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FOR JUSTICE

Post-Election Analysis:  
2012 Toss-Up House Races

*By Sundeep Iyer*

## INTRODUCTION

During the 2012 election, an influx of outside money—made possible by the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United*—shaped the political landscape. While most attention focused on the battle for the White House and Senate, control of the House of Representatives was at stake, too. On Election Day, Republicans retained control of the House. Democrats picked up just 8 of the 25 seats required to retake the chamber. Not surprisingly, candidates and outside groups raised and spent large sums in many House races.

Before the election, the Brennan Center examined spending patterns in some of the most hotly contested House races in the country through the end of September. Now that the election is over, we have revisited some of the most important spending trends in the races that decided the battle for control of the House. This issue brief presents the Brennan Center's final analysis of spending patterns in the 29 toss-up House races identified by the Cook Political Report on Election Day 2012.<sup>1</sup>

Relying on post-election Federal Election Commission (FEC) campaign finance filings, we examined three key spending patterns in these toss-up districts. First, we compared candidate spending to spending by party committees and independent outside groups through the duration of the campaign. Next, we reviewed the role small donors played in driving candidate fundraising. Finally, we analyzed outside group and party committee spending patterns over the final month of the campaign.

This analysis focuses on the total expenditures that have been publicly reported to the FEC. Due to FEC reporting requirements, tax-exempt groups must report their expenditures on "express advocacy," but they do not need to report expenditures on any so-called "issue ads" that they ran early in the campaign.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the figures cited in this issue brief understate the absolute totals of outside spending this election cycle.

Based on the Brennan Center's analysis of the 29 toss-up House races, several important trends emerge:

- **Overall, candidate spending accounted for just 46 percent of total spending.** Candidates accounted for less than half of the total money spent in 19 of the 29 toss-up districts.
- **Outside group spending exceeded party committee spending,** demonstrating the crucial role played by outside groups in shaping the electoral landscape in 2012. Republican-leaning and Democratic-leaning outside groups together spent **\$88.5 million**, while the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) and Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) together spent **\$79.7 million**.
- **Disclosed Republican spending exceeded Democratic spending by about \$33 million in the toss-up races:** Including candidate, party committee, and outside group expenditures, Republicans spent \$172.7 million, while Democrats spent \$139.4 million. **Republicans had a spending advantage in 23 of the 29 toss-up races, yet they won just 8 of these 23 races** and lost the four races where they had the greatest spending advantage. Overall, in 16 of the 29 toss-up races, the party with the overall spending advantage in the district lost.

- Republicans held an advantage in candidate spending and party committee spending, but the most significant driver of their overall spending advantage was outside spending. **Republican-leaning super PACs and outside groups outspent their Democratic counterparts by \$16 million and held the advantage in 22 of the 29 toss-up races.** Aside from outside spending, much of the Republican overall spending advantage came from a single race: Florida's 18th district, where Republican Rep. Allen West outspent his opponent by \$13.5 million and still lost.
- Small donors—those giving \$200 or less—did not play a significant role in fundraising for most Republican and Democratic candidates in the 29 toss-up House races. Republican candidates raised 16.4 percent of their money from small donations, and Democrats raised 12.7 percent. A single race—Florida's 18th district, where the incumbent West raised a staggering \$9.5 million in small donations—accounts for much of this disparity. **Excluding Florida's 18th district, Democratic candidates were nearly twice as reliant on small donors fundraising as their Republican opponents,** raising 12.0 percent of their money from small donors, compared to just 6.2 percent for Republican candidates. **Nationally, the DCCC was also far more reliant on small donor fundraising than its Republican counterpart,** raising 38.6 percent of its total money from small donors, compared to just 15.9 percent for the NRCC.
- **About three-quarters of all disclosed non-candidate spending in the toss-up races occurred after September 30.** One-half came during the final three weeks of the campaign.
- Republicans held a significant advantage in disclosed non-candidate spending through the end of September and during the first three weeks of October. **However, during the final two weeks of the campaign, the DCCC had a clear advantage over the NRCC, outspending them by \$10.4 million in the toss-up races.** The DCCC's spending advantage helped Democrats combat the Republicans' super PAC spending advantage in the campaign's home stretch. As a result, during the final two weeks of the campaign, Democrats actually had a slight non-candidate spending advantage over Republicans in these races.

Before the election, the Brennan Center's analysis of spending patterns in toss-up House races demonstrated the importance of outside group spending in shaping the 2012 election. Through the end of September, outside group spending was on par with party committee spending. Candidates had accounted for slightly less than 60 percent of all spending, and Democratic and Republican candidates had yet to rely much on small donors for their fundraising. The key findings in this issue brief indicate that many of the trends we identified before the election continued through the end of the campaign—and in some cases, those trends solidified even further in the final weeks before November 6.

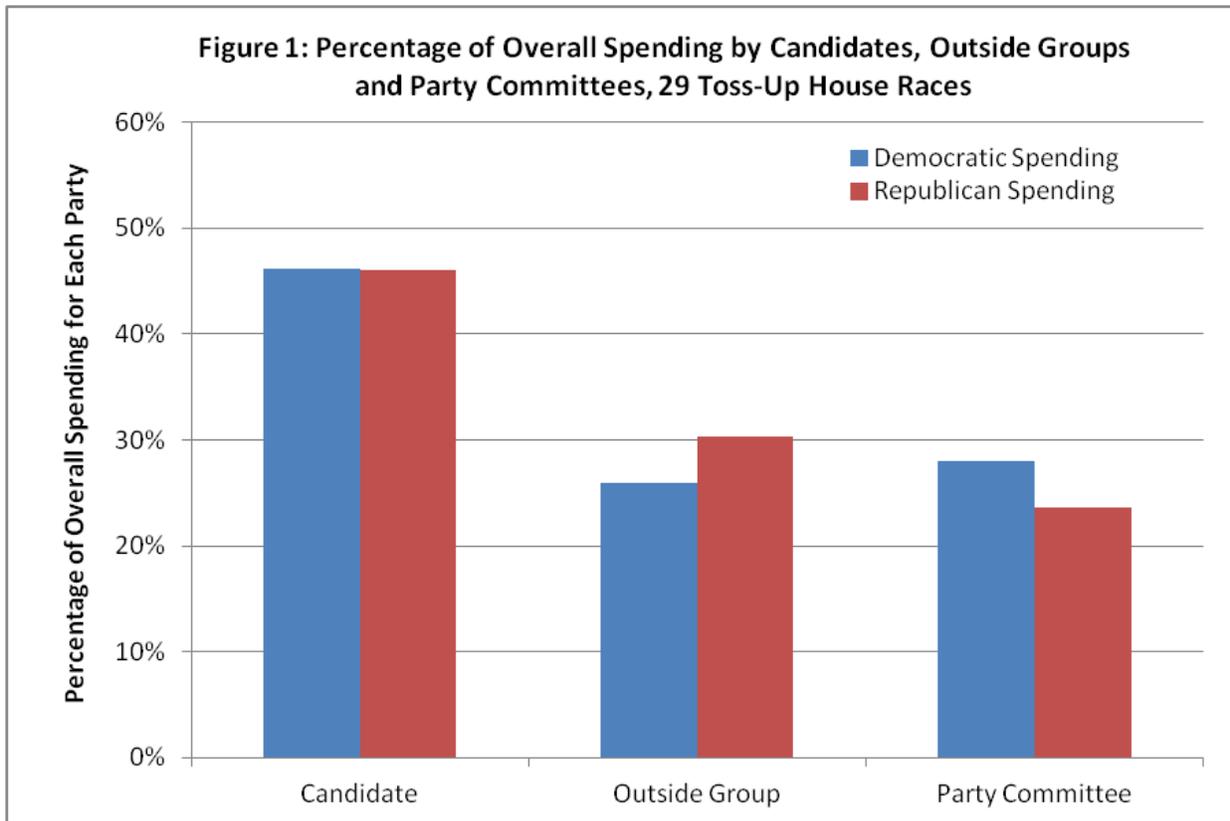
The candidate spending data in this issue brief are derived from the Center for Responsive Politics' compilation of data from candidates' FEC filings.<sup>3</sup> We define small donations as those of \$200 or less. FEC filings refer to these as “unitemized contributions”; donations larger than \$200 are referred to as “itemized contributions” by the FEC. The independent expenditure data are based on the Brennan Center's analysis of FEC filings.

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

In the 29 toss-up House contests, overall Republican spending (candidate, outside group, and party committee) totaled **\$172.7 million**, while overall Democratic spending totaled **\$139.4 million**.

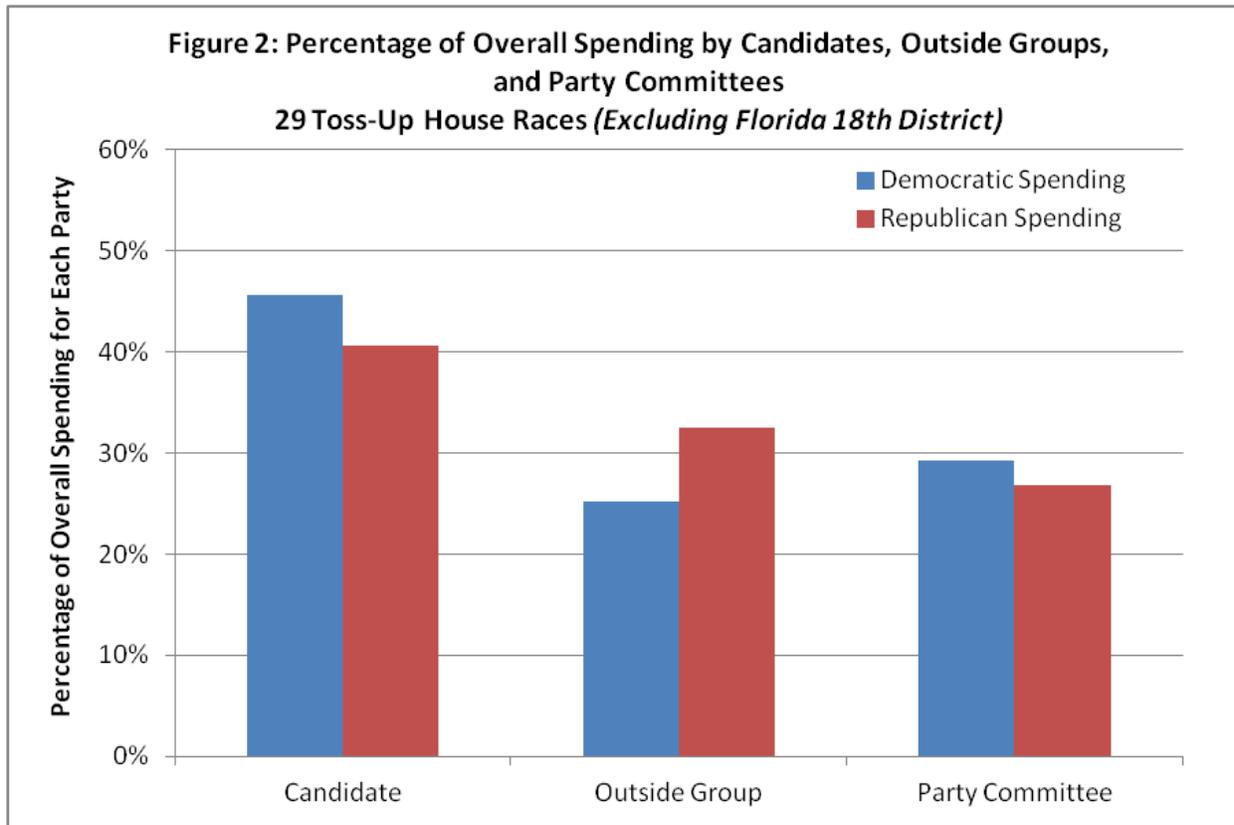
**Overall, candidates accounted for less than half—just 46.1 percent—of total spending in the toss-up House contests.** Figure 1 demonstrates that the distribution of candidate versus non-candidate spending is roughly similar for Democratic and Republican candidates. Republicans relied slightly more on outside groups than Democrats did, while party committee independent expenditures made up a greater fraction of overall Democratic spending than Republican spending.

**Outside group spending exceeded party committee spending, affirming their role in shaping the electoral landscape in 2012. Specifically, Republican-leaning and Democratic-leaning outside groups together spent \$88.5 million, while the two party committees together spent \$79.7 million.**

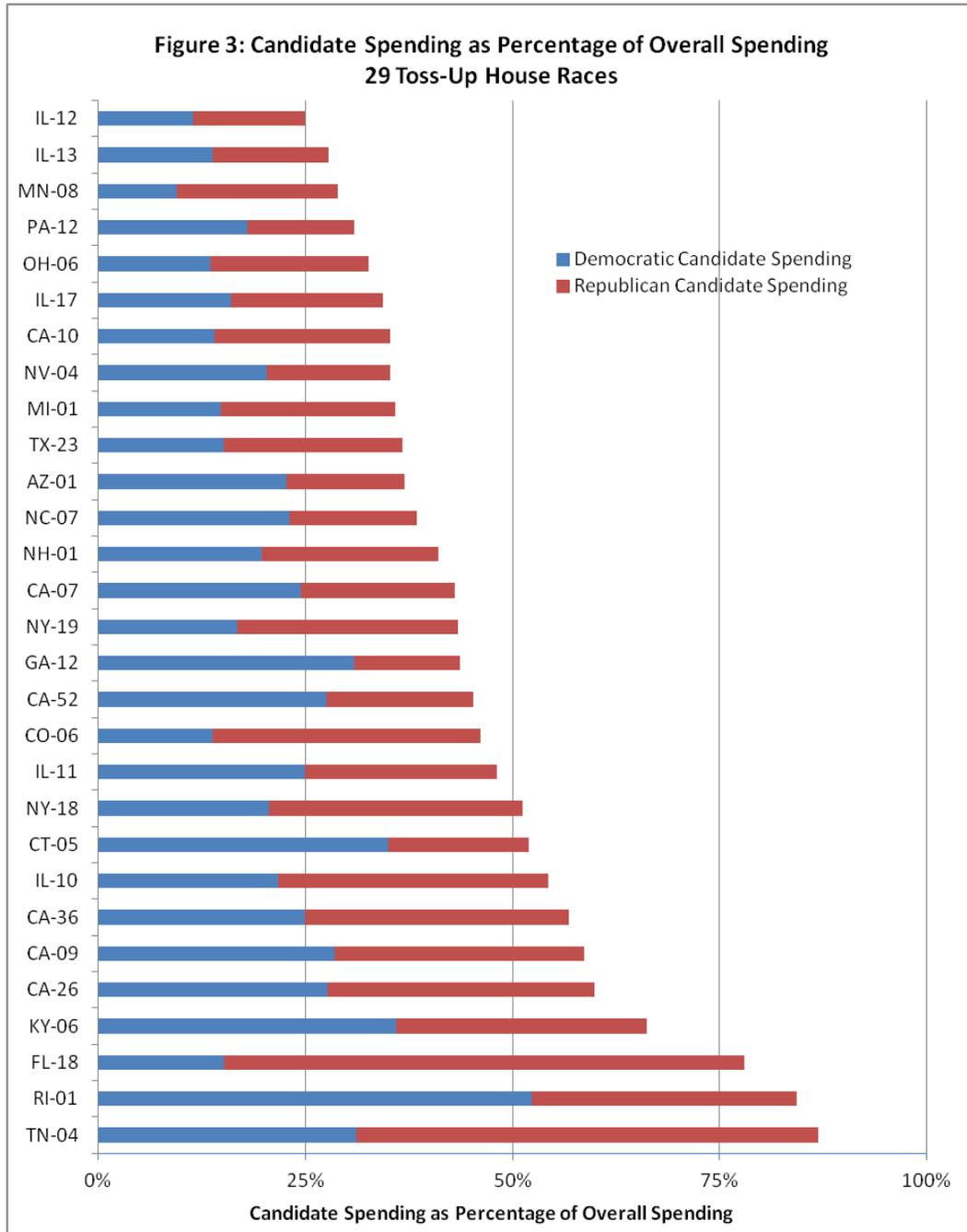


About 40 percent of the overall Republican spending advantage is due to one race: Florida's 18th district, where Democratic challenger Patrick Murphy defeated Republican Rep. Allen West. The incumbent West outspent his opponent by \$13.5 million. In the other 28 toss-up House races, no other candidate outspent his or her opponent by even one-sixth that amount.

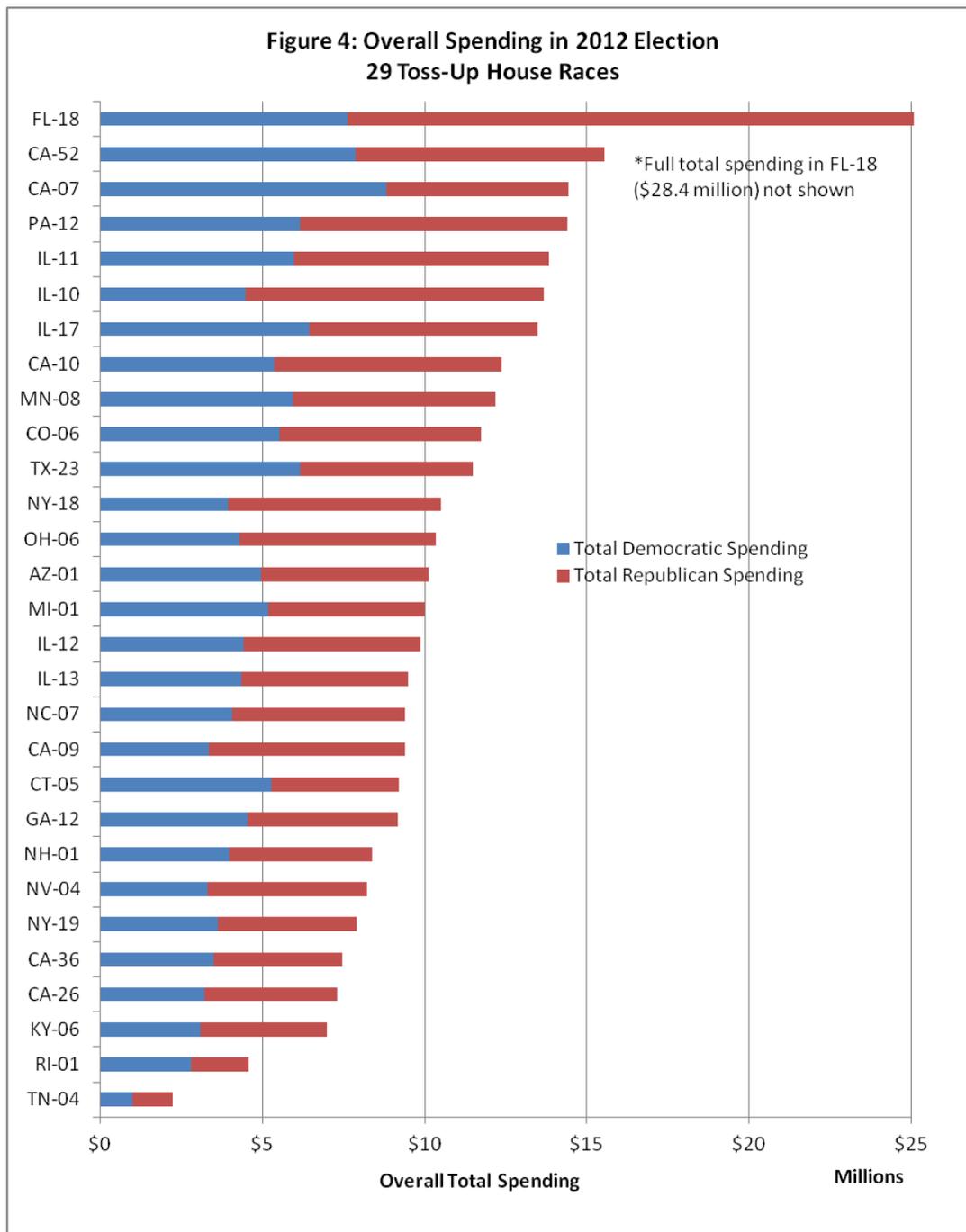
Excluding Florida's 18th district, **Republican spending totaled \$152 million, while Democrats spent \$131.8 million.** Most of the remaining disparity is accounted for by the fact that Republicans held an \$16.2 million advantage in outside spending. As Figure 2 shows, after excluding Florida's 18th district, Republicans were slightly more reliant on non-candidate spending than their Democratic counterparts. Candidates accounted for 45.6 percent of total Democratic spending but just 40.7 percent of total Republican spending.



In 19 of the 29 toss-up House races, candidate spending accounted for less than half of total spending. In other words, super PACs, party committees, and other outside groups spent more than the candidates in nearly two-thirds of the toss-up races. Figure 3 indicates that candidate spending accounted for the smallest fraction of overall spending in Illinois' 12th district, where the candidates were outspent by party committees and outside groups by a three-to-one margin. Aside from a few exceptional cases, we have not yet identified what accounts for the dramatic divergence in the role of candidate spending across these races.<sup>4</sup>

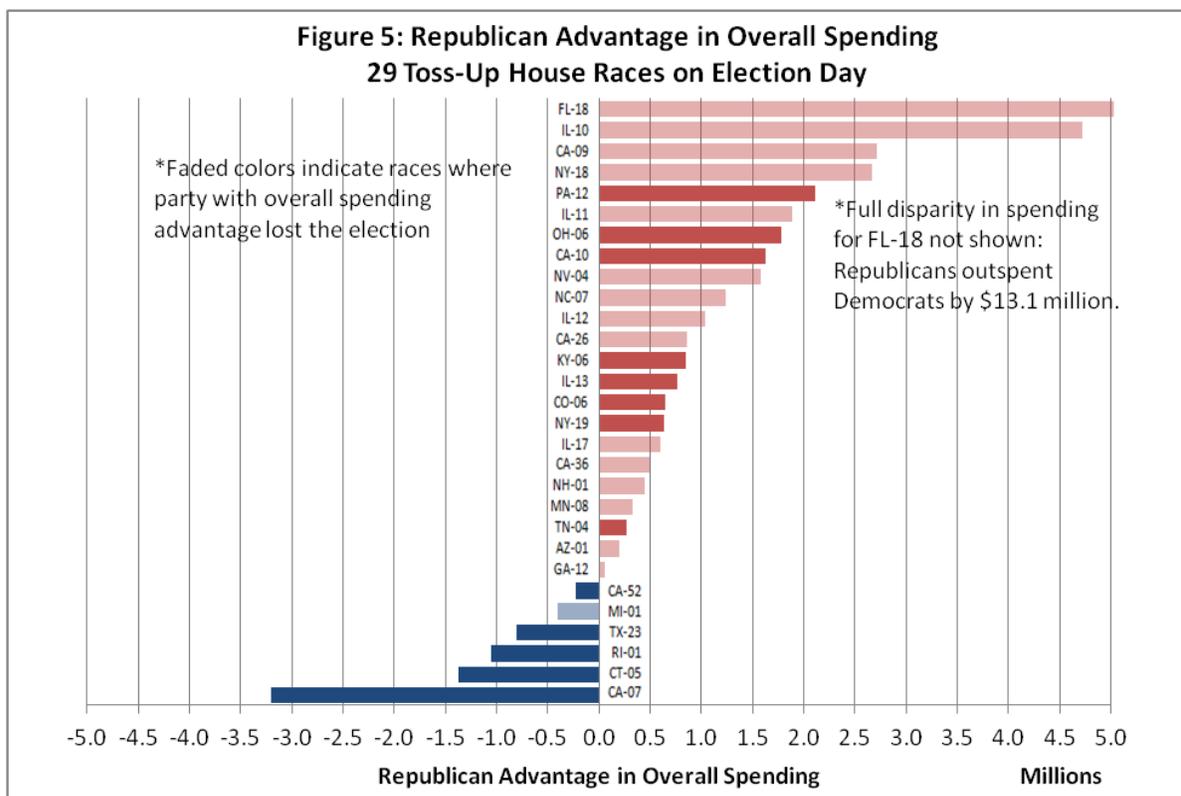


**Overall spending (including candidates, party committees, and outside groups) exceeded \$10 million in 14 of the 29 toss-up House races.** As indicated earlier, Florida's 18th district was an extreme outlier. Spending exceeded \$28 million in the district, owing in large part to the fact that incumbent Republican Rep. Allen West spent \$17.8 million on his campaign. No other candidate in the toss-up districts spent more than \$4.5 million. The least expensive contest was in Tennessee's 4th district, where the race only became competitive in the final weeks of the campaign due to a late-breaking scandal involving the Republican incumbent, Rep. Scott DesJarlais.<sup>5</sup>

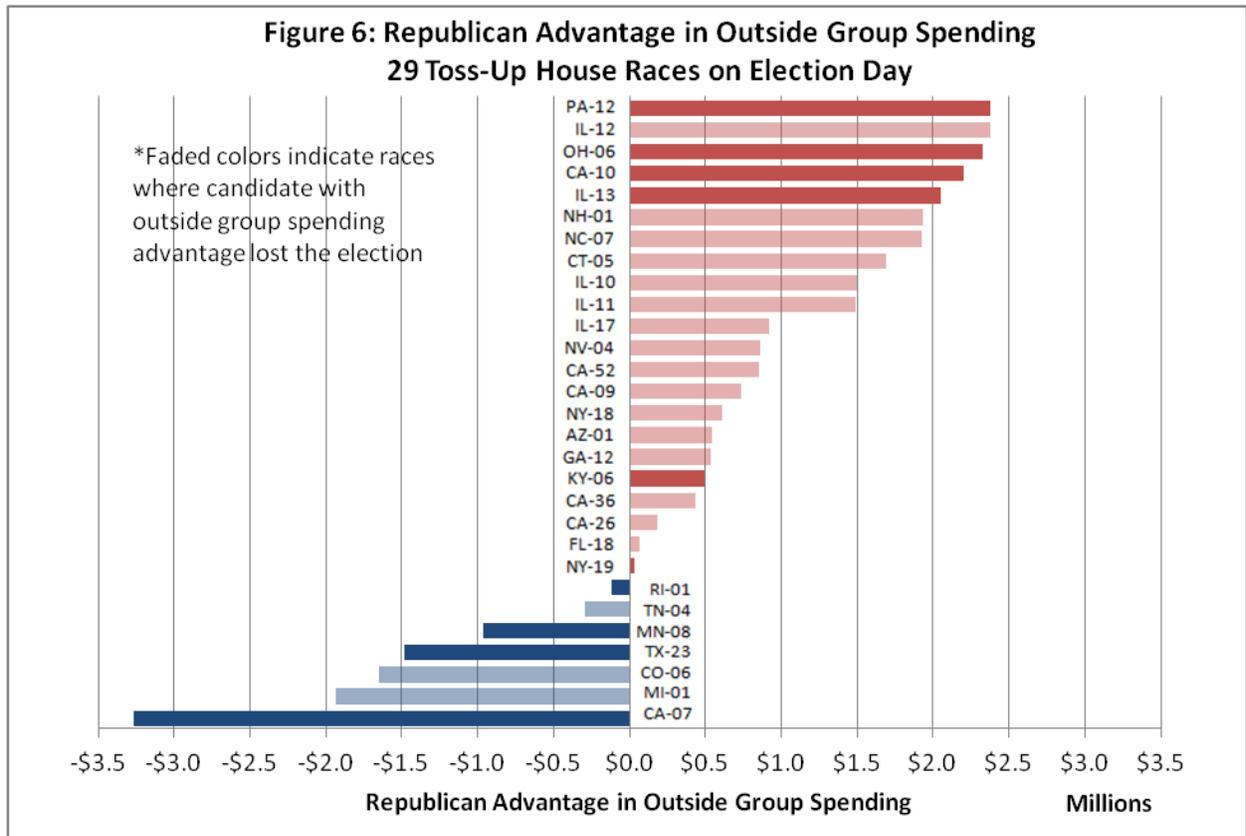


**Republicans had an overall spending advantage in 23 of the 29 toss-up House races.** In Florida's 18th district, Republicans held their greatest advantage, outspending Democrats by \$13.1 million. In four other districts, Republicans held a spending advantage of greater than \$2 million. Democrats held an advantage that large in only one race, California's 7th district, where Democratic challenger Ami Bera defeated Republican Rep. Dan Lungren.

Figure 5 shows which party held the overall spending advantage in each of the 29 toss-up House races. Faded colors indicate those races where the party with the overall spending advantage lost the election. **Overall, in 16 of the 29 toss-up House races, the party with the overall spending advantage lost,** suggesting that having a spending advantage was not always a determinative factor in these races. In five of the six races where Democrats held an overall spending advantage, the Democratic candidate won the election. Republicans won in just 8 of the 23 districts where Republicans held an overall spending advantage, and they lost in the four districts where they held the greatest overall advantage.



Outside group spending was a significant factor in the Republican overall spending advantage. **Republican-leaning outside groups outspent their Democratic-leaning counterparts in 22 of the 29 toss-up House races.** Notably, there were five races in which Republican-leaning outside groups outspent Democratic-leaning outside groups by more than \$2 million, and Republicans won four of them. But Republicans won just 2 of the other 17 races (KY-06 and NY-19) where they had an outside spending advantage.

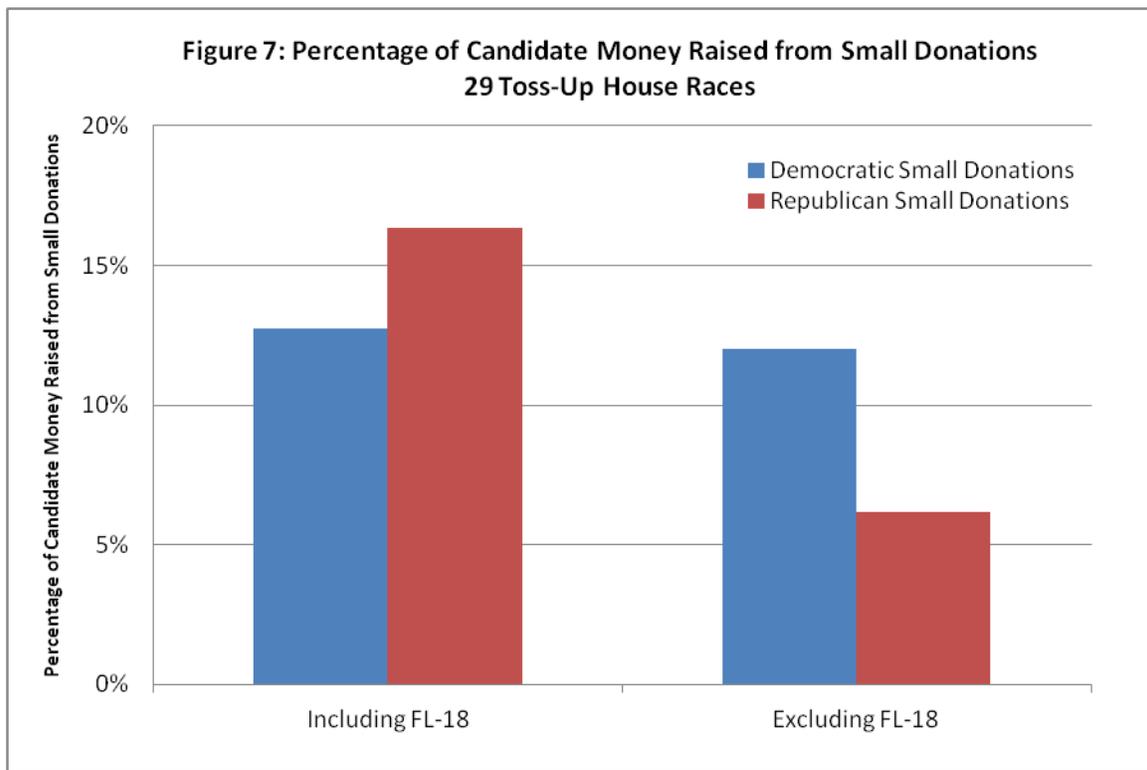


## II. THE IMPORTANCE OF SMALL DONORS IN TOSS-UP HOUSE CONTESTS

Part II examines the role of small donations in candidate campaigns in the 29 toss-up House races.

**Overall, Republican candidates raised 16.4 percent of their money from small donations of \$200 or less, compared to 12.7 percent for Democratic candidates.** Republican candidates received \$13.3 million in small donations, while Democratic candidates received \$8.3 million.

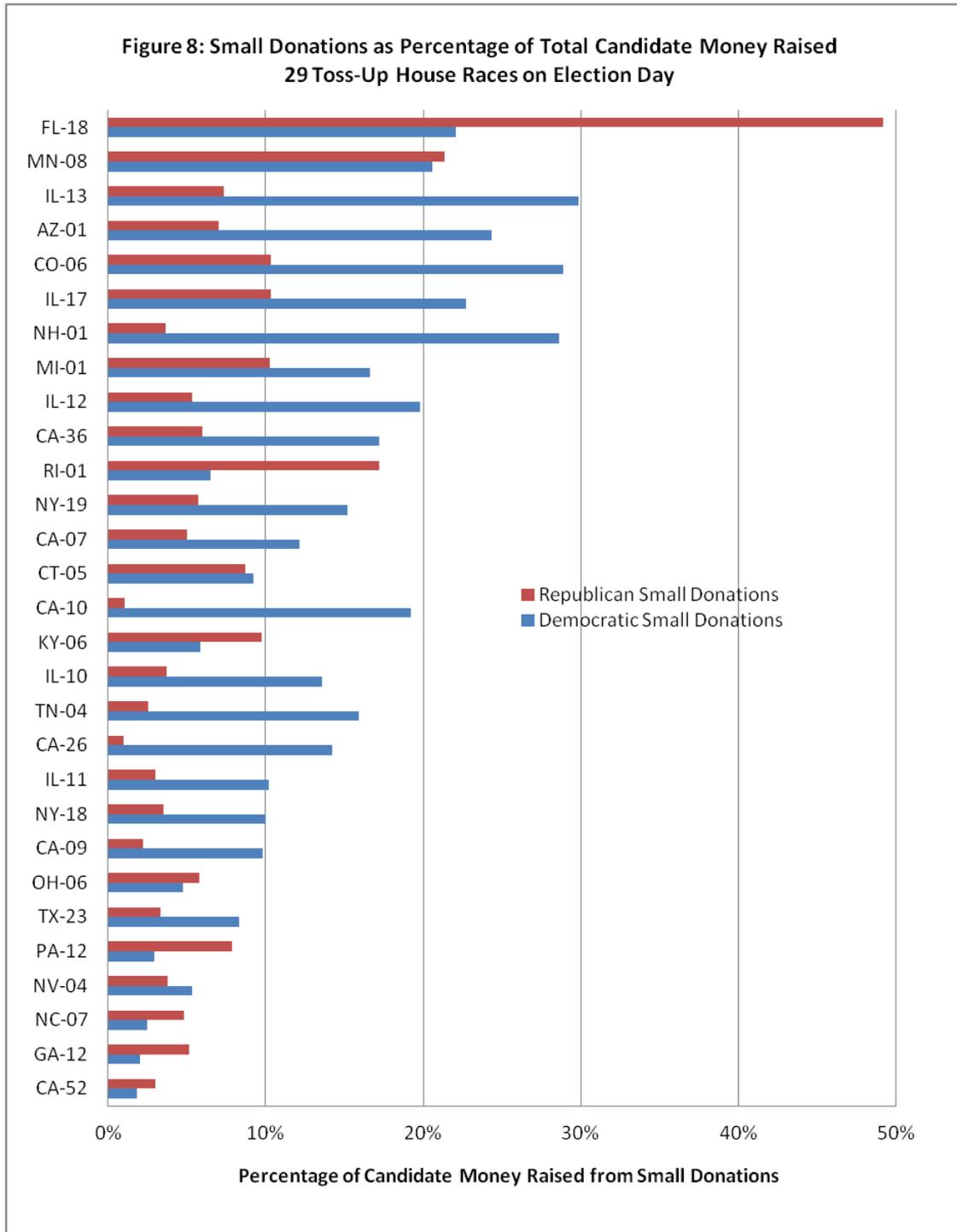
However, as Figure 7 demonstrates, the appearance of greater Republican reliance on small donors is driven by a single point: Florida's 18th district, where Republican Rep. Allen West raised a staggering \$9.5 million in small donations. This was 49.2 percent of his total fundraising total. West raised \$5.7 million more in small donations than the field of Republican candidates in the other 28 toss-up races combined.



**Excluding Florida's 18th district, Democratic candidates were nearly twice as reliant on small donors fundraising as their Republican opponents:** Democrats raised 12.0 percent of their money from small donors, compared to just 6.2 percent for Republicans.

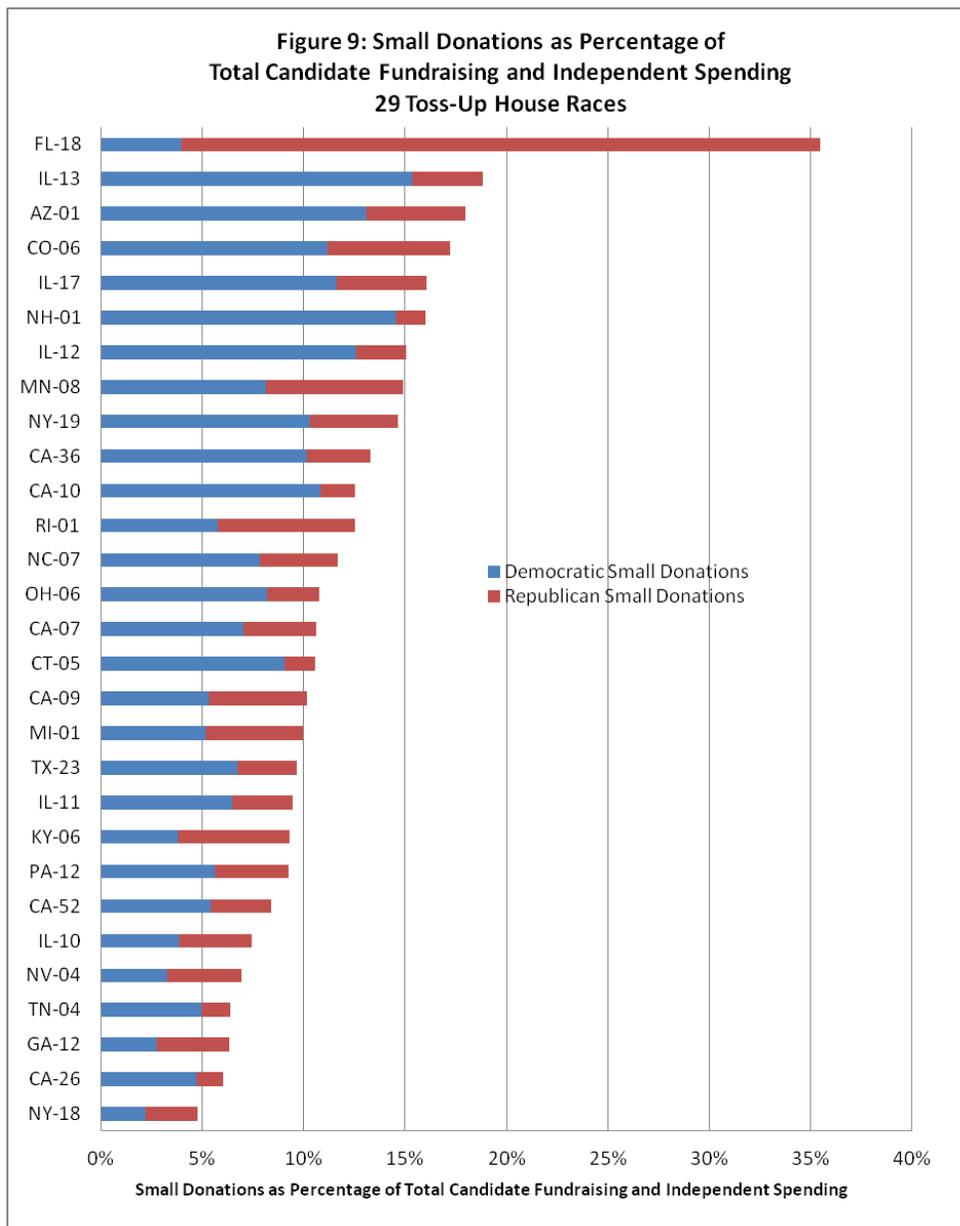
The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) also relied more on small donations than its Republican counterpart, the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC). Overall, the DCCC raised \$70.3 million from small donors, accounting for 38.6 percent of the total funds raised. By comparison, the NRCC raised just \$24.6 million from small donors; this was only 15.9 percent of the money it raised.

**Democratic candidates were more reliant on small donations than their Republican counterparts in 20 of the 29 toss-up House races.** Given Rep. Allen West's large fundraising haul from small donors, it is no surprise that small donors made up a greater portion of candidate fundraising in Florida's 18th district than in any other district. The district with the next highest reliance on small donor fundraising was Minnesota's 8th district, where Democratic challenger Rick Nolan defeated Republican Rep. Chip Cravaack. Both candidates raised over 20 percent of their money from small donations.



But candidate spending makes up only one part of the overall spending picture. Figure 9 assesses the relative importance of small donors in funding toss-up House races by comparing small donor fundraising—by both the candidates and the two party committees—with the total amount of candidate fundraising and non-candidate spending in the 29 toss-up House races.<sup>6</sup> In 7 of the 29 toss-up House races, small donors accounted for more than 15 percent of total candidate fundraising and non-candidate spending; small donors accounted for more than 10 percent in 17 toss-up House races.

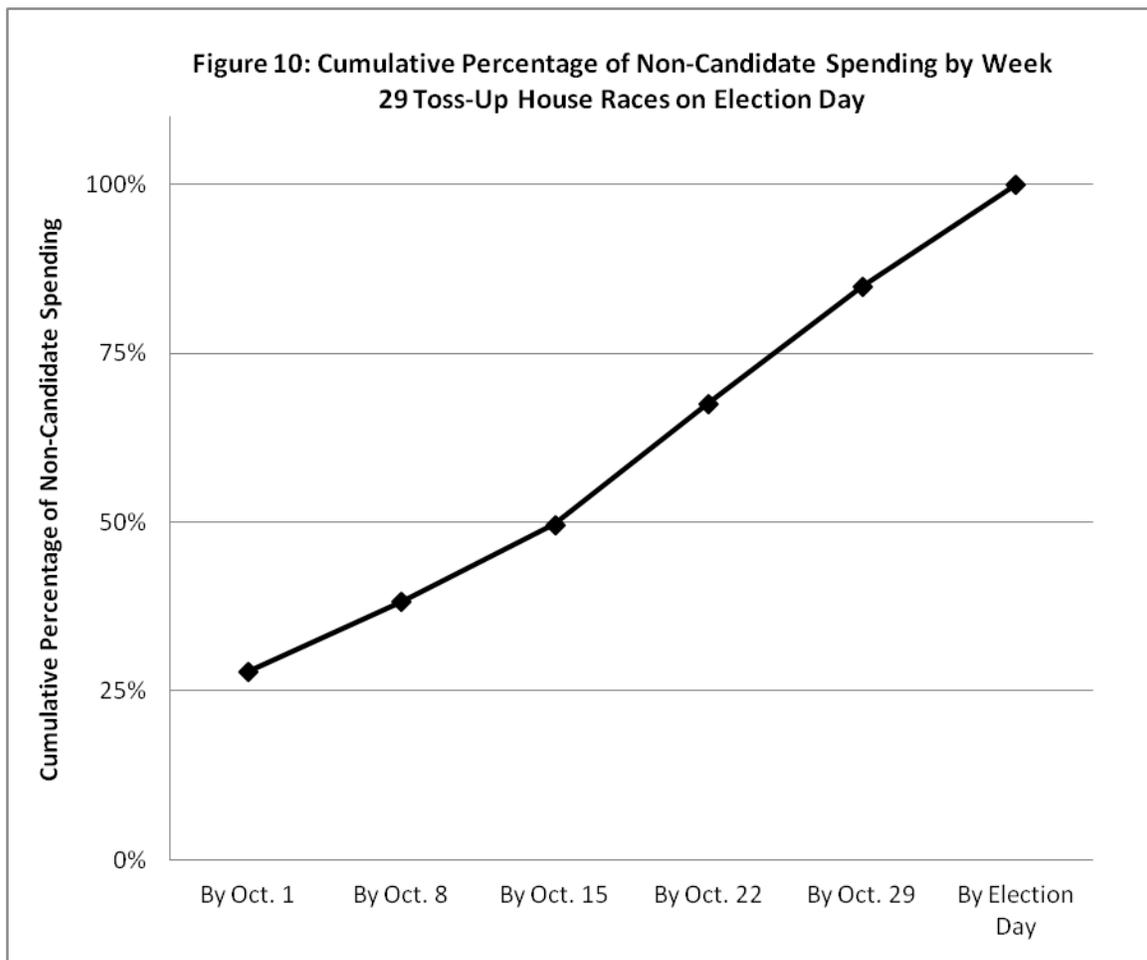
Small donors played the largest role in Florida's 18th district, where they made up 35.5 percent of total candidate fundraising and non-candidate spending. They also played a large role in Illinois' 13th district, accounting for 18.9 percent of the total in the district. Small donors played the smallest role in New York's 18th district, where they accounted for less than 5 percent of candidate fundraising and non-candidate spending.



### III. PATTERNS IN NON-CANDIDATE SPENDING IN TOSS-UP HOUSE RACES

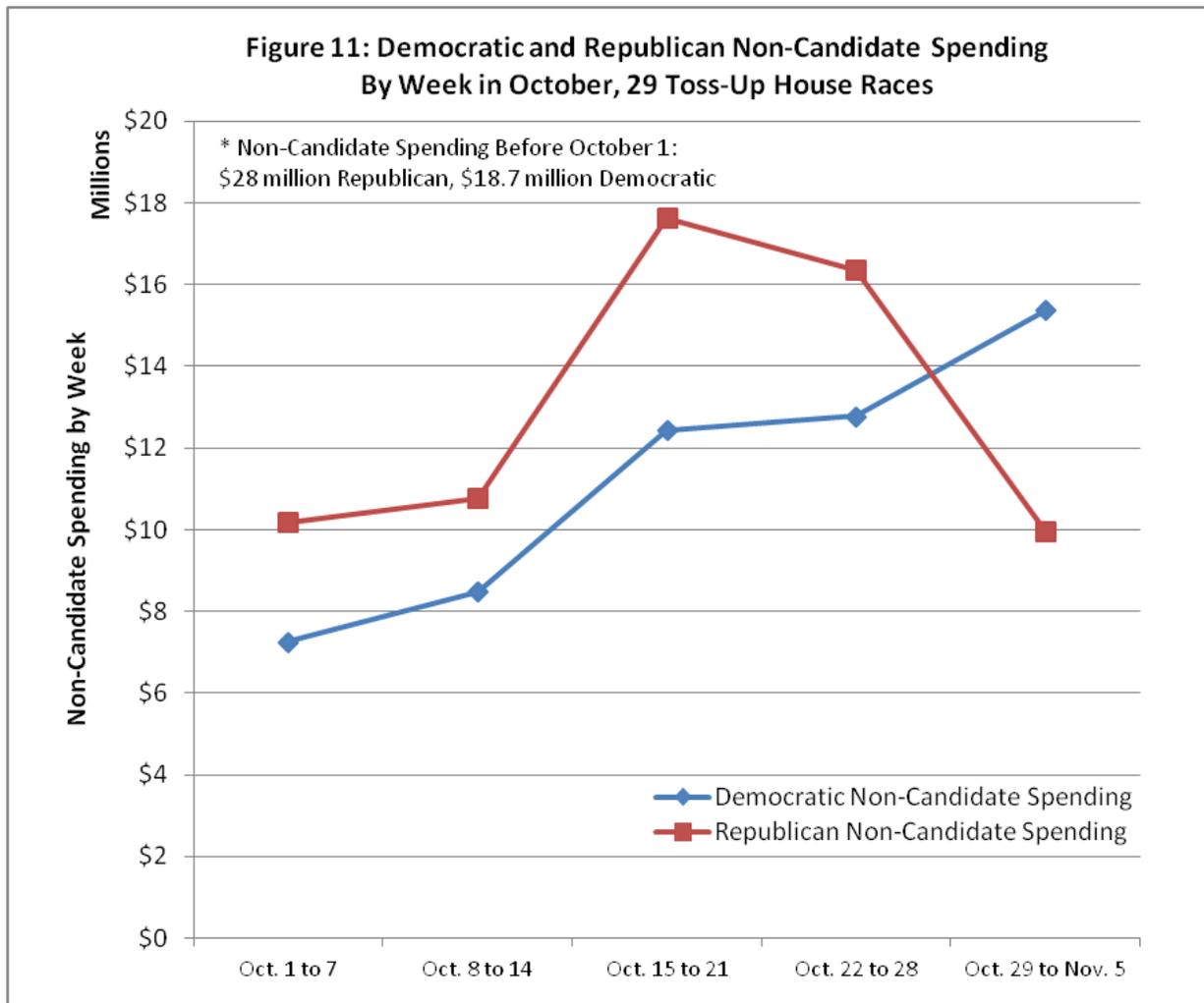
Part III examines the timing of outside group and party committee spending in the 29 toss-up House races. This section tracks spending by the Democratic and Republican party committees, as well as by outside groups during the final month before the election.

Over one-half of all disclosed non-candidate spending (including party committees and outside groups) in the 29 toss-up House races occurred during the final three weeks before the election. Of course, this estimate does not include spending on "issue ads" that tax-exempt groups ran early in the campaign. Nonetheless, it suggests that much of the spending by party committees and outside groups occurred towards the end of the 2012 campaign season. Just one-quarter of all disclosed non-candidate spending in the toss-up races occurred before October.



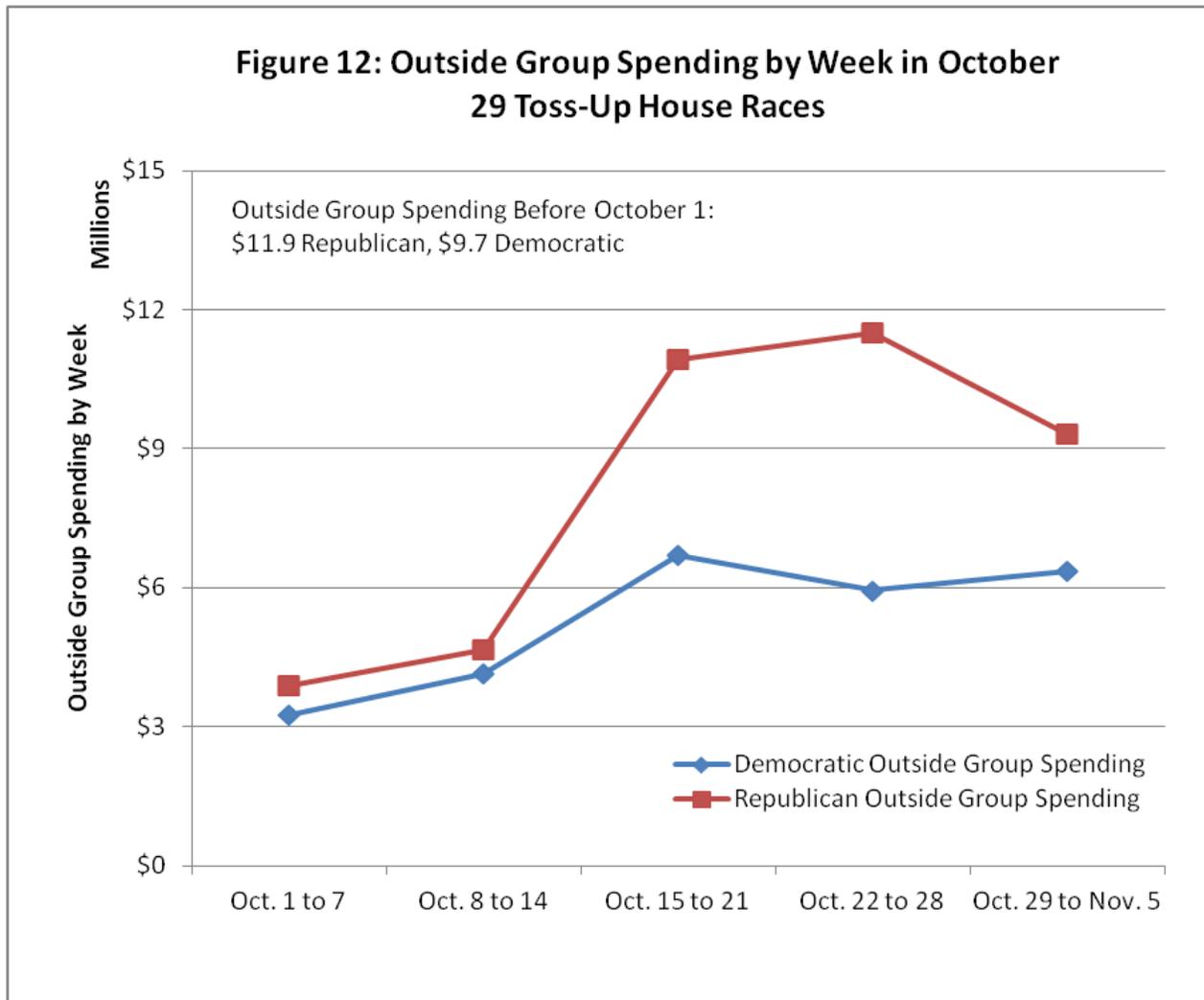
In the 29 toss-up House races, Republican non-candidate spending was significantly greater than spending by Democratic non-candidates. While Republican-leaning outside groups and the NRCC spent \$93.1 million, Democratic-leaning outside groups and the DCCC spent \$75 million.

Republicans held a significant advantage in disclosed non-candidate spending before October, when they outspent Democrats by \$9.3 million. They also held an advantage in the toss-up races during the first four weeks of October: Cumulatively, across these first four weeks, Republican-leaning outside groups and the NRCC outspent their Democratic counterparts by \$14 million. However, Democratic leaning outside groups and the DCCC had the advantage over their Republican-leaning counterparts in the final week before the election, outspending them by \$5.4 million.



Outside group spending explains much of the Republican advantage in non-candidate spending. Overall, while Democratic-leaning outside groups spent \$36.1 million in the toss-up House races, their Republican-leaning counterparts spent \$52.2 million.

As Figure 12 shows, much of this advantage developed during the final three weeks before Election Day, when Republican-leaning outside groups outspent Democratic-leaning ones by \$12.7 million. But even before the final weeks of the campaign, Republican-leaning outside groups held a slight advantage, outspeaking their counterparts on the Democratic side by \$3.4 million through the first two weeks of October.

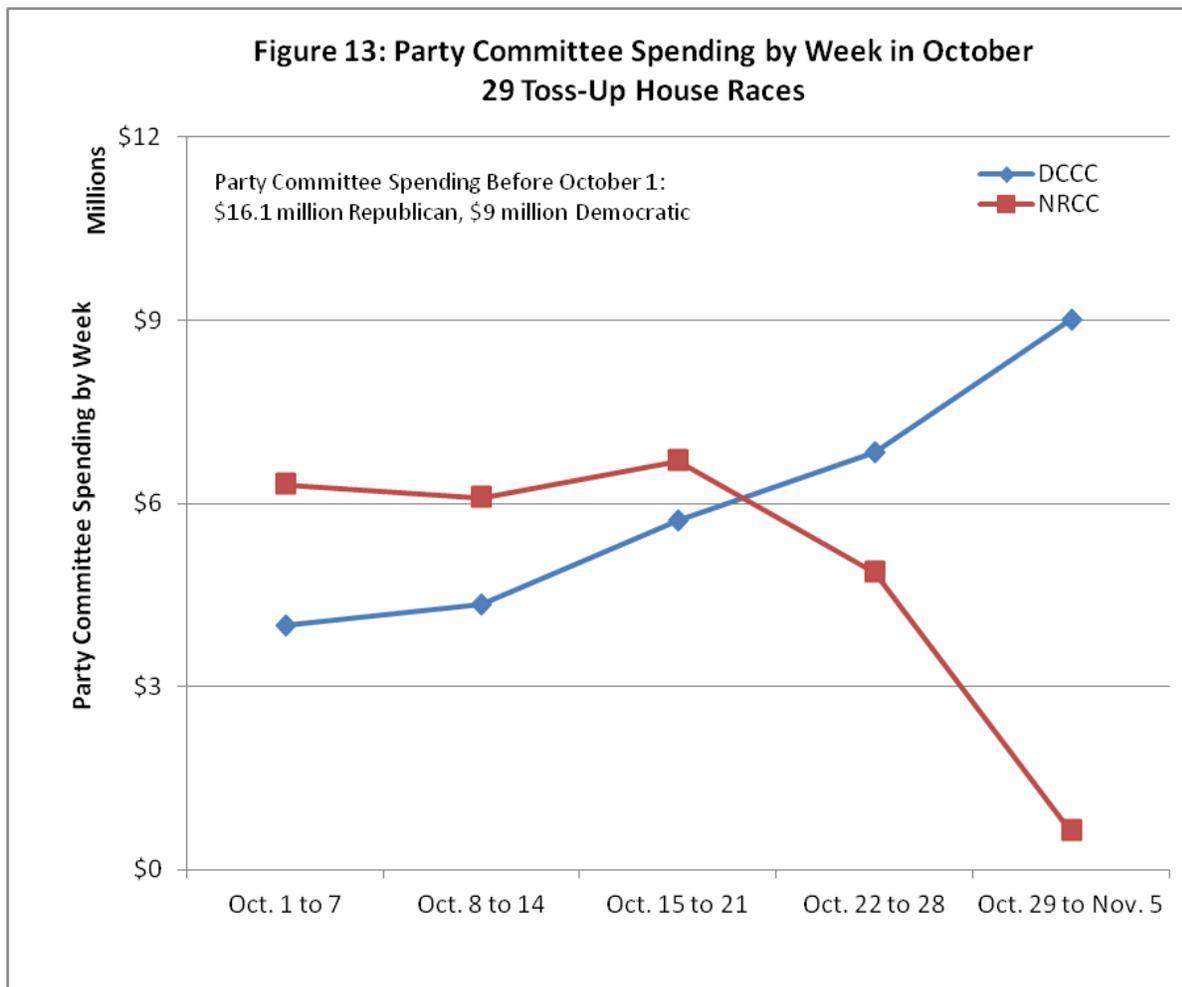


Unlike outside group spending, there was rough parity between Democrats and Republicans when it came to party committee spending: In the 29 toss-up House races, the DCCC spent \$38.9 million, while the NRCC spent \$40.8 million.

However, the two party committees were not equal throughout the entire campaign. Prior to October, the NRCC outspent the DCCC by \$7.1 million; this explains most of the overall non-candidate spending advantage for Republicans through September 30. The NRCC then modestly outspent the DCCC through the first three weeks of October.

**But during the final two weeks of the campaign, the DCCC had the clear advantage, spending \$10.4 million more than the NRCC in toss-up House races.** The DCCC helped Democrats combat the Republicans' outside group spending advantage during the home stretch of the campaign. As a result, during the final two weeks of the campaign, Democrats actually had an overall \$1.8 million non-candidate spending advantage over Republicans.

Indeed, the DCCC and NRCC had starkly different spending strategies in the 29 toss-up House races: The DCCC spent about as much before September 30 as it did in the last week of the campaign, while the NRCC spent 25 times as much before September 30 as it did during the campaign's final week.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This issue brief relies on The Cook Political Report's ratings released on November 5, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> 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 “issue ad” spending has occurred in the 29 toss-up districts examined here.

<sup>3</sup> These filings, reported by December 6, 2012, cover the period ending on November 26, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> In Tennessee's 4th district and Florida's 18th district, unusual circumstances may explain why candidate spending accounted for a greater percentage of overall spending than in most other toss-up races. In the former district, the races became a toss-up late in the campaign, attracting outside spending only in the final weeks before the election. In the latter district, Rep. Allen West's candidate spending was a high outlier, driving down the relative role of outside spending in that race.

<sup>5</sup> Josh Voorhees, Six Abortions, Two Affairs, and Another Term in Congress, Slate (Nov. 16, 2012), [http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_slatest/2012/11/16/scott\\_desjarlais\\_scandal\\_tennessee\\_congressman\\_admitted\\_to\\_affairs\\_with.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2012/11/16/scott_desjarlais_scandal_tennessee_congressman_admitted_to_affairs_with.html).

<sup>6</sup> To approximate the role of small donations in funding party committee independent expenditures in each district, the analysis assumes that the small donor contribution to party committee spending is in proportion to each committee's overall reliance on small donor fundraising. For example, if the DCCC spent \$1 million on independent expenditures in a district, the analysis estimates that small donors accounted for about \$386,000, or 38.6 percent, of the DCCC's spending in the district, as the DCCC received that proportion of its overall fundraising from small donations of \$200 or less.

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