



A Thumb on the Scales: Outside Spending in 2010 Senate Races

BY ANNE KIM

In 2010, the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* forever changed the landscape of political spending.

The Court's ruling to allow virtually unlimited contributions to outside political groups¹ unleashed a record \$290 million in outside spending in 2010 (not counting spending by party committees).² According to the Center for Responsive Politics, total outside spending in 2010 on congressional races was more than four times the total outside spending in the last mid-term elections in 2006. And as the torrents of super PAC spending in the GOP presidential primaries attest, outside spending in 2012 is on track to break all records.

But does outside spending really “work” to put a favored candidate in power? With the jury still out on 2012, this memo looks to the Senate races in 2010 for some clues.

The answer? Maybe.

Because 2010 was a “wave” election that rode on Tea Party rage, it's almost impossible to disaggregate the impact of outside spending from prevailing electoral trends. In addition, many other factors—such as the strength of a particular candidate's appeal and organization—cloud the picture.

Nevertheless, in some campaigns, a big unmatched advantage in outside spending seemed to help tip the balance in a candidate's favor. In 2010, this worked to the advantage of Republicans—conservative outside groups spent about twice as much on Senate races as liberal groups. Even though conservative groups spent millions of dollars more on losing races than on winning ones (e.g., in Nevada and Colorado), the sheer volume of conservative outside spending meant that their overall “batting average” was nearly twice that of liberal outside groups.

Given this mixed record, there's only one real certainty about the impact of outside money on Senate races in 2010: Running for Senate is a lot more expensive than it used to be.

Liberal versus conservative outside spending: Who “won”?

In the last off-year elections in 2006, liberal outside groups were the relative big spenders, putting \$38.8 million into House and Senate campaigns, versus just \$19.6 million in spending by conservatives.^{3*}

In 2010, both sides had upped the ante considerably, with conservative outside groups outspending liberals by more than 2 to 1: \$190.5 million for conservatives versus \$98.9 million for liberals.⁴ The bulk of this money went

* All figures in this memo exclude spending by party committees, which include the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee, the Democratic National Committee, and the Republican National Committee.

toward “independent expenditures” aimed directly at supporting or defeating specific candidates, while the rest went into “electioneering” and other communications activities.

Most this money was concentrated on the most hotly-contested races. Of the 37 Senate seats ultimately up for grabs in 2010 (including several special elections), 11 races drew relatively little spending from outside groups.

“Safe” Seats Drawing Minimal Outside Spending in 2010

Senate Race (Incumbent)	Total outside spending*
Vermont (Leahy)	\$50,000
New York (Schumer)	\$41,855
Oregon (Wyden)	\$39,458
Oklahoma (Coburn)	\$13,256
Kansas (Moran)	\$8,235
South Carolina (DeMint)	\$5,204
Idaho (Crapo)	\$4,413
Georgia (Isakson)	\$2,830
Alabama (Shelby)	\$1,480
South Dakota (Thune)	\$959
Hawaii (Inouye)	\$0

*Excluding party committee spending; Source: OpenSecrets

The calculations below are based on races where either liberal or conservative groups spent at least \$5,000 and total outside spending exceeded \$50,000. Of these races:

1. Conservative outside spending might have tipped the balance in six key battleground races.

While outside groups couldn’t seem to tip the scales in some races, conservative groups might have made a difference in six states where: (1) the candidates were otherwise relatively evenly matched in their fundraising; and (2) liberal groups didn’t keep up.

For example, even though Democratic incumbent Russ Feingold effectively matched his Republican challenger Ron Johnson dollar-for-dollar in campaign fundraising, conservative outside groups also swooped in with millions in outside spending and furthermore outmatched liberal groups 4-to-1. While these groups are legally prohibited from coordinating with a candidate’s campaign, their activities in support of Johnson effectively provided him with a \$2.8 million advantage.[†] In other cases, such as Pennsylvania, outside spending turned a slight disadvantage in funding to an insurmountable one.

[†] Note: This analysis excludes party committee spending. However, party committee spending tends to cancel each other out; the volume of spending also generally does not match what outside groups put in.

The following chart shows how in six critical races—Pennsylvania, Missouri, Kentucky, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, and Ohio—conservative outside spending helped push evenly-matched campaigns into lopsided ones that ultimately favored winning Republican candidates.

A Thumb on the Scales Conservative Outside Spending in 2010 Senate Races

State	Candidates (Republican winners in bold)	Campaign Expenditures	Total liberal outside spending*	Total conservative outside spending*	Effective Republican advantage
Pennsylvania	Joe Sestak (49%)	\$13.8 million	\$4.0 million	\$9.1 million	\$8.3 million
	Pat Toomey (51%)	\$17.0 million			
Missouri	Robin Carnahan (41%)	\$10.3 million	\$2.9 million	\$7.5 million	\$6.4 million
	Roy Blunt (54%)	\$12.1 million			
Kentucky	Jack Conway (44%)	\$6.1 million	\$1.3 million	\$5.0 million	\$5.3 million
	Rand Paul (56%)	\$7.8 million			
New Hampshire	Paul Hodes (37%)	\$4.9 million	\$629,000	\$4.9 million	\$4.4 million
	Kelly Ayotte (60%)	\$5.0 million			
Wisconsin	Russ Feingold (47%)	\$15.5 million	\$927,000	\$3.9 million	\$2.8 million
	Ron Johnson (52%)	\$15.3 million			
Ohio	Lee Fisher (37%)	\$6.4 million	\$389,000	\$2.1 million	\$632,197
	Rob Portman (57%)	\$5.3 million			

*Excludes party committee spending; PPI analysis of outside data from OpenSecrets and campaign expenditure data from Federal Election Commission

As for liberal groups, there were only two races where liberals outspent conservatives. One was Arkansas—where almost all the money was spent on the primary in a failed effort to defeat then-incumbent Democrat Blanche Lincoln, not the general election. The other case was Indiana. Although liberal outside groups outspent conservatives by roughly \$500,000, it wasn't enough to make up a \$2 million difference in campaign fundraising by the candidates.

2. Nevertheless, conservatives spent more on average on losing Senate races than on winning ones.

Despite what might have happened in these six key states, big outside spending did not guarantee wins. For example, conservative outside groups were especially profligate in places such as Colorado, where they sank \$14.3 million into a failed bid to defeat Democrat Michael Bennet (who had been outraising challenger Ken Buck by a margin of better than 3-to-1), and in Nevada, where they plowed \$10.8 million in a losing effort to unseat Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.

On average, conservative groups spent nearly \$4.8 million apiece on races in which their chosen candidate eventually lost, versus an average of \$2.8 million spent on races in which their chosen candidate won.

Liberals, on the other hand, spent an average of \$2.2 million per winning campaign, versus \$1.5 million on campaigns in which they backed a loser.

Big Money; Big Losses

State	Match-up	Total conservative outside spending*	Winner
Colorado	Michael Bennet vs. Ken Buck	\$14.3 million	Bennet
Nevada	Harry Reid vs. Sharron Angle	\$10.8 million	Reid
Washington	Patty Murray vs. Dino Rossi	\$7.6 million	Murray
California	Barbara Boxer vs. Carly Fiorina	\$7.4 million	Boxer

*Excluding party committee spending; PPI analysis of data from OpenSecrets

Interestingly, outside groups did not figure prominently in two of the highest-profile losses for Republican candidates in 2010 in Connecticut and in Delaware—rather, these campaigns reached dizzying financial heights from direct spending by candidates, not because of outside money. In Connecticut, for example, Linda McMahon’s campaign spent \$50.2 million but still lost to Democrat Richard Blumenthal.

3. Overall, conservatives had a better “batting average” than liberals.

Despite big losses in some races, the sheer volume of conservative outside spending—aided and abetted by the tide of Tea Party fervor—still meant that the “batting average” of conservative outside groups was better than that of liberals.

Conservative groups spent an average of about \$3.4 million per race, while the liberal average per campaign was closer to \$1.8 million. In four states—Colorado, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Illinois—conservative outside groups spent close to \$10 million or more per race. Liberals spent more than \$10 million in just one race—and that was in the Arkansas primary.

As for “batting average,” liberal outside groups bet on 11 winning campaigns and 17 losing ones for a “batting average” of .393, while conservatives bet on 19 winners and 9 losers for a batting average of .679.[‡] (Liberal and conservative groups did not spend heavily in the same campaigns.)

Among the top ten most expensive campaigns for each set of groups, however, liberals did slightly better and conservatives fared worse in picking winners versus losers. As the table below shows, liberals won in half of the ten most expensive races they spent money in, while conservatives won six out of ten (while at the same spending much more).

[‡] The conservative batting average does not include Alaska, where conservative outside spending was spent mostly on a primary effort against Republican Lisa Murkowski, who later ran as an independent and won the seat.

**2010 Outside Spending
Winning Picks**

Liberal outside groups	Amount spent	Conservative outside groups	Amount spent
Colorado	\$8.1 million	Illinois	\$9.1 million
Nevada	\$5.8 million	Pennsylvania	\$9.1 million
Washington	\$5.7 million	Missouri	\$7.5 million
California	\$2.7 million	Florida	\$6.0 million
West Virginia	\$914,602	Kentucky	\$5.0 million
Delaware	\$403,453	New Hampshire	\$4.9 million
Connecticut	\$225,046	Wisconsin	\$3.9 million
Maryland	\$144,168	Arkansas	\$2.8 million
New York (2 seats)	\$86,422	Ohio	\$2.1 million
Oregon	\$37,583	Indiana	\$784,945
		North Carolina	\$751,091
		Utah	\$489,587
		Louisiana	\$359,857
		Arizona	\$64,806
		Iowa	\$63,040
		Oklahoma	\$13,256
		North Dakota	\$12,519
		Kansas	\$7,810
		South Carolina	\$5,204

*Analyses of data from OpenSecrets; excludes spending by party committees and includes only races in which outside group spending exceeded \$5,000.

Top 10 Most Expensive 2010 Senate Races for Outside Spending

Liberal groups	Total outside spending*	Conservative groups	Total outside spending *
1. Arkansas	\$10.0 million	1. Colorado	\$14.3 million
2. Colorado	\$8.1 million	2. Nevada	\$10.8 million
3. Nevada	\$5.8 million	3. Pennsylvania	\$9.1 million
4. Washington	\$5.7 million	4. Illinois	\$9.1 million
5. Pennsylvania	\$4.0 million	5. Washington	\$7.6 million
6. Missouri	\$2.9 million	6. Missouri	\$7.5 million
7. California	\$2.7 million	7. California	\$7.4 million
8. Illinois	\$2.4 million	8. Florida	\$6.0 million
9. Kentucky	\$1.3 million	9. Kentucky	\$5.0 million
10. Indiana	\$1.2 million	10. New Hampshire	\$4.9 million
Batting average	.500	Batting average	.600

*Excluding party committee spending; Source: PPI analysis of data from OpenSecrets

Takeaways

Money alone doesn't guarantee victory. As this analysis shows, some candidates in 2010 faced immense disadvantages both in campaign fundraising and in outside spending yet still managed to win their races.

This means that outside groups are either not that great in picking the candidates to spend money on—i.e., by choosing ideologically favored candidates over electable ones—or that money can't overcome prevailing political winds.

On the other hand, candidates in at least six races who faced an overwhelming—and unmatched—onslaught of outside spending lost. Even if these losses weren't the direct effect of outside spending, outside groups will feel increasing pressure to match the investments made by opposing groups in a race, if only to keep things even.

The result? An arms race in campaign spending that neither side can win and that shows no signs of ending.

Appendix

Note on methodology: Outside spending figures in this chart exclude spending by the national party committees (e.g. the Democratic National Committee, the Republican National Committee, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee). "Liberal" and "conservative" spending reflect total spending by outside groups as aggregated by OpenSecrets.org, using the site's designation of groups as "liberal" or "conservative." These figures exclude spending by outside groups that have no stated ideological leaning. "Liberal" or "conservative" spending includes spending both for a chosen candidate and against that candidate's opponent. For example, "liberal" spending in Colorado includes all spending by groups designated as "liberal," including spending for Democrat Michael Bennet and against Republican Ken Buck.

State	Matchup (winner in bold)	Total campaign expenditures	Total outside liberal spending	Total outside conservative spending	Total outside spending (non-committee)
Colorado	Michael Bennet	\$13,082,307	\$8,133,453	\$14,278,159	\$22,411,612
	Ken Buck	\$4,891,784			
Nevada	Harry Reid	\$22,548,567	\$5,804,435	\$10,752,778	\$16,557,213
	Sharron Angle	\$28,262,487			
Washington	Patty Murray	\$14,873,696	\$5,689,029	\$7,645,213	\$13,334,242
	Dino Rossi	\$9,421,111			
Pennsylvania	Joe Sestak	\$13,806,119	\$3,981,675	\$9,121,425	\$13,103,100
	Pat Toomey	\$16,998,137			
Arkansas	Blanche Lincoln	\$11,545,776	\$10,046,407	\$2,793,387	\$12,839,794
	John Boozman	\$3,666,977			
Illinois	Alexi Giannoulias	\$9,902,006	\$2,382,854	\$9,111,383	\$11,494,237
	Mark Kirk	\$14,146,755			
Missouri	Robin Carnahan	\$10,311,557	\$2,926,445	\$7,516,014	\$10,442,459
	Roy Blunt	\$12,141,841			
California	Barbara Boxer	\$6,039,396	\$2,722,163	\$7,357,570	\$10,079,733
	Carly Fiorina	\$22,635,900			
Florida	Kendrick Meek	\$9,280,964	\$882,356	\$6,050,851	\$6,933,207
	Charlie Crist	\$13,608,676			
	Marco Rubio	\$21,638,315			
Kentucky	Jack Conway	\$6,127,990	\$1,309,878	\$5,007,262	\$6,317,140
	Rand Paul	\$7,756,095			
New Hampshire	Paul Hodes	\$4,912,819	\$628,938	\$4,904,999	\$5,533,937
	Kelly Ayotte	\$5,041,009			
Wisconsin	Russ Feingold	\$15,544,093	\$927,334	\$3,913,237	\$4,840,571
	Ron Johnson	\$15,316,651			
Alaska	Scott McAdams	\$1,268,031	\$176,628	\$2,725,545	\$2,902,173
	Lisa Murkowski (I)	\$4,113,372			
West Virginia	Joe Manchin	\$4,017,802	\$914,602	\$1,747,305	\$2,661,907
	John Raese	\$2,777,337			
Ohio	Lee Fisher	\$6,383,162	\$389,427	\$2,147,168	\$2,536,595
	Rob Portman	\$5,257,618			
Indiana	Brad Ellsworth	\$2,590,431	\$1,218,417	\$784,945	\$2,003,362
	Dan Coats	\$4,762,355			
Delaware	Chris Coons	\$3,869,062	\$403,453	\$602,804	\$1,006,257
	Christine O'Donnell	\$6,999,106			
Louisiana	Charlie Melancon	\$4,718,938	\$529,773	\$359,857	\$889,630
	David Vitter	\$10,572,617			

Connecticut	Richard Blumenthal	\$8,718,286	\$225,046	\$587,540	\$812,586
	Linda McMahon	\$50,181,464			
North Carolina	Elaine Marshall	\$2,869,346	\$19,956	\$751,091	\$771,047
	Richard Burr	\$4,770,832			
Utah	Sam Granato	\$305,629	\$32,486	\$489,587	\$522,073
	Mike Lee	\$1,800,865			
New York	Kirsten Gillibrand	\$13,007,808	\$46,260	\$143,681	\$189,941
	Joseph DioGuardi	\$3,192,289			
Maryland	Barbara Mikulski	\$3,990,768	\$144,168	\$0	\$144,168
	Eric Wargotz	\$1,240,730			
Iowa	Roxanne Conlin	\$3,123,307	\$71,377	\$63,040	\$134,417
	Chuck Grassley	\$6,749,896			
Arizona	Rodney Glassman	\$1,401,586	\$23,431	\$64,806	\$88,237
	John McCain	\$20,490,726			
North Dakota	Tracy Potter	\$28,279	\$67,564	\$12,519	\$80,083
	John Hoeven	\$2,909,158			
Vermont	Patrick Leahy	\$3,191,051	\$0	\$50,000	\$50,000
	Len Britton	\$231,484			
New York	Charles Schumer	\$18,143,841	\$40,162	\$1,693	\$41,855
	Jay Townsend	\$217,593			
Oregon	Ron Wyden	\$6,424,975	\$37,583	\$1,875	\$39,458
	Jiff Huffman	\$2,204,734			
Oklahoma	Jim Rogers	\$0	\$0	\$13,256	\$13,256
	Tom Coburn	\$2,492,983			
Kansas	Lisa Johnston	\$31,235	\$425	\$7,810	\$8,235
	Jerry Moran	\$6,525,438			
South Carolina	Alvin Greene	\$0	\$0	\$5,204	\$5,204
	Jim DeMint	\$3,588,246			
Idaho	Tom Sullivan	\$99,836	\$0	\$4,413	\$4,413
	Mike Crapo	\$2,515,883			
Georgia	Michael Thurmond	\$336,174	\$530	\$2,300	\$2,830
	Johnny Isakson	\$7,644,615			
Alabama	William Barnes	\$5,871	\$0	\$1,480	\$1,480
	Richard Shelby	\$1,508,102			
South Dakota	NONE	\$0	\$0	\$959	\$959
	John Thune	\$3,303,842			
Hawaii	Daniel Inouye	\$4,148,212	\$0	\$0	\$0
	Cam Cavasso	\$274,174			

Endnotes

¹ Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, 558 U.S. 08-205 (2010). For background, see for example, Adam Liptak, “Justices, 5-4, Reject Corporate Spending Limit,” Jan. 21, 2010, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/22/us/politics/22scotus.html>.

² OpenSecrets, “Outside Spending: Total Outside Spending by Election Cycle, Excluding Party Committees,” <http://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/index.php?cycle=2012&view=A&chart=N> (accessed January 15, 2012).

³ OpenSecrets, “Total Liberal vs. Conservative Outside Spending, Excluding Party Committees,” <http://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/index.php?cycle=2012&view=A&chart=N> (accessed January 15, 2012).

⁴ OpenSecrets, *Ibid.*

About the Author

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About the Progressive Policy Institute

The Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) is an independent research institution that seeks to define and promote a new progressive politics in the 21st century. Through research and policy analysis, PPI challenges the status quo and advocates for radical policy solutions.