cause viewers to feel hopeless regarding the current system, and the public’s ability to enact positive change. John Wonderlich, from the Sunlight Foundation, noted that he had originally been somewhat weary of the project because he was fearful that it would only serve to portray the regulatory system as a big joke, but that he had eventually come to see the project as a positive endeavor. Interviewees had mixed opinions regarding Colbert’s personal motivation for the Super PAC effort. Wertheimer said that while he couldn’t be certain of Colbert’s true attitudes, he believed that Colbert probably intended for the project to help solve the problems that existed within the campaign finance system. Similarly, Wonderlich argued that Colbert likely viewed himself as being a “reformer,” and was intentionally using his satire as a tool to help create positive political change. Alternately, Biersack stressed that Colbert’s satire was really just focused on showing how “silly” the campaign finance system was — and that it wasn’t at all clear whether Colbert was engaging in advocacy and personally hoped to influence public opinion or promote political change. Although the level of support for Colbert’s initiative varied among those who were interviewed, Wonderlich argued that most individuals within the pro-reform community viewed the Colbert Super PAC project as being “a very strong force for good.”

Free-Speech Perspectives

The perspectives of those who were interviewed from the “free speech” community were strikingly different from the reform community advocates, and significantly less supportive

toward Colbert and the Super PAC initiative. Generally speaking, the individuals in this group argued that Colbert's satire offered little value to the political debate (and was primarily just mischief), and that the Colbert Super PAC had often inaccurately portrayed the details of campaign finance laws. All three of the free speech advocates interviewed also offered a variation of the same argument — that the Colbert Super PAC project, instead of showing the need for reform and stronger campaign finance laws, could be interpreted as demonstrating that the existing system was too complicated and onerous for individual citizens to navigate (without expensive lawyers), and that there should instead be *less* restrictive campaign finance regulation.

Brad Smith, from the Center for Competitive Politics, argued that Colbert's satire was frequently inaccurate and portrayed overly simplified versions of campaign finance regulations which had “not always gotten the law right,” thus doing a disservice to the public's understanding of the issue. Smith contended that Colbert's satire had frequently, inaccurately, conflated the Citizens United and Speech Now court cases with unrelated elements of the regulatory system — and that these inaccurate “insinuations” were part of a larger intentional effort by Colbert and the reform community to portray a crisis situation, in order to promote a sense of urgency related to the need for campaign finance reform. In comments similar to Smith's, conservative lawyer James Bopp discussed details of specific Super PAC segments and argued that at times Colbert had intentionally used the Super PAC project to portray “distortions” of what was actually allowed by campaign finance law. Sean Parnell, former president of the Center for Competitive Politics, stressed that Colbert absolutely has a personal political agenda — and argued that he was engaging in political advocacy and using the Super PAC project in an attempt to influence public opinion and promote the need for reform. Similar to comments made by Smith and Bopp, Parnell also argued that Colbert's satire had intentionally ignored certain important elements, such as the fact that Citizens United allowed for unlimited *union* political contributions, as well as corporate donations. In stark contrast to interviewees from the pro-reform community, each of the free

speech advocates interviewed similarly argued that Colbert's Super PAC satire was at times misleading to the audience and had, in at least some ways, been an inaccurate portrayal of campaign finance law.

In examining the disparity in perspectives between those in the pro-reform and free speech communities regarding the accuracy and overall legitimacy of Colbert's Super PAC satire, it is worthwhile to consider the notion of motivated reasoning, one of the core theories of political psychology. The theory of motivated reasoning posits that in processing information, individuals constantly balance accuracy and directional motivations — meaning that while people typically want to be correct, they also naturally focus disproportionately on information which confirms their prior beliefs (Kunda, 1990). This dynamic can serve to result in rationalization of certain activities and thought processes, and increased counter-arguing or argument scrutiny when an individual encounters information that conflicts with their existing beliefs. It could be argued that in their consideration of Colbert's satire and the Colbert Super PAC initiative, members of the pro-reform and free speech advocacy communities would be significantly influenced by the dynamic of motivated information processing. Applying the notion of motivated reasoning to political science, scholars have found that it is often citizens with strong prior political attitudes and knowledge who are most likely to suffer confirmation bias in their processing tendencies (Tabor and Lodge, 2006). Obviously, the members of the campaign finance advocacy communities who were interviewed for this research all held strong opinions and significant knowledge regarding the subject of campaign finance law. The apparent tendency for those among the pro-reform community to support and view Colbert's satire as generally accurate and worthwhile — while those who were interviewed from the opposing free speech community alternately conveyed more critical attitudes, and demonstrated much stronger scrutiny and counterargument related to the specific elements of the Super PAC project — could be viewed as a classic example of biased, motivated reasoning at work.

Election Law Expert Perspectives

The fourth set of research questions focused on the perspectives of campaign finance law experts, including those within the FEC, and how they viewed Colbert's satire and the Super PAC project. Included within this group of interviewees was Trevor Potter (who, along with serving as Colbert's lawyer, is also a former FEC Commissioner), academic election law expert Richard Hasen, and current FEC Commissioner Cynthia Bauerly. Detailed in Chapter 6, many of the individual responses from this group regarding questions about Colbert's satire closely echoed other interviewees' comments. Perhaps most noteworthy from these three interviews were comments from Potter and Bauerly, who both discussed details related to Colbert's appearances in front of the FEC — and similarly stressed the fact that Colbert's advisory request was based on a “real” and “serious” legal question, and as such, was considered by the Commission in the same manner as any other regulatory policy issue. Bauerly argued that, regardless of the fact that Colbert typically operated “in character,” within his faux conservative persona, the FEC accepted his request for an advisory opinion at face value, noting that the agency has neither the capacity nor any interest in weighing an individual's sincerity or motivation in considering regulatory issues. Throughout the interview with Potter, he emphasized his attorney client relationship with Colbert, stressing that he viewed his own role in the Colbert Super PAC project as primarily providing information and legal services, as opposed to supporting any overt political advocacy effort.

During the interview with Hasen, along with discussing many of the legal aspects conveyed through the project, he offered his perspective that in spearheading the Super PAC effort Colbert was actually engaging in a type of “performance art” — a notion which was also repeatedly conveyed by several other interviewees. Hasen noted how, in going beyond just critiquing and making fun of politics, Colbert was instead actually engaging in the political process, and participating within and thus *changing* the campaign finance world he was also

skewering. Arguing that Colbert's satire was illustrating "the fundamental truth about the campaign finance process," in a manner which was demonstrative instead of just illustrative, Hasen stressed that what made Colbert's Super PAC effort unique was that "instead of just describing the world, he is actually changing the world."

Participatory Satire

The last set of research questions more broadly considered whether the Colbert Super PAC phenomenon has served to influence the debate about money and politics, and whether it can be considered to represent a new form of *advocacy based* political satire. Through consideration of twenty individual interviews with journalists, campaign finance advocates, and election law experts — as well as analysis of significant media coverage on the topic — it is clearly evident that the Colbert's Super PAC initiative has influenced the perspectives of many involved within the political debate over campaign finance regulation. With recent news articles reporting that campaign spending in the upcoming 2012 presidential election season is expected to "smash" all previous records of political contribution levels (Wilson, 2012), it also seems clear that the debate over the influence of money within election campaigns is only likely to grow louder. Over the past year and a half, Stephen Colbert has used his satirical persona to play a significant role in shaping the debate and influencing the perspectives not only his own viewers, but also of political experts and many within the news media.

Comments made about Colbert's initiative from the interview conducted with Charles McGrath from the *New York Times* were especially useful to this research, since McGrath's profile of the comedian allowed him to spend significant time getting to know Colbert and exploring his motivations for spearheading the Super PAC project. As discussed earlier,

McGrath's quote below conveys his view that Colbert's satire is indeed something new and different:

... it's a new kind of satire because I mean, traditional satire seems to be merely poking fun at things really from the outside. I mean, the satirist is just by definition a kind of outsider. And this thing as he is doing it from within, he is not just making fun of Super PACs, he *has* one. And he has one that is a real Super PAC. It has real money. Real people have given to it, have contributed to it. And he's actively trying to insert his PAC into the process. The very process that he's extensively making fun of, he is also a part of. And so, it's like it's 'participatory satire.' Or it's satire raised to the point of performance art. I think it is something different.

Charles McGrath, *New York Times*

Through the Super PAC project, Colbert has created a new model for political participation — a kind of political activism which employs messages of ironic support, and sarcastic dissent, as well as real world participation, for voicing strong opposition to a political issue. As became clear this past spring, when he successfully recruited hundreds of college students to join him in creating their own spin-off Super PAC entities, Colbert sees a future in political activism through what could be considered earnest sarcasm.

There are many potential avenues for continued research into the dynamics and effects of this particular form of political satire. Topping the list may be further exploration of citizens' actual understanding of the messages embedded within complex and nuanced political humor such as Colbert's. Opportunities for more in-depth exploration of the public's perceptions of Colbert's satirical activities exist through focus group studies and open-ended interviews, as well as more quantitative methodologies such as online surveys. Experimental research could examine partisan effects related to individuals' appreciation of political satire — and variables such as perceived fairness and accuracy in experiencing certain types of political humor. Monitoring of the political environment could examine whether the notion of "participatory satire" is proliferating as a model for political activism, especially online through user generated

videos and social media initiatives, and whether new examples show that this strategy is becoming embraced as a technique for voicing dissent. Finally an opportunity exists to examine the continued progression of the Colbert Super PAC initiative, especially focusing on the efforts of college students who have been motivated to political activism through Colbert's satire. Research could seek to better understanding what inspired these students to political advocacy, and whether there might be something uniquely appealing, especially to young people, related to political activity through satire.

Considering Colbert's motivation in creating his own Super PAC organization, it is clear that much of his inspiration for taking action came from watching the, arguably drastic, transformation of our nation's political environment with recent changes in how money is regulated in elections. During brief moments throughout the progression of the Super PAC effort, Colbert has frequently hinted at his own perspective on the state of American political speech, often with a variation of one simple and distilled, yet powerful quip:

Because money equals speech, the more money you have, the more speech you should have.

Stephen Colbert

Employing his trademark sarcasm, Colbert's undying "support" for the recent explosion of unbridled political campaign spending helps to drive home his essential, populist message — that our system has become undemocratic, and that ultimately, progressive change is needed. The strategic use of satire to not only call for that change, but to also help in leading the movement, is a political phenomenon that is only likely to grow and is worth our continued attention.

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Appendix A: List of Research Interviews

Cynthia Bauerly, FEC, 10/19/11

Trevor Potter, Founding President and General Council of Campaign Legal Center, 11/1/11

Fred Wertheimer, Democracy 21, 2/3/12

Dahlia Lithwick, Slate.com, 02/8/12

Bob Biersack, Center for Responsive Politics / OpenSecrets.org, 02/16/12

John Wonderlich, Sunlight Foundation, 02/16/12

Charles McGrath, New York Times, 02/17/12

David Carr, New York Times, 02/18/12

Ken Vogel, Politico, 02/18/12

Brad Smith, Center for Competitive Politics, 02/21/12

Nancy Marshall-Genzer, NPR, 02/21/12

Jim Bopp, conservative lawyer (Citizen United v. FEC), 03/02/12

Peter Grier, Christian Science Monitor, 03/02/12

Sean Parnell, Center for Competitive Politics (former president), 03/05/12

Peter Overby, NPR, 03/06/12

Paul Blumenthal, Huffington Post, 03/06/12

Aaron Blake, Washington Post/ The Fix blog, 03/09/12

Chris Good, ABC News / The Atlantic, 03/09/12

Rick Hasen, ElectionLawBlog.org, 03/12/12

George Will, Washington Post, 03/20/12

Appendix B: Interview Categories

Journalist Interviews

Dahlia Lithwick

Charles McGrath

David Carr

Ken Vogel

Nancy Marshall-Genzer

Peter Grier

Peter Overby

Paul Blumenthal

Aaron Blake

Chris Good

George Will

“Pro-Reform” Advocate Interviews

Fred Wertheimer

Bob Biersack

John Wonderlich

“Free-Speech” Advocate Interviews

Brad Smith

Jim Bopp

Sean Parnell

Campaign Election Law Expert Interviews

Cynthia Bauerly

Rick Hasen

Trevor Potter