The Center for Voting and Democracy

November 2013

PARTISANSHIP TRUMPS CAMPAIGN SPENDING IN CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

Spotlighted Facts

- **The underlying partisanship of a district's voters, rather than campaign spending, is the decisive factor in the vast majority of U.S. House elections**
  - District partisanship predicted the outcome of 94% of congressional elections in 2012. In the remaining 26 seats, 11 of the winners were outspent, indicating that it was not necessarily money that helped these candidates overcome partisan bias.
  - Only 15 winners (3%) out of 435 overcame an unfavorable district partisanship and outspent their opponent (including outside spending on their behalf).
- **The predictive power of partisanship continues to trump spending in competitive races and races for open seats.**
  - Republicans spending advantages in competitive and open seat races did not translate into greater electoral success in those seats.
  - In the 58 open seat races, only two winners outspent their opposition and won in a district leaning toward the other party.
  - Many open seat candidates were able to perform on par with district partisanship despite being outspent by more than 10 to 1. In the 58 open seats, only 13 races had outcomes more than 5% different than what that district's partisanship projected.
- **Money plays an important role in elections even if it is not decisive in determining outcomes**
  - Money influences primaries because candidates need a certain amount of money to be competitive, although the biggest spender may still be defeated.
  - Money may be bolstering district partisanship as the dominant factor in congressional races by reinforcing the partisan identification of voters.

For decades, many reformers have focused on campaign spending as the decisive factor in U.S. elections. In the wake of the Supreme Court ruling in the *Citizens United* case, that belief has become even more pervasive. While money may indeed have a corrosive effect on our political process, data overwhelmingly suggests that it is not the decisive factor in the vast majority of U.S. House races. Just as the great majority of states are out of reach for one major party presidential candidate despite their enormous financial resources, a great majority of congressional districts are effectively out of reach of one party's congressional nominees as well, no matter how much money they spend. Thus, the corrupting power of money in politics is more likely a result of the purchase of influence by donors, rather than the purchase of electoral victories by candidates.

The most important factor in determining who wins a congressional race is the underlying partisanship of the district, as measured by how the voters in that district voted for president in the most recent election relative to the national average. Now, more than at any time in recent congressional history, the representative of a district is almost certain to be a member of the party that the district preferred in the last presidential election. In 2012, that was the case for 94% of congressional races.

The relative amount of money spent by candidates has also been cited as being highly predictive of congressional outcomes, as around 93% of races in 2012 were won by the candidate who spent the most money, including Super PACs and independent expenditures. However, money is not the root cause. It is far more likely to reflect investment in a likely winner than to alter an outcome. Most of those 93% were uncompetitive races that nominees of the districts' majority parties would have easily won even if they had spent no money at all. These candidates – often incumbents – also happen to have a much easier time raising money than challengers, but that advantage is not what allows them to win.

Even within the small band of races that were competitive, money was still less important than district partisanship in affecting election outcomes. Data on candidate and outside spending in the most competitive districts, compiled by the Sunlight Foundation, clearly shows this relative importance. For the purposes of this analysis, "spending" will include candidate spending, Super PAC spending, and independent expenditures in support of a party's candidate.

Money Doesn't Overcome Partisanship in Competitive Races

Of the 81 races considered competitive by the Cook Political Report (those rated as "toss up," "lean," or "likely") in the week before the November 2012 election, Democrats spent more in 33 and Republicans spent more in 48. That differential is reflective of Republicans' overall spending advantage in congressional races. But of those 81 races, Democrats won 42 and Republicans 39 – almost an even split. The Republican spending advantage did little to tip the balance in their favor in competitive districts.

Digging deeper, of the races that Democrats won, they had a spending advantage in 25 of the 42 (60%). Republicans had a spending advantage in 31 of the 39 races they won (82%). Those percentages aren't as high as the nationwide percentage of spending advantages translated into victories, though they are still substantial.

But to determine whether partisanship is more predictive than money, we need to look at the few races where the two factors predicted different outcomes. There were 18 races in which there was a Democratic partisanship of greater than 50% but a Republican spending advantage. Democrats won twelve (66%) of those 18 races. Of the six won by Republicans, five were only 51% or 52% Democratic.

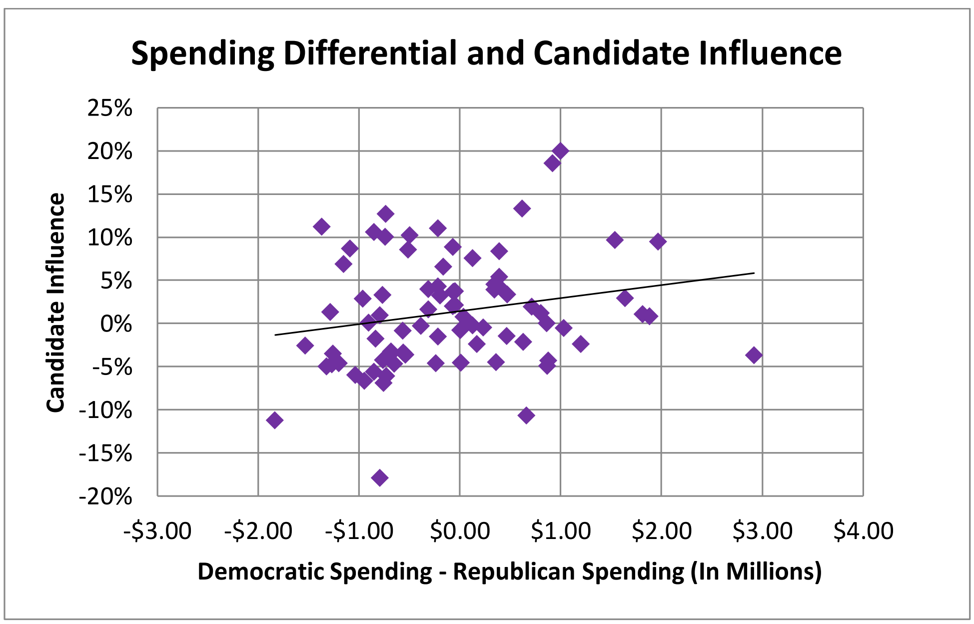
Of the 15 races in which there was a Republican partisanship of greater than 50% and a Democratic spending advantage, Republicans won eight (53%) of fifteen. Four of the seven Democrats who won in those districts were long-standing incumbents with at least four terms in Congress – likely a more important factor in those races than a spending advantage.

Money has Minimal Impact on Candidate Vote Shares

We can more precisely track money's influence on these competitive races by using a tool called "candidate influence[1]," a rating that FairVote assigned to every winning House candidate in 2012 to determine their relative strengths. Candidate influence measures the extent to which the candidate performed better (or worse) than a generic candidate of that party would be expected to perform in the district. It is calculated using the performance of a candidate in a district relative to the Democratic presidential nominee's performance in the same district, adjusted for the national partisan tilt and whether the candidate was an incumbent, ran in an open seat, or was a challenger. The ratings are designed to isolate the effects of individual candidates and their campaigns from the broader structural factors that influence the outcomes of elections, so any effects of campaign spending should show up prominently in candidate influence scores.

Candidate influence is stated in terms of how much the candidate influenced the vote in the district toward Democrats. Thus, a negative candidate influence score for a Republican candidate means that the candidate performed well. If money does, in fact, have a major influence on election results, then it should be closely correlated with candidate influence.

But as the chart below shows, the correlation is extremely weak in competitive districts.



A candidate's chances of outperforming his or her district's partisanship may have increased slightly with a favorable increase in spending differential. But money certainly did not buy any guarantee of increased performance.

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[1] "Candidate influence" is akin to the "Performance Over Average Candidate" (POAC) scores referenced elsewhere in *Monopoly Politics 2014*. Whereas POAC uses the average incumbency bump as a baseline for incumbent candidates, Candidate Influence scores include incumbency bumps, making them slightly higher than POAC scores.

To portray this data another way, see the table below showing the mean candidate influences of winning Democratic and Republican candidates who had spending advantages and spending disadvantages in competitive districts. The national average for all candidates was an influence of 4.7% in favor of their party. Again, a positive candidate influence means that the race broke towards the Democratic candidate, and a negative score means that it shifted in favor of the Republican

Candidate Influence of Winners in 81 Competitive House Districts, 2012

Candidate Influence	Spending Advantage	Spending Disadvantage
Democrats	+3.8%	+6.7%
Republicans	-2.4%	-2.6%

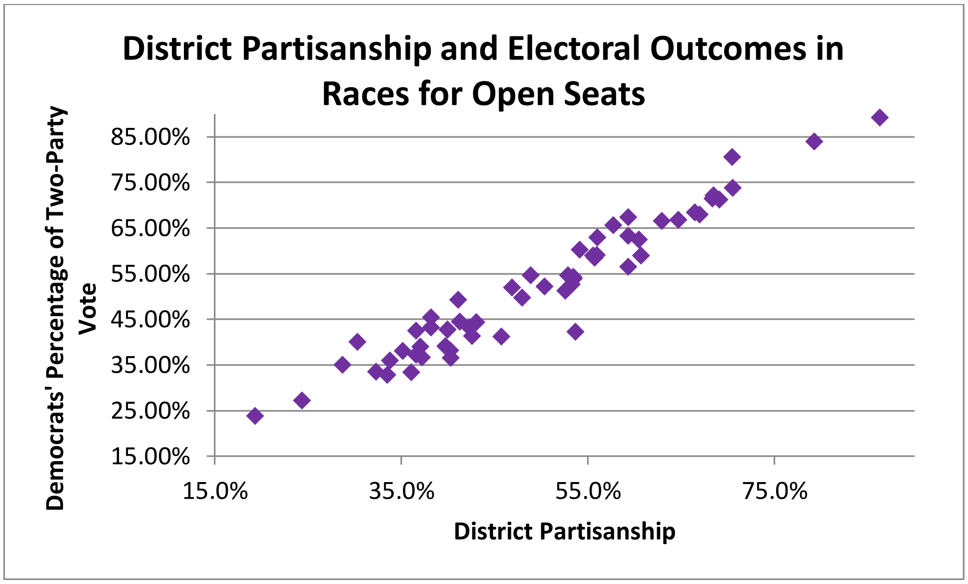
On average, candidates who were outspent in competitive districts had higher candidate influence scores than those who benefited from a spending advantage. This incongruous result is likely due to the fact that several Democratic candidates were able to overcome significant spending deficits to unseat Republican incumbents, giving them high candidate influence scores.

The Effects of Money in Races for Open Seats

The built-in electoral and fundraising advantages of incumbents complicate analysis of the effects of money in congressional races, but can be bypassed through an examination of races for open seats, where no incumbent was involved. Data on campaign spending in races for open seats comes from the Federal Election Commission Campaign Finance Disclosure Portal. This data shows a stronger correlation between money spent and candidate influence scores, indicating that money contextually can have more influence when incumbency advantages are not a factor. Even so, a financial advantage was almost never sufficient to overcome district partisanship.

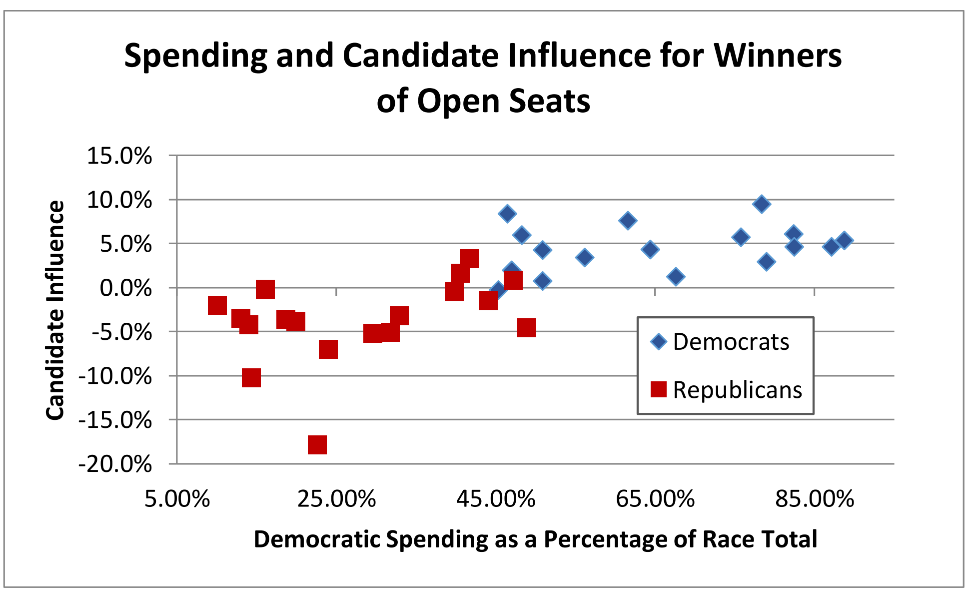
District partisanship predicted the outcome of 55 of the 58 open seat races in 2012 (94.8%). Though Democrats outspent Republicans in just 26 of these races, they managed to win 30 of the 58 seats (51.7%). Republican spending advantages were rarely sufficient to overcome underlying Democratic partisanship: GOP candidates won only one of the four Democratic leaning districts in which they had a spending advantage.

The chart below illustrates the close correlation between underlying district partisanship and electoral outcomes in open seat races. The results of these elections rarely deviated significantly from what the districts' partisanship would predict.



This is not to say that campaign spending has no effect. We can examine the role it played in races for open seats using candidate influence.

The following chart shows the relationship between campaign spending and candidate influence in races for open seats in which both parties fielded a serious candidate (defined as races in which the Democratic candidate's spending was not less than 10% or greater than 90% of the total spending between the two major party candidates). Again, a negative candidate influence indicates a race that broke towards the Republican candidate, and a positive candidate influence score indicates a race that broke in favor of the Democratic candidate.



Note that this chart uses a slightly different methodology and a different data source than the chart in the competitive districts section. This was done to ensure that the results of this study are not colored by anything inherent in one particular method of presenting data or one particular data source.

While far less dramatic than the relationship between partisanship and vote share, there does appear to be a relationship between spending advantages and candidate influence in open seat races[2].

Some caveats for this data are important to note. First, this chart shows a correlation between candidate influence and money spent, but does not necessarily imply causation. It is very possible that the strongest overall candidates also happened to be skilled at attracting funds, and so would have achieved high candidate influence ratings regardless of the effects of the money they spent. Furthermore, most of the data points on this chart are candidate influences of less than 5%. Very few districts (just 20%) have district partisanships that are competitive enough for that level of candidate influence to matter.

Indeed, the small advantage conferred by greater spending was rarely enough to affect the outcome of contests for open seats. Only two candidates in the 58 open races were able to overcome unfavorable district partisanship with the help of an advantage in spending.

Several candidates in open races, however, were able to earn a share of the vote consistent with their parties' partisanship despite dramatic spending disadvantages. Democrats Charles Malone, in North Carolina's 13th district and Brad Bookout in Indiana's 6th each outperformed their districts' partisanship despite spending less than $100,000 against an opponent who spent well over $1,000,000. A number of other candidates in races for open seats performed nearly as well in the face of similar disparities.

Ultimately, there is little evidence in the 2012 election data to indicate that money was a dominant factor in determining election outcomes or margins of victory, especially compared to the far more predictive factor of district partisanship. The most generous interpretation of the data from 2012 is that money could affect candidate vote margins in a few competitive open seat races. It is unlikely that differences in campaign spending could alter the outcome of more than a handful of congressional races in a given election, however.

Implications for Reform

While it is true that the vast majority of victorious candidates in 2012 U.S. House races raised and spent more money than their opponents, the highly predictable nature of these races and the apparently meager benefits of spending advantages for increasing vote share suggest that campaign contributions may often represent investments in likely winners by donors seeking influence, rather than genuine efforts to affect the outcome of a race. This explains why many of the candidates who raised large sums of money are those whose success was never in doubt.

[2] Races without a serious candidate from each major party, if included, would show a much clearer relationship between spending and candidate influence. They are not particularly relevant to an analysis of the effect of money on electoral outcomes, however, given that the results of these races were never in doubt.

All this is not to say that the only impact of money in elections comes after the victors take office, or that campaign finance reform could not improve the electoral process. Money may well be decisive in primary contests – not necessarily by guaranteeing victory to the candidate who spends the most, but by requiring candidates to reach a certain minimum level of spending in order to be competitive.

During general elections, money may interact with hardening partisanship in winner-take-all districts to create especially pernicious effects. When candidates and their allies spend large sums of money in a district on advertising attacking their opponents, it is plausible that voters would be less likely to vote based on the merits of the individual candidates and more likely to vote based on their party affiliation. Ads reminding voters that, for instance, a vote for a Democrat is a vote for Nancy Pelosi, could serve to convince voters in a Republican district to vote on party lines. The recent increase of money in politics may have contributed to the simultaneous drop in ticket-splitting and the corresponding decline in the number of competitive districts.

There is anecdotal evidence of this trend in districts where vulnerable incumbents spend large sums to reinforce their districts' underlying partisanship. Rhode Island Democrat David Cicilline and Ohio Republican Jim Renacci each represent districts that favor members of their party, but found themselves high on lists of vulnerable incumbents in the summer of 2012. Cicilline dealt with ongoing criticism of his performance as mayor of Providence from 2003-2010, and Renacci faced a stiff challenge from Democratic incumbent Betty Sutton, who lost her seat through the 2011 redistricting process. Cicilline and Renacci each outspent their opponents by nearly $1,000,000 to earn victories in districts that a generic member of their party would have been expected to win easily. In these districts, campaign spending may have shifted the focus away from the candidates and their records to bolster voters' existing party identification.

In short, campaign finance reformers have important arguments to make about the impact of money on election outcomes, but they should be narrower than the blanket claims often made about the effects of campaign spending. The idea that any congressional candidate with enough money can simply "buy" electoral victory is inaccurate. Reformers should also devote more attention to policies that may reduce the ability of money to harden partisan bias: specifically, fair representation voting systems.

The adoption of fair representation voting systems in super districts with multiple members would not directly address all concerns with money in politics, of course, but it could dilute some of money's most damaging effects. Winner-take-all districts create an arms race of sorts, as each major party continuously tries to outspend the other. In a super district electing between three and five representatives, however, candidates would not believe that they have to outspend all others in order to win election; ensuring victory would only require support from between 17% and 25% of voters. The power of voters in such a system would mean that it would be essentially impossible to prevent both major parties from winning at least one seat in every super district. Furthermore, if the ranked choice voting form of fair voting is used, candidates would be less likely to use negative advertising because they would have an incentive to seek second choice rankings from supporters of like-minded candidates.

Limiting the influence of money in politics, however desirable, will not alter the underlying truth that district partisanship is by far the most important factor in determining election outcomes. It is the use of winner-take-all elections, not money, that leaves most voters without meaningful choices on Election Day.

2012 Races for Open U.S. House Seats

State	District	Previous Party	2012 Partisanship (D%)	Outcome	Candidate Influence	Spending - Democrat	Spending - Republican	D Spending as % of Total Spending	Two-Party Vote (D%)
Arizona	1	(R)	46.80%	D	7.62%	$2,369,726	$1,477,836	61.59%	51.9%
Arizona	5	(R)	33.50%	R	7.17%	$0	$1,283,757	0.00%	32.8%
Arizona	9	NEW	50.30%	D	4.37%	$2,118,461	$1,170,857	64.40%	52.2%
Arkansas	4	(D)	35.10%	R	3.49%	$314,758	$2,094,867	13.06%	38.1%
California	1	(R)	39.90%	R	3.81%	$192,676	$775,942	19.89%	42.7%
California	2	(D)	69.10%	D	4.67%	$1,262,440	$268,634	82.45%	71.3%
California	21	(D)	53.60%	R	17.88%	$345,405	$1,181,113	22.63%	42.2%
California	26	(R)	53.20%	D	1.97%	$2,106,886	$2,377,030	46.99%	52.7%
California	41	(R)	60.70%	D	0.79%	$1,433,468	$1,384,947	50.86%	59.0%
California	47	(D)	59.30%	D	-0.27%	$1,175,009	$1,418,740	45.30%	56.6%
California	51	(D)	68.30%	D	5.65%	$1,024,618	$34,320	96.76%	71.5%
Connecticut	5	(D)	52.60%	D	1.24%	$3,285,560	$1,574,454	67.60%	51.3%
Florida	3	(R)	36.00%	R	9.13%	$14,053	$611,549	2.25%	33.4%
Florida	6	(R)	39.90%	R	3.65%	$258,207	$1,127,142	18.64%	42.8%
Florida	7	(R)	45.70%	R	10.93%	$12,806	$2,473,672	0.52%	41.3%
Florida	9	NEW	60.40%	D	4.59%	$5,352,174	$148,812	97.29%	62.5%
Florida	19	(R)	37.20%	R	7.04%	$85,869	$946,371	8.32%	36.6%
Florida	22	NEW	52.80%	D	4.30%	$3,490,565	$3,368,777	50.89%	54.6%
Georgia	9	NEW	19.30%	R	1.96%	$75,606	$674,339	10.08%	23.8%
Hawaii	2	(D)	70.40%	D	12.62%	$1,516,207	$0	100.00%	80.5%
Illinois	12	(D)	48.80%	D	8.40%	$1,167,686	$1,346,211	46.45%	54.7%

State	District	Previous Party	2012 Partisanship (D%)	Outcome	Candidate Influence	Spending - Democrat	Spending - Republican	D Spending as % of Total Spending	Two-Party Vote (D%)
Illinois	13	(R)	47.90%	R	4.61%	$1,322,5	$1,383,024	48.88%	49.8%
Indiana	2	(D)	41.10%	R	-1.68%	$1,278,023	$1,874,003	40.55%	49.3%
Indiana	5	(R)	39.70%	R	6.99%	$399,590	$1,265,519	24.00%	39.2%
Indiana	6	(R)	36.50%	R	5.74%	$73,449	$1,135,529	6.08%	37.3%
Kentucky	4	(R)	33.80%	R	4.26%	$157,884	$966,562	14.04%	36.0%
Massachusetts	4	(D)	56.00%	D	9.53%	$3,869,295	$1,068,678	78.36%	63.0%
Michigan	5	(D)	59.30%	D	10.59%	$579,339	$56,950	91.05%	67.4%
Michigan	14	(D)	79.30%	D	7.26%	$1,887,340	$0	100.00%	84.0%
Missouri	2	(R)	40.20%	R	8.56%	$59,565	$2,500,364	2.33%	38.2%
Montana	AL	(R)	41.20%	R	3.21%	$991,016	$2,021,596	32.90%	44.5%
Nevada	1	(D)	64.70%	D	4.67%	$1,219,621	$180,116	87.13%	66.8%
Nevada	4	NEW	53.40%	D	3.41%	$1,705,210	$1,332,799	56.13%	54.3%
New Jersey	10	(D)	86.30%	D	5.47%	$582,654	$0	100.00%	89.3%
New Mexico	1	(D)	55.90%	D	5.73%	$1,809,037	$578,879	75.76%	59.2%
New York	6	(D)	66.50%	D	4.71%	$1,788,012	$180,572	90.83%	68.5%
North Carolina	11	(D)	36.50%	R	0.45%	$725,988	$1,098,850	39.78%	42.6%
North Carolina	13	(D)	42.30%	R	5.57%	$18,132	$1,680,724	1.07%	43.2%
North Dakota	AL	(R)	38.20%	R	1.50%	$1,019,197	$1,291,733	44.10%	43.2%
Ohio	2	(R)	42.60%	R	7.71%	$0	$910,490	0.00%	41.4%
Ohio	3	(R)	68.50%	D	6.19%	$729,107	$25,233	96.65%	72.2%
Oklahoma	1	(R)	32.30%	R	5.23%	$322,254	$767,459	29.57%	33.5%
Oklahoma	2	(D)	30.30%	R	-3.30%	$1,220,586	$1,709,208	41.66%	40.1%
Pennsylvania	4	(R)	40.30%	R	10.22%	$88,971	$529,610	14.38%	36.6%
Pennsylvania	17	(D)	54.10%	D	8.69%	$1,304,274	$27,107	97.96%	60.3%
So. Carolina	7	NEW	43.00%	R	5.09%	$637,043	$1,367,013	31.79%	44.4%
Texas	14	(R)	38.20%	R	-0.81%	$1,175,039	$1,314,706	47.20%	45.5%
Texas	16	(D)	62.90%	D	6.09%	$618,526	$132,575	82.35%	66.6%

State	District	Previous Party	2012 Partisanship (D%)	Outcome	Candidate Influence	Spending - Democrat	Spending - Republican	D Spending as % of Total Spending	Two-Party Vote (D%)
Texas	20	(D)	57.70%	D	10.44%	$1,351,968	$58,352	95.86%	65.7%
Texas	25	NEW	37.00%	R	4.47%	$12,060	$3,230,074	0.37%	39.0%
Texas	33	NEW	70.50%	D	5.75%	$1,198,195	$12,983	98.93%	73.8%
Texas	34	NEW	59.30%	D	6.25%	$789,598	$81,702	90.62%	63.4%
Texas	36	NEW	24.30%	R	3.52%	$2,701	$368,712	0.73%	27.3%
Utah	2	NEW	28.70%	R	0.18%	$95,929	$499,660	16.11%	35.0%
Washington	1	(D)	53.50%	D	2.96%	$4,501,799	$1,201,900	78.93%	53.9%
Washington	6	(D)	55.50%	D	5.97%	$1,706,202	$1,827,361	48.29%	59.0%
Washington	10	NEW	55.70%	D	5.38%	$2,019,842	$257,625	88.69%	58.6%
Wisconsin	2	(D)	67.00%	D	3.56%	$1,100,360	$90,402	92.41%	68.0%

- Spending data for open seat races comes from the Federal Election Commission: http://www.fec.gov/disclosurehs/hsnational.do;jsessionid=5B133DCD7E1F254C052265051829ED26.worker1.

- In the table, Candidate Influence values for Republican winners have been multiplied by -1 for the purpose of comparison.