

Special election for House seat in Georgia becomes most expensive in US history

A reporter
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The special election taking place in Georgia's Sixth Congressional District has now become the single most expensive congressional race in history, with more than \$40 million poured into the campaigns of Democrat Jon Ossoff and Republican Karen Handel.

Ossoff, 30, is a first-time candidate who is a former congressional aide and documentary filmmaker, while Handel, 55, was secretary of state of Georgia after two unsuccessful races for statewide office. After placing first and second in a primary election April 18, the two candidates are on the ballot for the June 20 runoff vote to fill the seat of Republican Tom Price, Trump's choice as secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Ossoff fell just short of winning the seat outright in the primary, where he gained 48 percent of the vote. Handel's share was only 20 percent, but the most among the nine Republicans who combined for 51 percent of the vote. Polls show the runoff is closely contested, with perhaps a slight lead for the Democrat.

Ossoff alone has raised \$23 million, the bulk of it from small online contributions from around the country by supporters who saw the race as an opportunity to show opposition to the Trump administration, although the candidate himself rarely mentions Trump and is running a thoroughly conservative campaign. The national Democratic Party has pumped in about \$6.7 million.

Handel has raised only \$4.2 million since the primary, but the national Republican Party has poured more than \$12 million into her campaign in an effort to save the seat, in an upscale suburban area, which has been held by Republicans for 38 years, half of that time by former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

The combined total in spending, now well over \$40 million, eclipses the previous record for a congressional seat, the \$30 million spent for a Florida race in 2012. If that figure were projected over the 2018 campaign as a

whole, when 435 House seats are contested, total spending just on the House of Representatives would total more than \$17 billion.

The Georgia race is the highest profile contest in a series of special elections occasioned by Trump's selection of four House Republicans for cabinet positions—CIA Director Mike Pompeo, Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney, in addition to Price.

Republicans won narrow victories to succeed Pompeo in Kansas and Zinke in Montana, in contests that were much closer than previous races, but showed little effort by the national Democratic Party to appeal to the growing popular opposition to the Trump administration. The contest to succeed Mulvaney in South Carolina takes place on June 20, the same day as the Georgia runoff, with just as little attention from the national Democrats.

The Georgia special election, by contrast, has become the occasion for a considerable effort by the national Democratic Party apparatus, including newly elected chairman of the Democratic National Committee, Tom Perez, for money and manpower.

The Ossoff campaign fits the profile desired by the DNC and the congressional Democratic leadership. Unlike the Democratic candidates in the special elections in Kansas and Montana, who were more aligned with the Bernie Sanders wing of the party, Ossoff has disavowed any association with supposedly "progressive" politics, claiming to advocate fiscal responsibility and what he called "sense over nonsense." Sanders, in return, has given Ossoff only tepid endorsement and has not campaigned with him.

A long report on his campaign in Monday's *New York Times* included the following description of Ossoff's "essentially anti-ideological" political views: "Bucking the left, Mr. Ossoff said in an interview that he would not support raising income taxes, even for the wealthy, and

opposed ‘any move’ toward a single-payer health care system. Attacked by Republicans for his ties to national liberals, Mr. Ossoff said he had not yet given ‘an ounce of thought’ to whether he would vote for Nancy Pelosi, the House Democratic leader, in a future ballot for speaker.”

He told the *Times*, “There’s a coalition of folks here in Georgia who want representation that’s focused on local economic development and on accountability ... and not on the partisan circus in Washington.”

Ossoff has largely avoided mentioning Trump’s name, which did not deter Trump from mentioning Ossoff in a tweet posted in April, when he wrote that “Democrat Jon Ossoff would be a disaster in Congress. VERY weak on crime and illegal immigration, bad for jobs and wants higher taxes. Say NO.” Vice President Mike Pence declared that “Karen Handel will partner with President Donald Trump to make America safe and prosperous again.”

Handel has embraced the full range of ultra-right positions advocated both by Trump and the congressional Republican leadership. At a debate last week, she declared her opposition to raising the state or national minimum wage, saying at one point, “I do not support a livable wage.” She also declined to say whether she believes human activity is a cause of climate change, saying, “I am not a scientist.”

Ossoff has supported the anti-Russian campaign mounted by the congressional Democrats, which aligns the Democratic Party with the military-intelligence apparatus in unsupported charges that the Russian government intervened in the US presidential election to support Trump.

Ossoff has said that there should be a “firm response and a transparent, independent investigation” into the Russian role in the presidential election, but added that “we’re still not there yet” on the question of whether Trump should be impeached. This is nearly word for word the position of Democratic Minority Leader Pelosi.



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