

Super PACs and Dark Money Groups Outspent Candidates in a Record Number of Races in 2018



By Michael Beckel, Research Manager

As Democrats and Republicans battled for dominance in both the House of Representatives and the Senate in 2018, super PACs and dark money groups collectively outspent the candidates' own campaigns in a record-breaking 16 races, according to data provided to [Issue One](#) by the [Center for Responsive Politics](#).

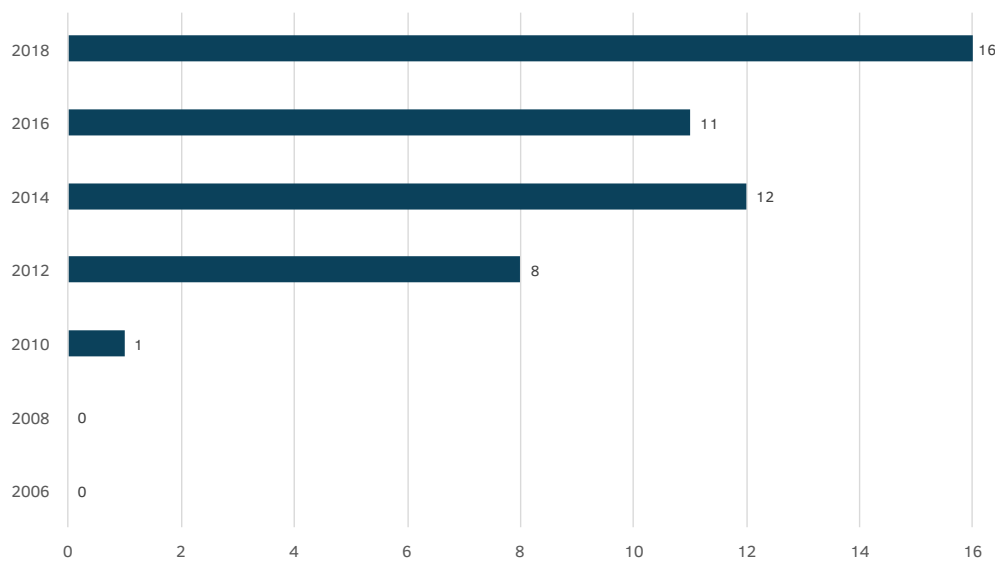
Control of the House and Senate for the next two years was determined by a small number of elections in 2018. Super PACs and dark money groups focused most of their spending in these races. Democrats needed a net gain of 23 seats to win a majority in the House and a net gain of two seats to win control of the Senate. Democrats ultimately flipped the House, but Republicans added one seat to their majority in the Senate.

The new data shows that candidates were outspent by outside groups in seven Senate races and nine House races. This amounted to more than half of the [13 competitive Senate contests](#) and about 10 percent of the [House races ranked as competitive](#) by the Cook Political Report.

Non-candidate, non-party groups have now outspent candidates in 48 congressional races since the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, with one-third of that total occurring in 2018. This phenomenon occurred 11 times in 2016, and only once in 2010, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

“When outside groups are spending more than candidates are on their own campaigns, we’re in the danger zone,” said Issue One CEO Nick Penniman. “This is especially troubling because so much of this money purchases negative TV ads. A political system this broken means that fewer people consider running for office, good leaders retire early, and those who continue serving frequently spend too much of their time raising money. This startling development should worry Democrats, Republicans, and independents alike.”

Number of races in which outside groups collectively outspent candidates' own campaigns



Source: Center for Responsive Politics.

Note: Outside group spending includes money spent by groups such as super PACs and dark money organizations, but not political parties.

Added Issue One Executive Director Meredith McGehee: “While raising the most money doesn’t necessarily guarantee victory on Election night, no candidate wants to be outspent by outside groups and lose control of the messaging in their own campaign.”

Both Democrats and Republicans Have Embraced Big-Money Outside Groups

Spending by super PACs and dark money organizations has been on the rise in recent years, with both Democrats and Republicans embracing big-money outside groups in an ever-escalating political arms race.

In fact, super PACs and dark money groups close to party leaders on both sides of the aisle played crucial roles in the 2018 spending frenzy that led to candidates being outgunned in so many races.

These groups included super PACs such as the Republican-aligned Congressional Leadership Fund and Senate Leadership Fund as well as the Democrat-aligned House Majority PAC and Senate Majority PAC. They also included dark money groups such as Majority Forward and Patriot Majority USA, which were major drivers of the [unprecedented surge of Democratic dark money in 2018](#).

Other big spenders in many of these races included Independence USA PAC, the super PAC bankrolled by billionaire former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, the National Rifle Association, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

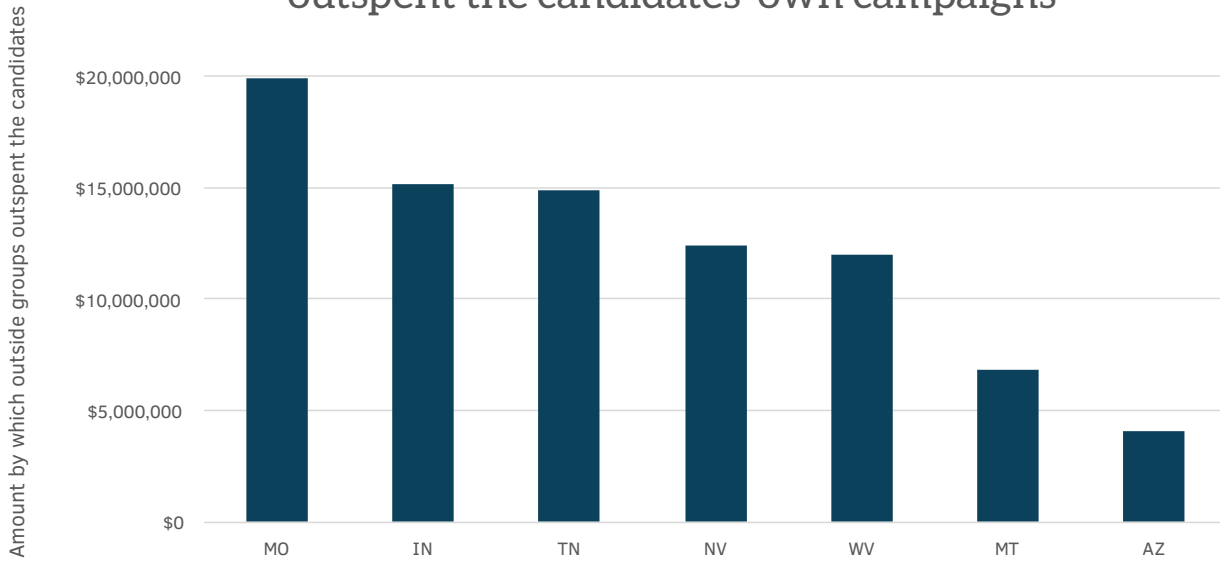
Notably, [Patriot Majority USA](#), the [National Rifle Association](#), and the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#) all rank among the top 15 dark money groups since the *Citizens United* decision, according to an [Issue One analysis](#) published in September.

By law, candidates are capped in how much money they can raise from any single individual donor — \$2,700 per person per election, with the primary and general election counting as separate elections. Meanwhile, super PACs and dark money organizations may collect unlimited sums from donors. (Like candidates, super PACs are required to disclose their donors, while dark money groups are generally not required to publicly reveal their funders.)

In its 2010 *Citizens United* decision, the Supreme Court allowed corporations — including dark money groups organized as [501\(c\)\(4\)](#) and [501\(c\)\(6\)](#) nonprofit corporations — to spend without limit on political advertisements that overtly call for the election or defeat of federal candidates. These advertising expenditures cannot be coordinated with political candidates themselves, although candidates and their advisers may help these groups raise money without running afoul of laws that prohibit them from coordinating.

A separate federal court ruling in 2010 called *SpeechNow v. Federal Election Commission* allowed political committees that spend money independently of candidates to accept unlimited contributions from individuals, corporations, and labor unions to produce ads — which ushered in the super PAC era.

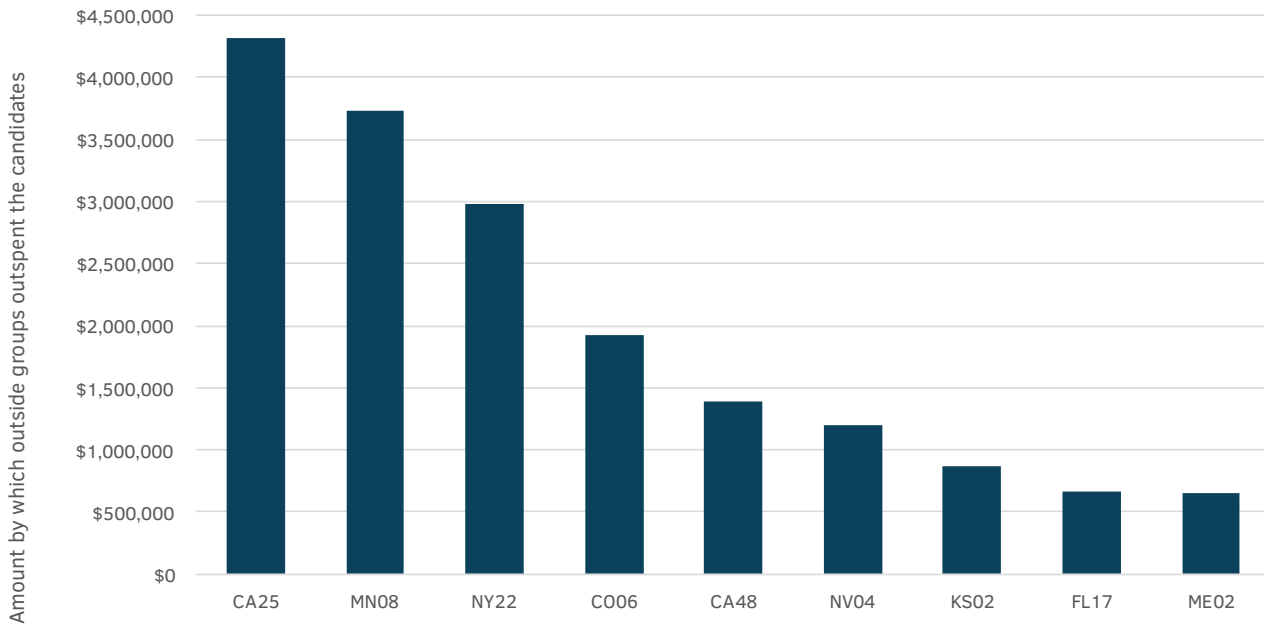
2018 Senate races in which outside groups collectively outspent the candidates' own campaigns



Source: Center for Responsive Politics.

Note: Outside group spending includes money spent by groups such as super PACs and dark money organizations, but not political parties.

2018 House races in which outside groups collectively outspent the candidates' own campaigns



Source: Center for Responsive Politics.

Note: Outside group spending includes money spent by groups such as super PACs and dark money organizations, but not political parties.

“Candidates running in competitive districts are likely to face an avalanche of outside money. But the prevalence and prominence of misleading attack ads sponsored by opaque organizations isn’t healthy for our republic,” said Issue One [ReFormers Caucus](#) Co-chair Rep. Zach Wamp (R-TN). “Constituents want to know you are listening to them, not big-money donors and secretive special interest groups.”

Added fellow ReFormers Caucus Co-chair Amb. Tim Roemer, a former Democratic congressman from Indiana: “As new reports convey everyday, America’s election security is being attacked from the outside by foreign adversaries and from the inside by special interests. The corrosive influence of big-money donors increases distrust in our electoral system and creates an unjust and unbalanced democracy.”

Here’s a breakdown of the 16 congressional races in which super PACs and dark money groups combined to outspend the candidates’ own campaigns during the 2018 election cycle, according to data provided to Issue One by the Center for Responsive Politics. This includes all spending during both primary and general elections.

Senate Races Where Outside Groups Outspent the Candidates:

Ranked by the amount by which outside groups outspent the candidates



Senate candidates in **Missouri** spent approximately \$51.6 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$71.4 million. Republican Josh Hawley spent about \$11.2 million in his victory over incumbent Democratic Sen. Claire McCaskill, whose campaign spent about \$38.5 million. Both the Democrat-aligned Senate Majority PAC and Republican-aligned Senate Leadership Fund super PAC spent about [\\$21 million](#).



Senate candidates in **Indiana** spent approximately \$43.1 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$58.2 million. Republican Mike Braun spent about \$18.3 million in his victory over incumbent Democratic Sen. Joe Donnelly, whose campaign spent about \$17 million. Both the Democrat-aligned Senate Majority PAC super PAC and Republican-aligned Senate Leadership Fund super PAC spent [about \\$17 million](#) in the race.



Senate candidates in **Tennessee** spent approximately \$36.6 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$51.5 million. Republican Marsha Blackburn spent about \$16.1 million in her victory over Democrat Phil Bredesen, whose campaign spent about \$18.9 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Republican-aligned Senate Leadership Fund super PAC, which spent [about \\$18 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Democratic dark money group Majority Forward, which spent [about \\$10 million](#).



**\$12.4M
more**

Senate candidates in **Nevada** spent approximately \$40.5 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$52.9 million. Democrat Jacky Rosen spent about \$25.1 million in her victory over incumbent Republican Sen. Dean Heller, whose campaign spent about \$15.1 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Republican-aligned Senate Leadership Fund super PAC, which spent [about \\$16 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Democrat-aligned Senate Majority PAC super PAC, which spent about [\\$15 million](#).



**\$12M
more**

Senate candidates in **West Virginia** spent approximately \$20.6 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$32.6 million. Incumbent Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin spent about \$8.8 million in his victory over Republican Patrick Morrisey, whose campaign spent about \$5.6 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Democrat-aligned Senate Majority PAC super PAC, which spent [about \\$12 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Republican-aligned Senate Leadership Fund super PAC, which spent [about \\$7.6 million](#).



**\$6.8M
more**

Senate candidates in **Montana** spent approximately \$28.4 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$35.3 million. Incumbent Democratic Sen. Jon Tester spent about \$20.3 million in his victory over Republican Matt Rosendale, whose campaign spent about \$5.4 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Democratic dark money group Majority Forward, which spent [about \\$4.2 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was a super PAC affiliated with the conservative Club for Growth, which spent [about \\$3.2 million](#).



**\$4.1M
more**

Senate candidates in **Arizona** spent approximately \$49.4 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$53.5 million. Democrat Kyrsten Sinema spent about \$24 million in her victory over Republican Martha McSally, whose campaign spent about \$20.6 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was a super PAC known as DefendArizona, which was primarily funded by the Republican-aligned Senate Leadership Fund super PAC and which spent [about \\$22 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Democratic dark money group Majority Forward, which spent [about \\$7.5 million](#).

House Races Where Outside Groups Outspent the Candidates:

Ranked by the amount by which outside groups outspent the candidates



**\$4.3M
more**

Candidates in **California's 25th Congressional District** spent approximately \$12.5 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$16.8 million. Democrat Katie Hill spent about \$8.3 million in her victory over incumbent Republican Rep. Steve Knight, whose campaign spent about \$2.6 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Republican-aligned Congressional Leadership Fund super PAC, which spent [about \\$5.8 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Democrat-aligned, Bloomberg-funded Independence USA PAC, which spent [about \\$5.1 million](#).



**\$3.7M
more**

Candidates in **Minnesota's 8th Congressional District** spent approximately \$4.5 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$8.2 million. Republican Pete Stauber spent about \$1.6 million in his victory over Democrat Joe Radinovich, whose campaign spent about \$2.3 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Republican-aligned Congressional Leadership Fund super PAC, which spent [about \\$3.9 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Republican-aligned America First Action super PAC, which spent [about \\$3.3 million](#).



**\$3M
more**

Candidates in **New York's 22nd Congressional District** spent approximately \$7.7 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$10.7 million. Democrat Anthony Brindisi spent about \$4.5 million in his victory over incumbent Republican Rep. Claudia Tenney, whose campaign spent about \$3.1 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Republican-aligned Congressional Leadership Fund super PAC, which spent [about \\$4 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Democrat-aligned House Majority PAC super PAC, which spent [about \\$2.5 million](#).



**\$1.9M
more**

Candidates in **Colorado's 6th Congressional District** spent approximately \$9.8 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$11.7 million. Democrat Jason Crow spent about \$5.6 million in his victory over incumbent Republican Rep. Mike Coffman, whose campaign spent about \$3.7 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Republican-aligned Congressional Leadership Fund super PAC, which spent [about \\$2.4 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Democrat-aligned Giffords PAC, the group started by former Democratic Rep. Gabby Giffords and her husband Mark Kelly to support politicians who pledge to work to reduce gun violence, which spent [about \\$1.5 million](#).



**\$1.4M
more**

Candidates in **California's 48th Congressional District** spent approximately \$15.2 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$16.6 million. Democrat Harley Rouda spent about \$7.6 million in his victory over incumbent Republican Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, whose campaign spent about \$2.9 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Democrat-aligned, Bloomberg-funded Independence USA PAC, which spent [about \\$4.5 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Republican-aligned Congressional Leadership Fund super PAC, which spent [about \\$4 million](#).



**\$1.2M
more**

Candidates in **Nevada's 4th Congressional District** spent approximately \$3.6 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$4.8 million. Democrat Steven Horsford spent about \$2.2 million in his victory over Republican Crescent Hardy, whose campaign spent about \$900,000. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Democrat-aligned, Bloomberg-funded Independence USA PAC, which spent [about \\$2.8 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Democrat-aligned House Majority PAC super PAC, which spent [about \\$1.2 million](#).



**\$900k
more**

Candidates in **Kansas' 2nd Congressional District** spent approximately \$6 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$6.9 million. Republican Steve Watkins spent about \$1.2 million in his victory over Democrat Paul Davis, whose campaign spent about \$3.9 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Republican-aligned Congressional Leadership Fund super PAC, which spent [about \\$4.3 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Democratic dark money group Patriot Majority USA, which spent [about \\$800,000](#).



**\$700k
more**

Candidates in **Florida's 17th Congressional District** spent approximately \$1.1 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$1.8 million. Republican Greg Steube spent about \$700,000 in his victory over Democrat Allen Ellison, whose campaign spent about \$2,000. (Most of the spending in this race occurred during the GOP primary, when Steube's main opponents combined to spend about \$500,000.) The top-spending outside group in the race was a super PAC affiliated with the conservative Club for Growth, which spent [about \\$800,000](#). The No. 2 outside group was the veteran-supporting With Honor Fund super PAC, which spent [about \\$200,000](#). Both groups supported Steube.



**\$700k
more**

Candidates in **Maine's 2nd Congressional District** spent approximately \$10.4 million, while super PACs and dark money groups spent about \$11.1 million. Democrat Jared Golden spent about \$5.5 million in his victory over incumbent Republican Rep. Bruce Poliquin, whose campaign spent about \$3.9 million. The top-spending outside group in the race was the Republican-aligned Congressional Leadership Fund super PAC, which spent [about \\$3.5 million](#). The No. 2 outside group was the Democratic dark money group Patriot Majority USA, which spent [about \\$2.3 million](#).

About Issue One:

Issue One is the leading cross-partisan political reform group in Washington. We unite Republicans, Democrats, and independents in the movement to increase transparency, strengthen ethics and accountability, and reduce the role of big money in politics. Issue One's ReFormers Caucus of more than 200 former members of Congress, governors, and Cabinet officials is the largest bipartisan coalition of its kind ever assembled to advocate for solutions to fix our broken political system.