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Election Spending 2012:
25 Toss-Up House Races
By Sundeep Iyer

INTRODUCTION

This election season, an influx of outside money made possible by the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United* has redrawn the political landscape. Historical spending records will be shattered. Most attention has focused on the battle for the White House and Senate. But control of the House of Representatives is at stake, too. Victories in relatively few Congressional contests could shift control of the chamber. Not surprisingly, large sums are raised and spent in these races. Here, too, the new reality of big money in American politics makes itself felt.

This issue brief analyzes the most hotly contested House races, focusing on the 25 toss-up House races identified by the Cook Political Report one month before Election Day.¹ The outcomes of these 25 races will go a long way towards determining which party controls the House in the 113th Congress.

Relying on the most recent Federal Election Commission (FEC) campaign finance filings, we examine three key spending patterns in these toss-up districts. First, we examine the relative role of candidate spending as compared to spending by party committees and independent outside groups, through September 30th. Next, we examine the role played by small donors and larger donors in driving candidate fundraising through the end of September. Finally, we examine outside group and party committee spending over the first two weeks of October. In the 2010 election, much of the surge in Republican outside spending that helped the GOP retake the House only came in October. In this issue brief, we assess whether a similar surge happened through the first half of October 2012.

At the outset, it is important to note that while the outside spending totals reported here include expenditures by non-profit groups on “express advocacy,” which are reported to the FEC, they do not include expenditures on any so-called “issue ads” that tax-exempt groups ran early in the campaign, which are not required to be reported to the FEC.² Therefore, the figures cited in this issue brief understate the absolute totals of outside spending this election cycle. The analysis here focuses on the total expenditures that have been publicly reported to the FEC. Given the torrid pace of spending in House races, the trends we identify may change over the final weeks of the election.

Based on the Brennan Center's analysis of the 25 toss-up House races, several important trends emerge:

- Through the end of September, **outside group spending was on par with party committee spending in the 25 toss-up House races: the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) and Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) together spent \$24.9 million, while Republican-leaning and Democratic-leaning outside groups spent \$24.8 million.** Outside group spending has nearly kept pace with party committee spending through the first two weeks of October, too. The fact that outside group spending and party spending are roughly on par affirms the importance of outside groups in shaping the electoral landscape in 2012.
- **In 11 of the 25 toss-up House races, candidate spending accounted for less than half of the total money spent in the district through the end of September.** Overall, in the 25 toss-up House races, candidate spending accounted for less than 60 percent of all spending.

- **Disclosed Republican spending in the 25 toss-up House races exceeded Democratic spending by \$14 million** through the end of September: Republican spending totaled \$68.7 million and Democratic spending totaled \$54.7 million. This aggregate disparity, however, is somewhat misleading. A single race — in Florida's 18th district, represented by Republican freshman Allen West — accounts for much of the disparity, as West has dramatically outspent his Democratic opponent. Leaving aside the spending patterns in West's district, the aggregate totals are much closer: **Republicans have outspent Democrats by \$5 million** through the end of September in the other two-dozen other toss-up House races, **spending \$56 million compared to the Democrats' \$51 million**. Republicans had an overall spending advantage in 15 of these 24 races.
- Through the end of September, Republicans relied more on non-candidate spending (which includes party committee and outside group spending) than their Democratic counterparts: **excluding the 18th district in Florida, three-fifths of Democratic spending comes from candidates, as compared to barely one-half of Republican spending**. Higher spending by the NRCC — more so than its Democratic counterpart— carried Republicans to a slight overall money advantage in toss-up House races, not higher spending by Republican-leaning Super PACs and outside groups. Republicans did not have a spending advantage among Super PACs and other outside groups; to the contrary, **Super PACs and other outside groups actually made up a slightly larger share of overall Democratic spending than overall Republican spending through the end of September**.
- Most Republican and Democratic candidates in the 25 toss-up House races have not relied significantly on small donors. **Republican candidates raised 18.3 percent of their money from small donations of \$200 or less through the end of September, compared to 12.5 percent for Democratic candidates**. But here, too, a single data point — Florida's 18th district, where the incumbent Allen West raised a staggering \$7.4 million in small donations through September 30th — accounts for much of this disparity. **Excluding Florida's 18th district, Republican candidates in the other two-dozen toss-up races raised 7.6 percent of their money from small donations, compared to 12.4 percent for Democrats**. In 17 of these 24 toss-up races, small donations made up a greater portion of candidate fundraising for Democrats than for Republicans.
- **Republicans in the 25 toss-up House races had a slight advantage in overall non-candidate spending during the first two weeks of October**. However, they gained that advantage only because the NRCC significantly outspent the DCCC. Excluding the two party committees, **during the first two weeks of October, Democratic-leaning Super PACs and other outside groups actually spent slightly more than their Republican counterparts in the 25 toss-up House districts**. This suggests that unlike the 2010 election, there has yet to be a significant October Republican surge in outside spending in the most competitive House races.

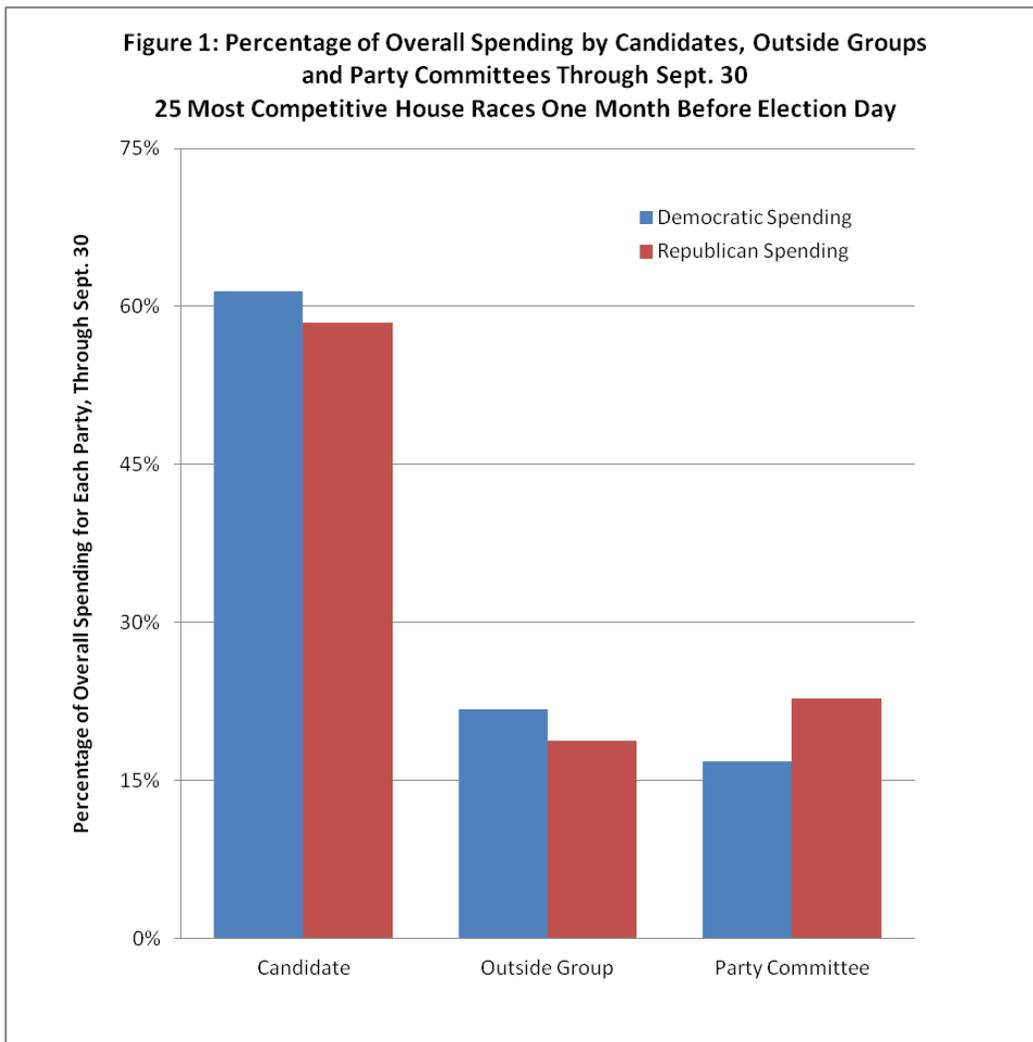
The candidate spending data in this issue brief are derived from the Center for Responsive Politics' compilation of data from candidates' Federal Election Commission (FEC) filings.³ We define small donations as those of \$200 or less. FEC filings refer to these as "unitemized contributions"; donations larger than \$200 are referred to as "itemized contributions" by the FEC. The independent expenditure data are based on the Brennan Center's analysis of Federal Election Commission (FEC) filings. To enable accurate comparisons between candidate and independent spending based on the respective filing deadlines, Parts I and II of this issue brief examine only spending data through September 30th. Part III, by contrast, focuses on non-candidate spending between October 1st and October 15th.

I. CANDIDATE AND NON-CANDIDATE SPENDING IN TOSS-UP HOUSE RACES

In the 25 toss-up House races, overall Republican spending (candidate, outside group, and party committee spending) totaled **\$68.7 million** through September 30th. Overall Democratic spending totaled **\$54.7 million**.

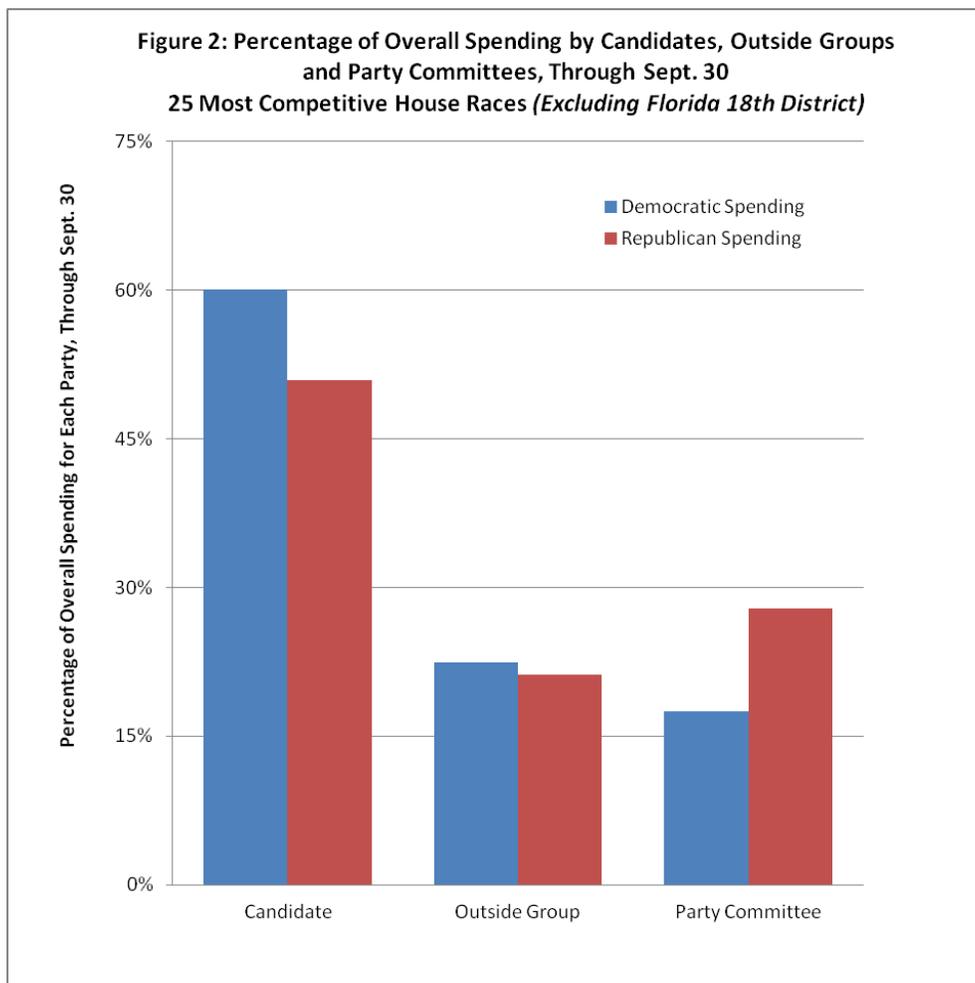
As Figure 1 shows, the distribution of aggregate candidate, party committee, and outside group spending is roughly similar for Republicans and Democrats. Through the end of September, candidates accounted for 59.8 percent of overall spending in the 25 toss-up districts. Democrats in these 25 House races were actually slightly more reliant on outside groups than Republicans were, while Republicans were more reliant on their party committee, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC).

Overall, though, **outside group spending was on par with party committee spending in the 25 toss-up House races: the NRCC and DCCC together spent \$24.9 million through the end of September, while Republican-leaning and Democratic-leaning outside groups together spent \$24.8 million.** This affirms the outside importance of outside group spending in shaping the electoral landscape in the most competitive House races.

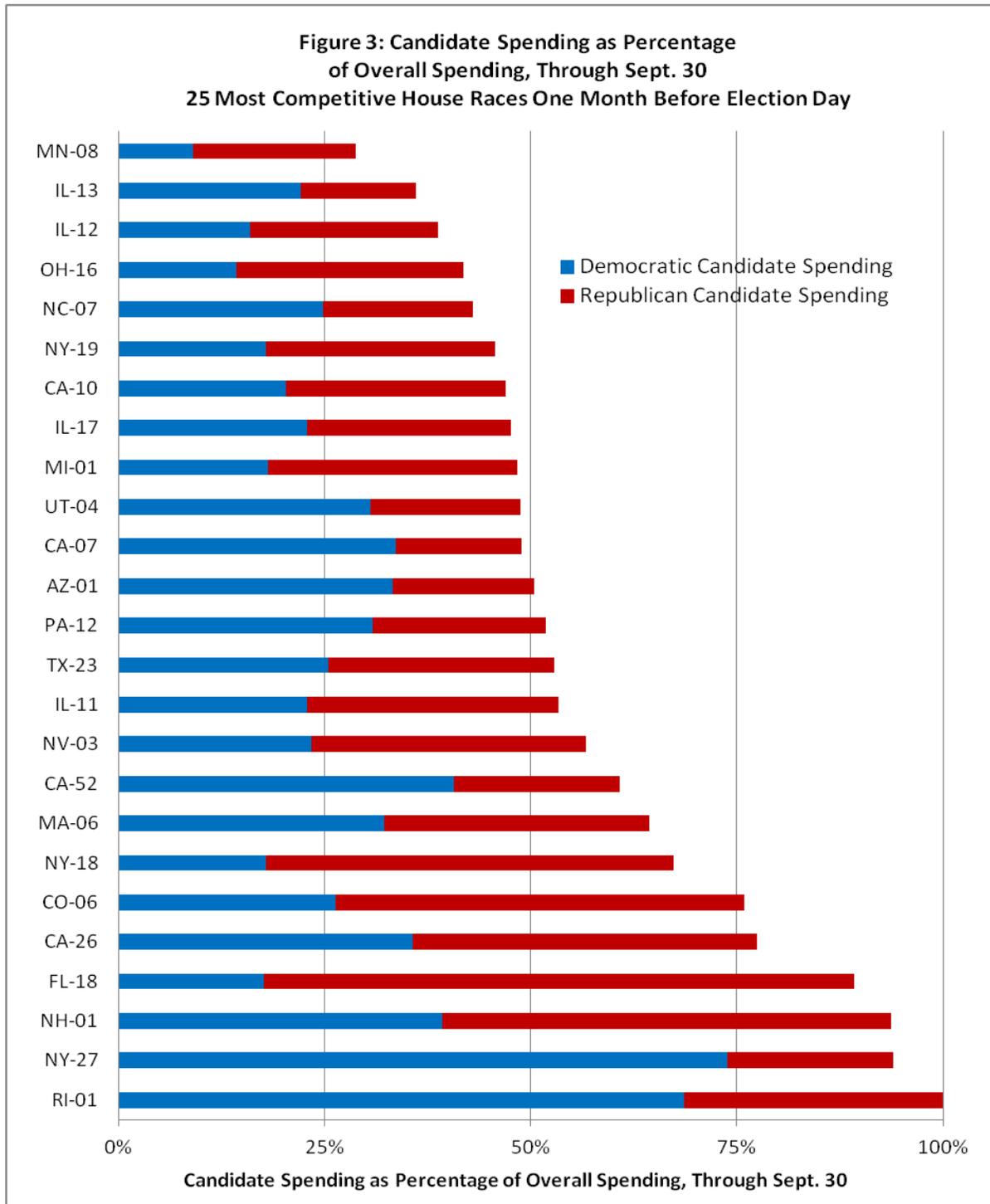


Much of the overall Republican spending advantage, however, comes from one district: Florida's 18th district. There, Republican Rep. Allen West has outspent his opponent, Democrat Patrick Murphy, by \$8.7 million through the end of September. In the 25 toss-up races, no other candidate has outspent his or her opponent by even half that amount.

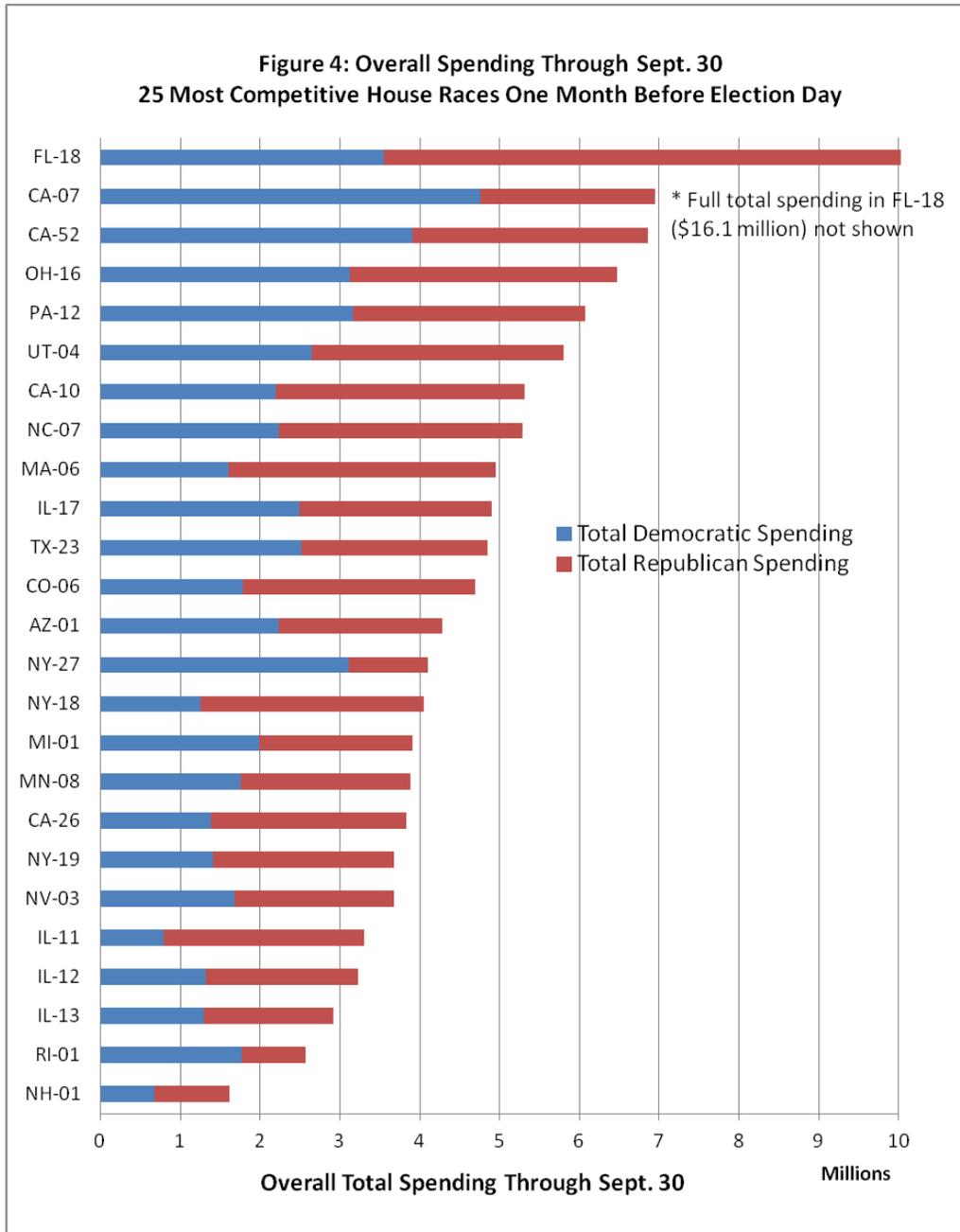
As Figure 2 shows, excluding Florida's 18th district, overall spending is much closer to parity: In the other 24 toss-up races, overall Republican spending is \$56.1 million, and overall Democratic spending is \$51.1 million. The remaining Republican advantage is primarily explained by the fact that the NRCC outspent the DCCC in these 24 races by over \$6.4 million through the end of September. After Florida's 18th district is excluded, the data suggest that Republicans in the toss-up districts were more reliant on non-candidate spending than their Democratic counterparts: candidates accounted for 60.1 percent of overall Democratic spending but barely half (51 percent) of overall Republican spending.



In 11 of the 25 toss-up House races, candidates accounted for less than 50 percent of the total money spent in the district through the end of September. In other words, Super PACs, party committees and other outside groups spent more than the candidates themselves in these 11 districts. As Figure 3 indicates, candidate spending accounted for the smallest fraction of overall spending in Minnesota's 8th district: party committees and outside groups outspent the candidates by over a two-to-one margin in the district through the end of September.

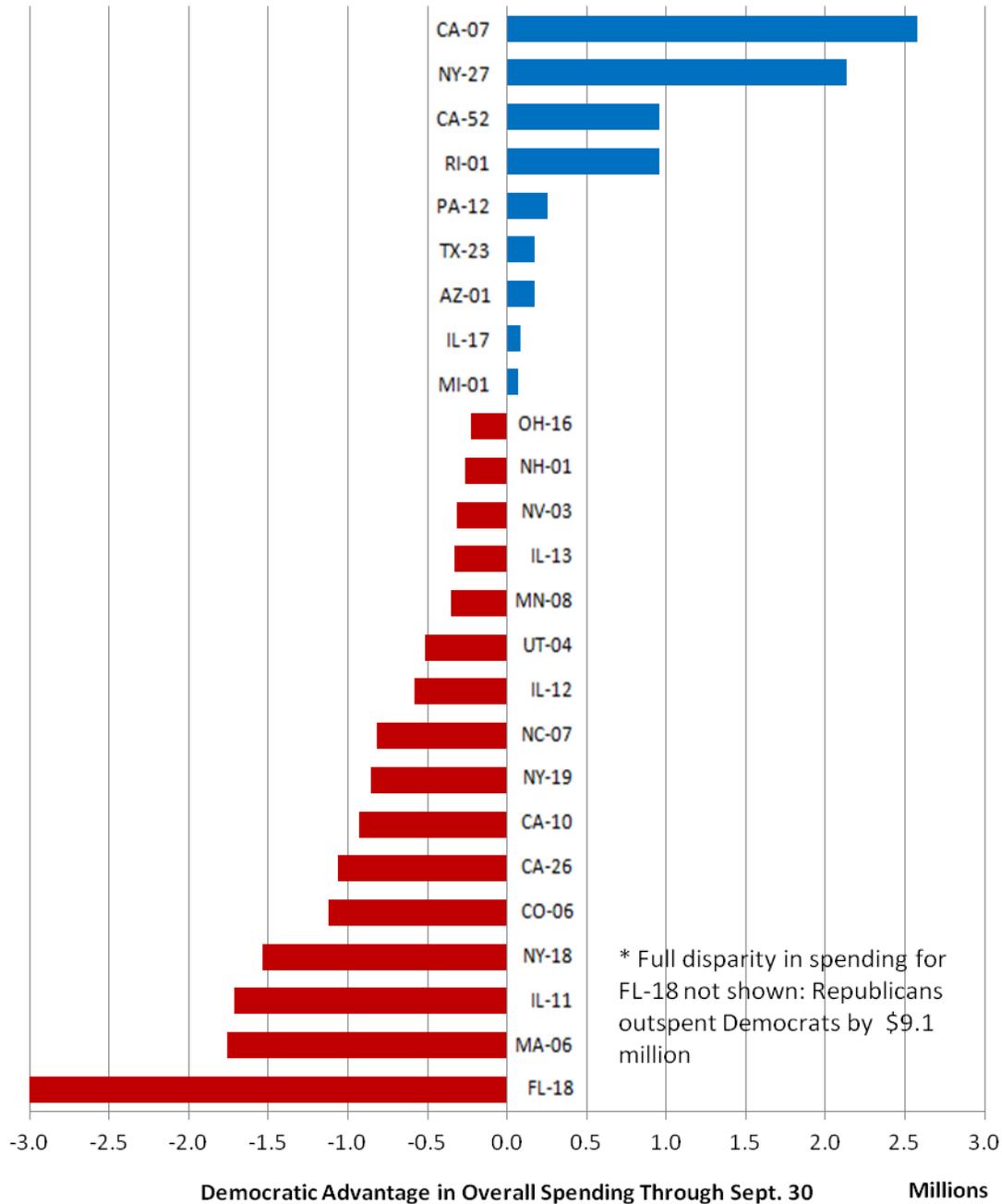


Through the end of September, overall spending (including candidates, party committees, and outside groups) exceeded \$5 million in 8 of the 25 toss-up districts and \$3 million in 22 of the 25 toss-up districts. As noted above, Florida's 18th district was a clear outlier. Spending in the district exceeded \$16 million through the end of September, owing in large part to the fact that Republican incumbent Allen West had spent \$11.6 million. No other candidate in the 25 toss-up districts spent more than \$3.1 million through the end of September.



Through the end of September, Republicans had an overall spending advantage in 16 of the 25 toss-up House districts. Republicans hold their greatest advantage in Florida's 18th district, where they outspent Democrats by \$9.1 million. In five other districts, Republicans outspent Democrats by more than \$1 million. Democrats held an advantage that large in only two districts: California's 7th district, where Republican Rep. Dan Lungren faces Democrat Ami Bera in a rematch from the 2010 election, and New York's 27th district, where freshman Democrat Rep. Kathy Hochul faces Republican Chris Collins.

**Figure 5: Democratic Advantage in Overall Spending Through Sept. 30
25 Most Competitive House Districts One Month Before Election Day**

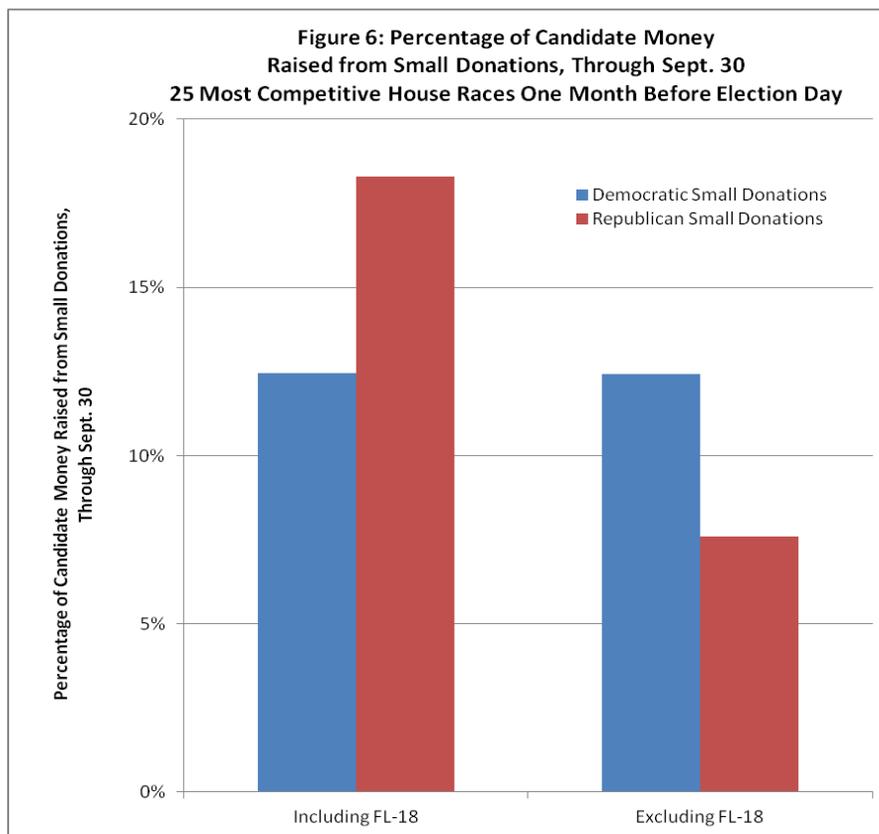


II. THE IMPORTANCE OF SMALL DONORS IN TOSS-UP HOUSE CONTESTS

Part II examines the relative role of small donations in funding candidate campaigns in the 25 toss-up House races through the end of September.

In the 25 toss-up House races, Republican candidates raised 18.3 percent of their money from small donations of \$200 or less through the end of September, compared to just 12.5 percent for Democratic candidates. Overall, Democratic candidates received \$5.7 million in small donations, and Republican candidates received \$10.8 million.

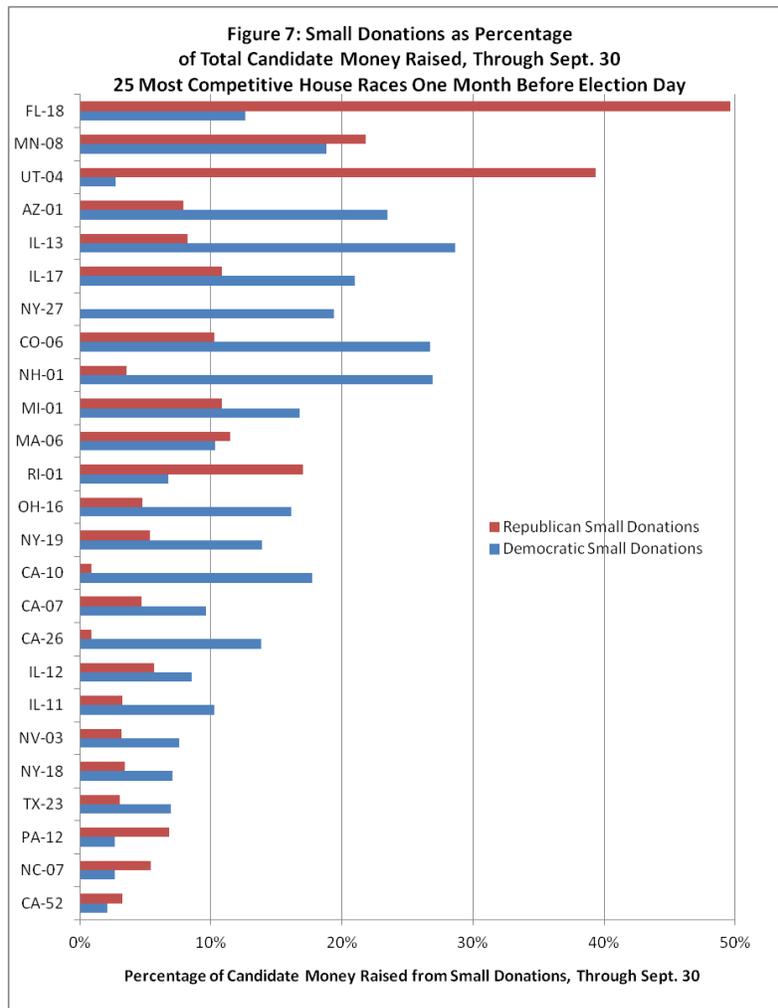
However, as Figure 6 shows, the appearance of greater Republican reliance on small donor fundraising is largely driven by one data point: Florida's 18th district, where freshman Republican Rep. Allen West faces Democratic challenger Patrick Murphy. West raised a staggering \$7.45 million from small donors through the end of September; this represented 49.6 percent of his fundraising haul. In fact, West raised \$1.7 million more from small donors than the 25 Democratic candidates in toss-up races *combined*.



Excluding Florida's 18th district from the analysis suggests a different picture. Republican candidates in the other 24 toss-up House races raised only 7.6 percent of their money from small donations, compared to 12.4 percent for Democratic candidates. With the obvious exception of West, Democratic candidates in the toss-up House races were more reliant on small donors for their fundraising than their Republican counterparts.

In 17 of the 25 toss-up House races, Democratic candidates relied more on small donations for their fundraising than Republican candidates did through the end of September.

Given Rep. Allen West's enormous fundraising haul from small donors, it is no surprise that small donors made up a larger portion of candidate fundraising in Florida's 18th district than in any other toss-up district. The district with the next highest level of candidate reliance on small donors was Minnesota's 8th district, where Republican freshman Rep. Chip Cravaack faces former Rep. Rick Nolan. Both candidates in the district raised about 20 percent of their money from small donations.

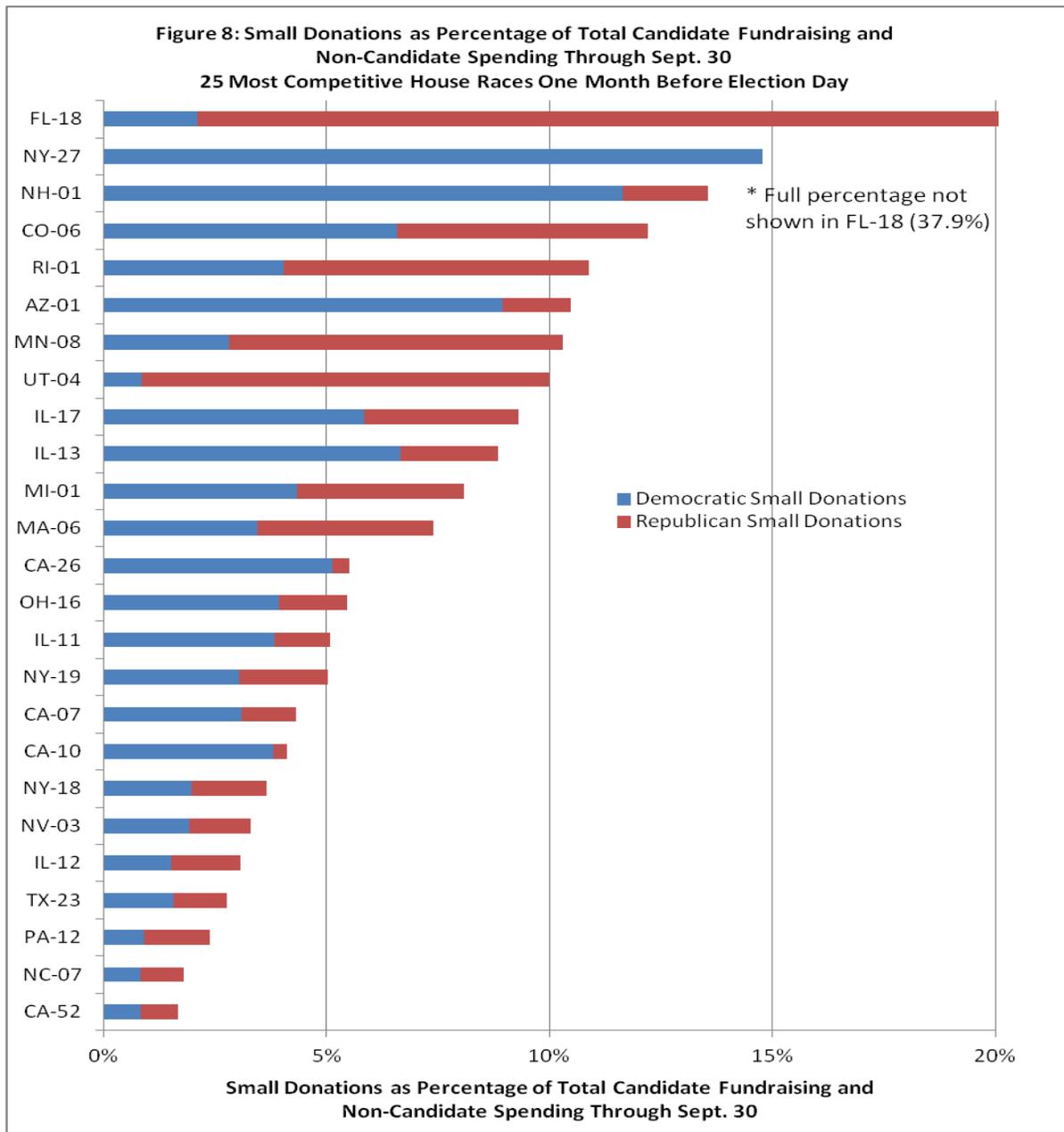


Republican challenger Mia Love in Utah's 4th district depended more on small donations for her fundraising than any candidate in a toss-up House district except for West. Love has raised 39.4 percent of her money from small donations through the end of September. Among the 25 Democratic candidates in toss-up races, David Gill, a candidate in Illinois' 13th district, has relied most on small donations: about 28.7 percent of Gill's fundraising has come from donations under \$200.

Notably, through the end of September, 17 of the 21 candidates challenging an incumbent in a toss-up race have relied more on small donations than the incumbents they face this November. (Four toss-up races are open seats where no incumbent is running.)

Of course, candidate spending is only one part of the money picture. Figure 8 considers the importance of small donations to candidates within the overall money picture, comparing small donations to candidates with the total amount of candidate fundraising and non-candidate spending through September 30th. The figure shows that in 7 of the 25 toss-up House races, small donors to candidates account for more than 10 percent of all candidate fundraising and non-candidate spending.

In Florida's 18th district, small donors have accounted for nearly 38 percent of candidate fundraising and non-candidate spending through September 30th. Small donations have also played a large role in New York's 27th district, where small donations to Democratic Rep. Kathy Hochul have accounted for almost 15 percent of all candidate fundraising and non-candidate spending in the district. Among the 25 toss-up House races, small donations have played the least important role in California's 52nd district, where such donations to candidates make up less than 2 percent of all candidate fundraising and non-candidate spending.



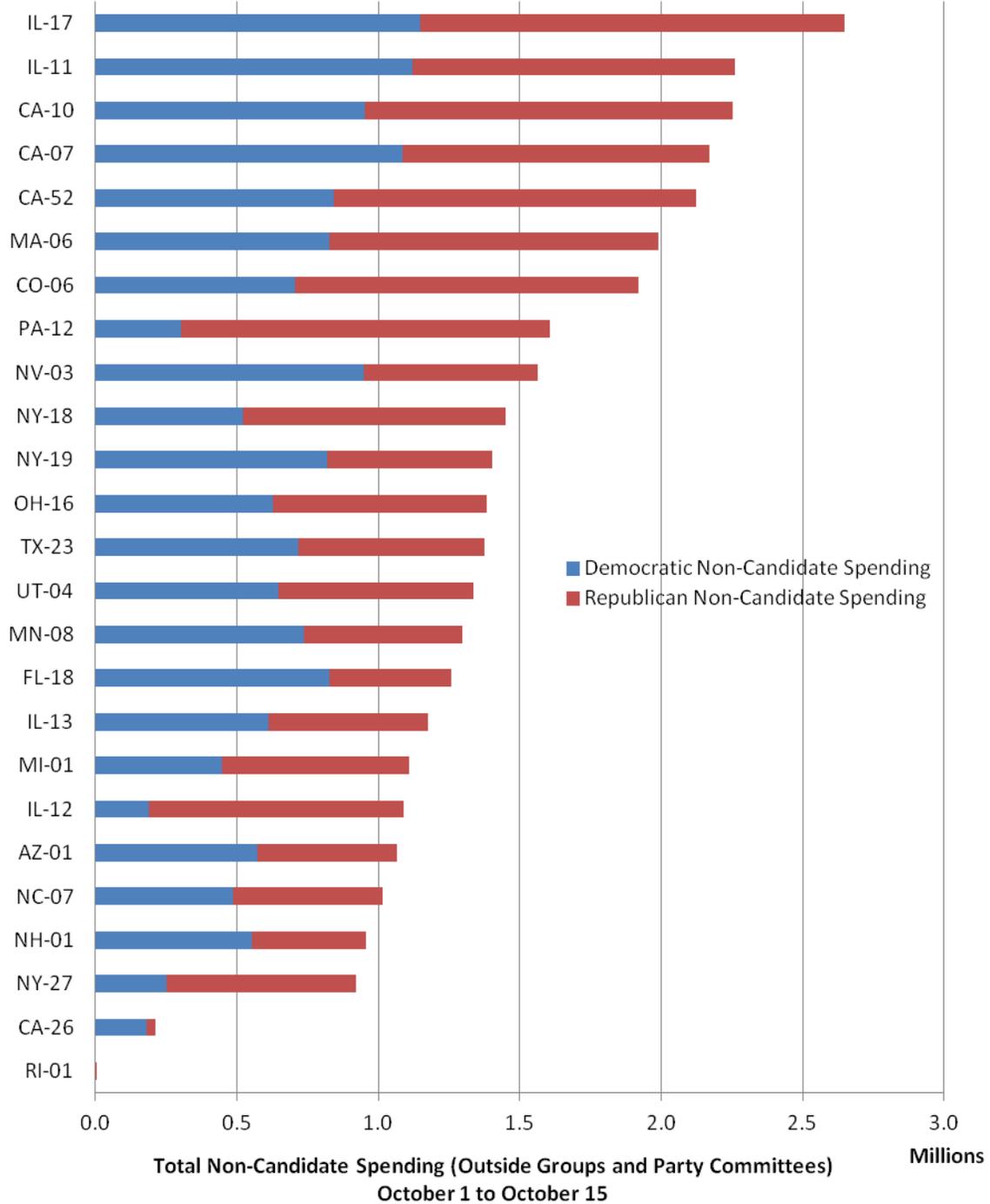
III. NON-CANDIDATE SPENDING IN TOSS-UP RACES: THE FIRST TWO WEEKS OF OCTOBER

Part III examines outside group and party committee spending over the first two weeks of October. Through the end of September, Republican-leaning and Democratic-leaning outside groups were on roughly equal footing in House contests. However, in the 2010 election, much of the surge in Republican outside spending that helped the GOP retake the House only came in October. Has a similar surge happened so far in October 2012?

As Figure 9 (on the next page) indicates, party committee and outside group spending continue to play an important role in House races. **During the first two weeks of October, non-candidate expenditures exceeded \$1 million in 21 of the 25 toss-up House races.**

Illinois' 17th district, where freshman Republican Rep. Bobby Schilling faces Democratic nominee Cheri Bustos, was the site of the most non-candidate spending (nearly \$2.7 million) during the first two weeks of October. Notably, the five House districts with the most non-candidate spending during the first two weeks of October were in Illinois and California. Neither state has a competitive presidential or Senate contest this November, so while voters in these states have not seen the levels of political advertising airing in presidential swing states, they have nonetheless been inundated with advertising supporting and opposing their House candidates.

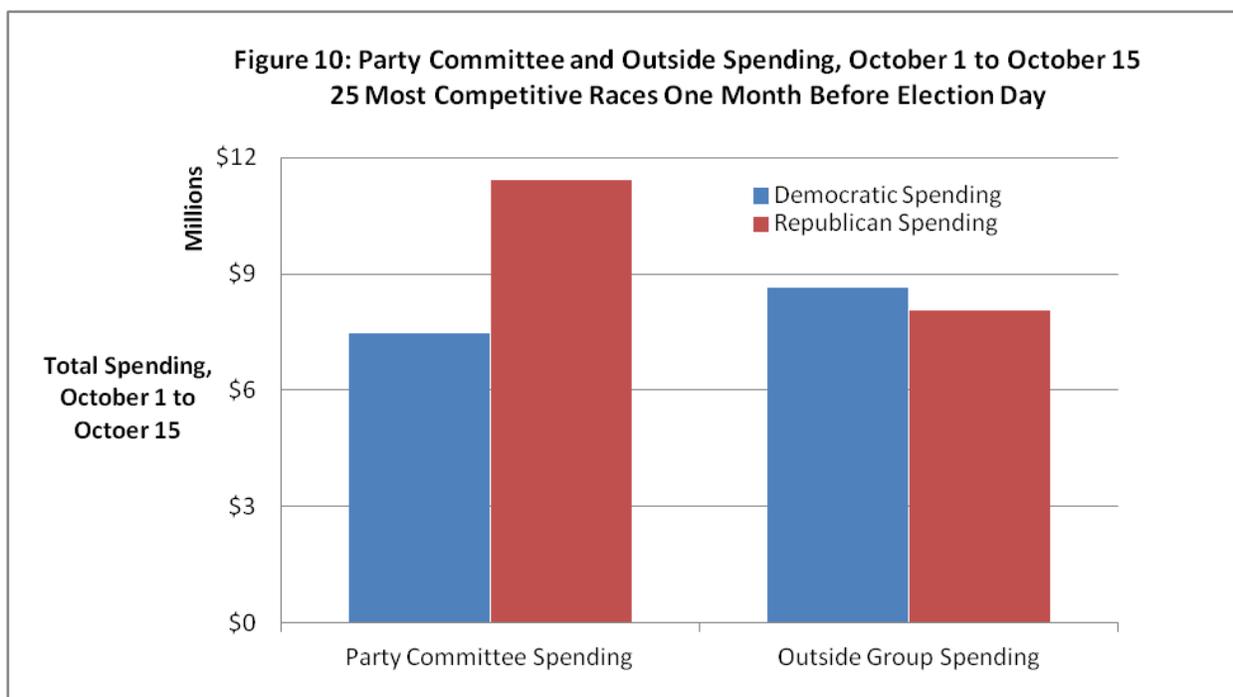
**Figure 9: Overall Non-Candidate Spending, October 1 to October 15
25 Most Competitive House Races One Month Before Election Day**



Through the end of September, in the 25 toss-up House races, Super PACs and other outside groups reported almost \$25 million in spending. That spending was roughly evenly divided between Democratic-leaning groups, who spent about \$11.9 million, and Republican-leaning groups, who spent about \$12.9 million. However, the NRCC significantly outspent the DCCC: through the end of September, the NRCC spent \$15.7 million, as compared to \$9.2 million by the DCCC.

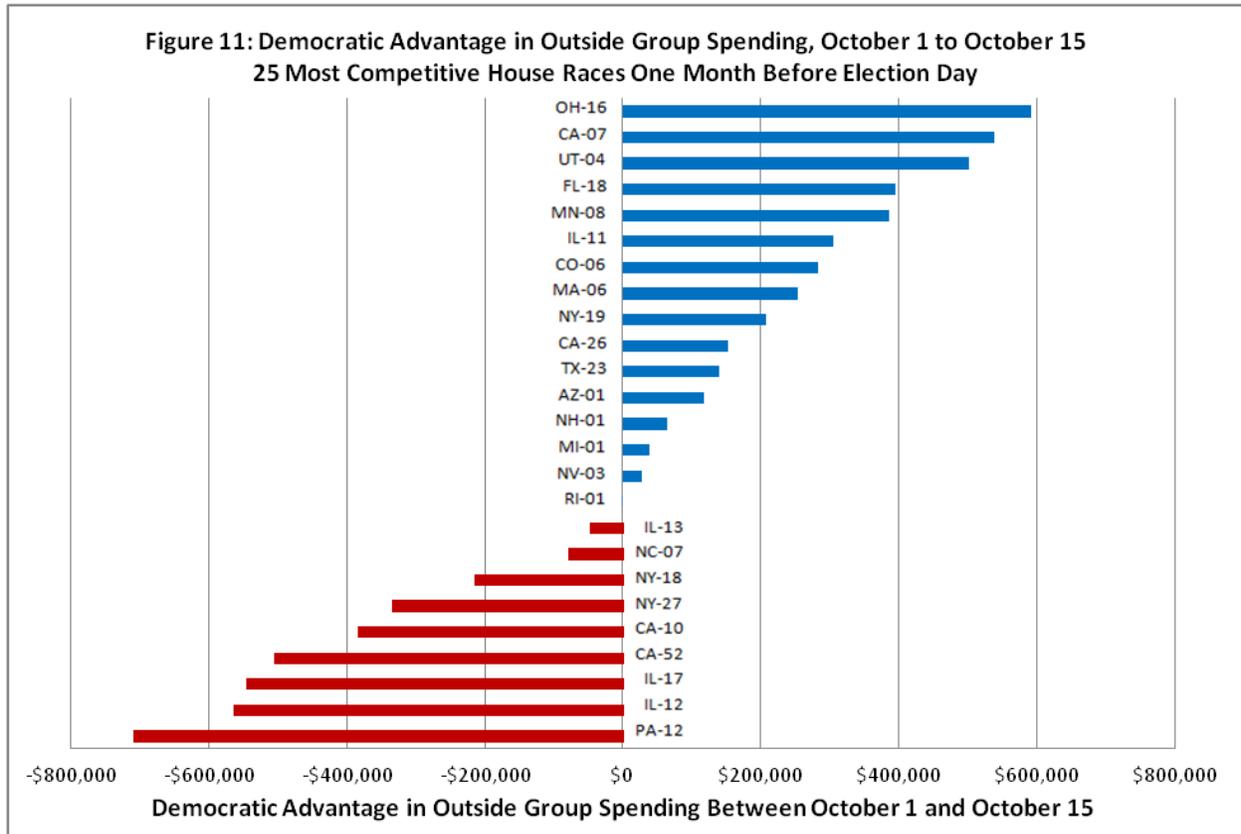
Overall, outside spending nearly kept pace with party committee spending during the first two weeks of October. The NRCC and DCCC together spent \$18.9 million, while Republican-leaning and Democratic-leaning outside groups spent \$16.7 million.

In the first two weeks of October 2012, there has not been a surge in Republican outside spending in the 25 toss-up House races. Overall, in the first two weeks of October, Democratic-leaning outside groups have actually outspent Republican-leaning outside groups slightly in these contests, with \$8.6 million compared to \$8.1 million for Republican-leaning groups.



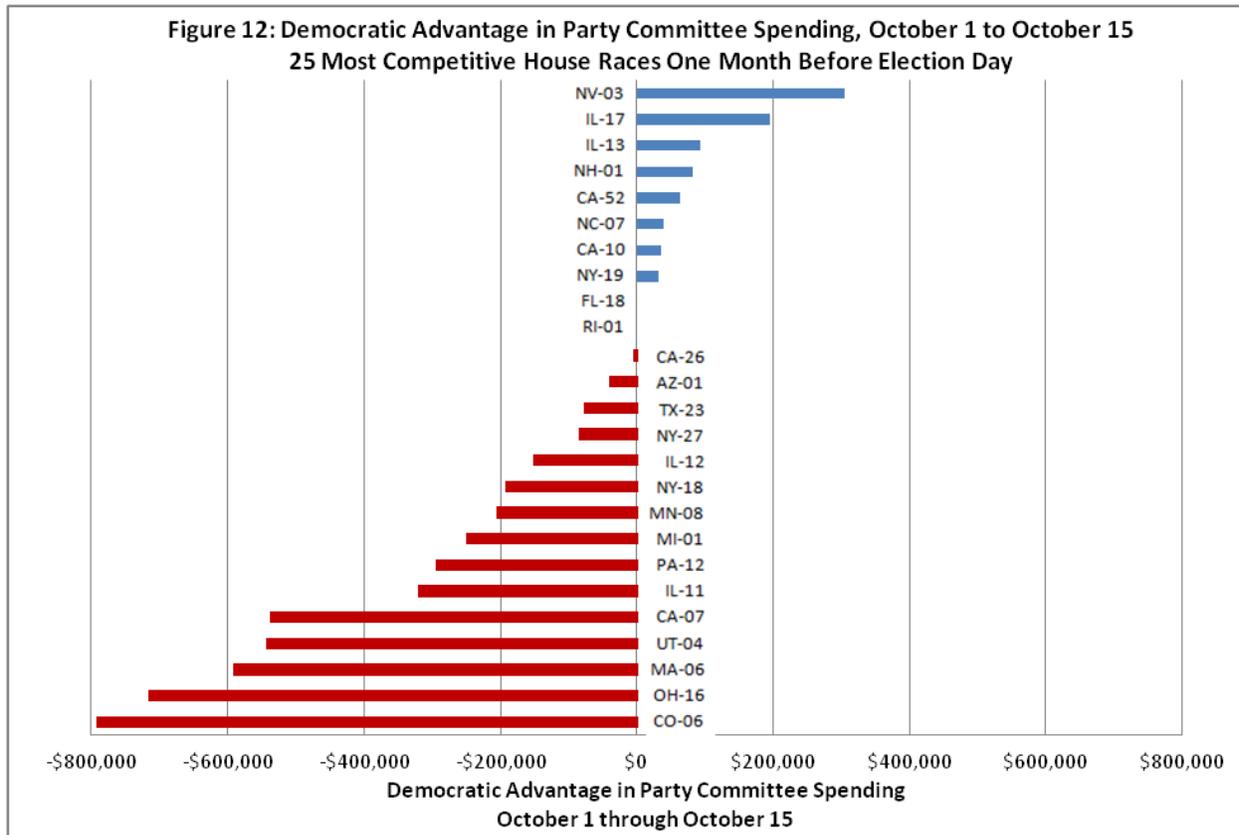
Nonetheless, the NRCC continues to outspend the DCCC in the 25 toss-up House races. **This has given Republicans a slight advantage in overall non-candidate spending during the first two weeks of October.** Of the \$35.6 million in non-candidate spending, Republican-leaning groups and the NRCC have accounted for \$19.5 million, while the DCCC and Democratic-leaning groups have accounted for \$16.1 million.

In 15 of the 25 toss-up House races, Democratic outside groups have a significant advantage over their Republican counterparts. The biggest Democratic advantage is in Ohio's 16th district, where incumbents Jim Renacci (R) and Betty Sutton (D) were paired together during redistricting. There, Democratic-leaning outside groups have spent more than \$625,000, while Republican-leaning groups have spent less than \$40,000. The biggest Republican advantage is in Pennsylvania's 12th district, where Democratic Rep. Mark Critz faces Republican challenger Keith Rothfus. Republican-leaning outside groups have spent about \$700,000 more than their Democratic counterparts.



The NRCC has the advantage over the DCCC in 15 of the 25 toss-up House races, while the DCCC holds a significant advantage in just 8 races. In two races (Florida's 18th district and Rhode Island's 1st district), neither the DCCC nor the NRCC spent any money during the first two weeks of October.

The DCCC's greatest advantage is in the Nevada 3rd district, where it has outspent the NRCC by \$305,000. However, there are five races where the NRCC has outspent the DCCC by more than that amount. The disparity between the NRCC and DCCC is greatest in the Colorado 6th district, where the NRCC has poured more than \$1 million into the district, as compared to just \$270,000 by the DCCC.



ENDNOTES

¹ This issue brief relies on *The Cook Political Report's* ratings released on October 5, 2012, about one month before Election Day.

² Independent analysis concludes that such groups have spent tens of millions of dollars on such unreported “issue ads” during this election cycle; this issue brief does not address how much spending has occurred in the 25 toss-up districts examined here. It is as yet unknown how much outside groups have spent on issue ads in House races this election cycle.

³ These filings, reported by October 15, 2012, cover the period ending on September 30, 2012.

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