

Record flood of cash to buy US midterm elections

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With nearly three weeks still remaining before the November 6 vote, the 2018 US midterm elections have already become the most expensive non-presidential elections in American history. More than \$5 billion has already been raised by and for federal, state and local campaigns.

Democratic and Republican candidates for the House of Representatives and US Senate, and outside groups supporting or opposing them, had raised \$3.96 billion by September 30, according to reports filed with the Federal Election Commission that were analyzed by the Center for Responsive Politics. That left five more weeks of fundraising and spending by the two corporate-controlled parties, for which reports will not be available until the end of the year.

To this must be added well over \$1.5 billion spent on gubernatorial contests in 36 states, campaigns for state legislatures, and spending to promote and oppose statewide ballot initiatives in those states that provide for such referenda.

The 2018 election features the most expensive Senate campaign in history, in Florida, where the multi-millionaire governor of state, Republican Rick Scott, is challenging incumbent Democrat Bill Nelson. The two candidates had raised more than \$113 million by September 30. Hotly contested Senate races in Missouri, Arizona, Indiana, Wisconsin and Nevada are all expected to break the \$50 million mark.

Several of the contests for the 435 seats in the House of Representatives have broken the \$20 million mark, including four in southern California and one in the Hudson Valley of New York state. There are \$10 million House contests in California, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

The election also has one of the most expensive governor's races in history, in Illinois, where billionaire Democratic J. B. Pritzker, an heir to the Hyatt Hotel fortune, is challenging incumbent Republican Governor Bruce

Rauner, a billionaire hedge fund boss. Pritzker has already spent more than \$100 million and Rauner \$82 million. Texas Governor Greg Abbott, a Republican, and New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, will each spend more than \$50 million on reelection campaigns against nominal opponents.

Gubernatorial candidates have spent \$664 million, according to state-level financial reports, which lag substantially behind the reporting on spending in federal elections. Another \$250 million has been raised by the Republican Governors Association and the Democratic Governors Association.

An estimated \$650 million has been contributed to campaigns supporting or opposing ballot measures in statewide referendums. According to press reports, \$118 million has been spent on a single ballot proposition in California, which would limit the revenues of kidney dialysis clinics. No figures are yet available on the amount spent in campaigns for the thousands of state legislative seats on the November 6 ballot.

Midterm election spending has rocketed upwards over the past two decades, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. The 2002 midterm was the first to cost \$2 billion. The 2014 midterms cost \$3.67 billion and saw record low turnout. The 2018 midterm could hit \$6 billion.

The sheer scale of the fundraising and spending demonstrates the profoundly anti-democratic character of the American political system. Only candidates who can raise vast sums need apply. That ensures that the entire political structure, from the legislature of the smallest state right up to Capitol Hill and the White House, is controlled by those with money. Those elected will, in a very real sense, represent their financial backers, not the voters who go to the polls November 6 to cast their ballots.

These huge outlays do not go to educate or inform the public about the political programs and experience of the candidates. The bulk of the money is spent on attack ads that pollute the airways and the internet, with an intensity of mudslinging and slander that makes commercial television

virtually unwatchable for the last month of the campaign.

Republican candidates brand their Democratic opponents as terrorist sympathizers—the word “treason” has been flung about by more than one campaign—while Democrats respond in kind, portraying President Trump as a stooge of Russia or branding Republicans as apologists for sexual assault.

There is considerable political significance to the fact that in both House and Senate races, Democratic candidates have raised and spent more money than their Republican opponents, reversing the longtime trend in which Republicans generally spent more, while the Democrats relied on the trade union apparatus and urban political machines to make up the difference.

Democratic candidates for the US Senate outraised the Republicans by roughly \$450 million to \$350 million. This financial advantage is partly a demonstration of the power of incumbency, as Democrats hold 26 of the 35 contested seats and all 26 Democratic incumbents are seeking reelection, including senators in ten states carried by Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. But one Democratic challenger, Beto O’Rourke in Texas, raised a staggering \$38 million during the third quarter, from July 1 through September 30, more than triple the \$12 million raised by incumbent Republican Ted Cruz.

It is in the House races that the Democratic advantage is most striking, since there are more Republican incumbents than Democratic, but Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives had raised \$714 million through September 30, compared to \$542 million for Republicans. This fundraising edge underlies projections that the Democrats will make the net gain of 23 seats required to win a majority in the lower chamber. In 115 competitive seats, where the balance of power in the House will be decided, Democratic candidates have outraised Republicans in 71. In dozens of cases, Democratic challengers have raised more money than Republican incumbents.

While this is in part the result of a surge of small-dollar contributions raised over the internet, on the model of the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign in 2016, the Democratic Party advantage is primarily a product of shifts within the US corporate elite, where billionaires are pouring funds into the Democratic campaign. One aspect of this shift in support is the struggle over the direction of US foreign policy, particularly in relation to Russia.

The *New York Times*, in an effort to conceal the class significance of this shift by the financial aristocracy, published a report Tuesday headlined, “Small Donors Fuel a Big Democratic Lead in 2018 Fund-Raising.” But the figures supplied in the article belie the headline: while Democrats outraised Republicans in small donations by \$46 million to \$15 million in the 69 most competitive House

races, the article acknowledges: “Democrats have taken in \$252 million altogether in those races over the course of the campaign, versus \$172 million for Republicans. The gap in small donors accounts for about 40 percent of the Democrats’ overall financial advantage.”

In other words, the Democratic advantage among large donors *accounts for 60 percent of the overall advantage*, the direct opposite of the claim made in the headline. Needless to say, the *Times* does not examine the reasons for the shift in large donations. It notes the \$50 million given to the Republicans by casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, while ignoring the \$80 million given to the Democrats by media billionaire Michael Bloomberg.

In some areas, the Democratic fundraising advantage is so immense that the Republican Party appears to be effectively conceding long-held seats. In seven competitive Republican-held seats in California, for example, Democratic challengers raised \$21.6 million in the third quarter, while five Republican representatives and two replacements for retiring incumbents raised only \$4.2 million. In New York and New Jersey, every one of the 14 Democratic challengers to Republican House incumbents outraised their opponent in the third quarter, in many cases by millions of dollars.

Particularly remarkable is the fundraising for Democratic candidates with a military-intelligence background. These candidates, whom the *World Socialist Web Site* has identified and profiled as the “CIA Democrats,” come from the intelligence agencies, combat commands, special forces, and civilian war-planning agencies like the National Security Council.

For the most part, these candidates are not independently wealthy. But they have been able to raise gargantuan sums, in many cases with the backing of political action committees bankrolled by the super-rich, such as Jeff Bezos of Amazon, who recently pumped \$10 million into the With Honor Fund, which donates to veterans running as candidates in either capitalist party.

Among the military-intelligence candidates raising vast sums are: Mikie Sherill, a former Navy pilot, who has raised over \$7 million for her campaign in New Jersey; Amy McGrath, a Marine Corps pilot, \$6.7 million in Kentucky; Abigail Spanberger, a former CIA agent running in Virginia, \$5 million; Elissa Slotkin, another former CIA agent running in Michigan, \$5.5 million; and Gina Ortiz Jones, an Air Force intelligence agent running in Texas, \$4.7 million.



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