

Are Super PACs Super-Efficient?
Independent Expenditures in House Races

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State of the Parties: 2020 and Beyond Virtual Conference

Nov. 4-5, 2020

The 2020 cycle marked a decade of elections in which “super PACs,” or independent expenditure-only committees, could participate, raising and spending unlimited amounts of money on political contests. How much have these groups affected the campaign environment for candidates? Recent scholarship (Dwyre et al., 2015, for example) argues that most super PACs follow an electoral strategy that aims to change (or preserve) the overall partisan advantage. As such, they behave similarly to political parties themselves. This paper builds on this insight by examining in more detail the allocation strategies of super PACs in the 2020 campaigns for the House of Representatives. I analyze their spending habits through the lens of “efficiency” (Glasgow 2002), studying whether super PACs focus their expenditures on the most marginal, i.e. competitive races. If so, have these new campaign finance organizations only amplified partisan trench warfare over these highly competitive seats, rather than creating an environment in which more “long shot” candidates are provided the potential resources to produce upsets? In other words, has the advent of the super PAC contributed to the dampening of swings in partisan majorities in the House of Representatives?

Literature review (under construction)

In order to understand political parties comprehensively, political scientists look beyond traditional party organizations to allied organizations operating within party networks. Herrnson (2009) defines American political parties in the twenty-first century as “enduring multilayered coalitions of individuals and groups that possess mutual goals and share interlocking

relationships'. Within these coalitions, 'party allies', such as PACs, super PACs, and other organizations, sit outside the core of the formal party leadership and the organizations under their control. Party allies, however, undertake partisan actions just as the inner core of the political party does, and normally support only one party in the two-party system. The support of party allies, however, is not as ironclad as that of the formal party core. Party allies exert less influence on party 'goals, strategies, and tactics', are 'less likely to coordinate' their activity with core party organizations, and do not possess the same authority to act in the name of the party. Nonetheless, party allies often carry out actions, such as financing and advertising, that the party does not have the ability to execute. The party allies are connected to the core by 'extensive networks within and between them'. (Also see Bawn et al., 2012; Koger et al., 2009; Skinner, Masket and Dulio 2013)

Super PACs are not the first example of the purported "outsourcing" of activities traditionally conducted by political parties. Two decades ago, for example, the rise of political consultants was thought to weaken the importance of political parties for candidates. Upon closer examination, however, scholars discovered that political parties actually had consciously brought consultants on board in order to satisfy candidates' needs (Kolodny and Dulio 2003).

Exactly how closely these party allies are integrated into the political party network is a matter of scholarly debate. On the one hand, interest groups 'seek control to enact favorable policy; party leaders may see control as an end in itself'; nonetheless, there is ample evidence that interest groups have become firmly embedded in partisan networks (Skinner, 2005; Skinner,

2007). During election season, interest groups tend to support the candidates of one party only, rather than cross partisan lines (Grossmann and Dominguez, 2009). In an examination of 527 committees, Skinner, Masket and Dulio (2012) analyze the employment histories of staff members to prove that 'through their personnel connections, 527s are far from being fringe groups; they are in a position to facilitate collective action among virtually all key party actors'. Further, they argue that the 527 networks 'mirror the architecture' of the parties to which they are allied. The Republican 527 network is more hierarchical than its Democratic counterpart, in keeping with the organizational style of the GOP itself.

'Super PACs' are now major players in political campaigns for federal office, after a pair of 2010 decisions by the federal courts, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* and *Speechnow.org v. Federal Election Commission*. Donors may make unlimited contributions to super PACs, provided that these 'independent expenditure-only' committees avoid coordination of their activities with candidates or political parties. Nonetheless, super PACs may well find ways to coordinate their activities with allies while staying within the bounds of the law. (Farrar-Myers and Skinner, 2012; on coordination in presidential nomination contests, see Christenson and Smidt 2014). Findings based on expenditure data from 2012 U. S. Senate contests present a mixed picture: Coordination between super PACs and the two major political parties is apparent, but much more so among the Democratic Party and its super PAC allies. The Republican Party and its super PAC associates show much more evidence of acting at cross-purposes. (Scala, 2014).

One may better understand how well party allies facilitate or disrupt their home party's goals by comparing their spending habits to those of national party committees. `Hill committees', or national party congressional campaign committees, are known for the efficiency of their spending. Hill committees, above all, pursue majorities for their party in Congress (Kolodny, 1998), and thus seek to maximize the number of seats their parties hold after an election. Decades ago, Republicans built a centralized committee decision-making structure that downplayed incumbents' pleas for more funds, and instead distributed resources in order to salvage seats in a challenging national political environment (Jacobson, 1985). Democratic and Republican Hill committees now emulate each other strategically. They focus first and foremost on electability, and consider candidates' ideological adherence to party beliefs only secondarily (Nokken, 2003; also see Glasgow, 2002).

Past efforts at studying the behavior of congressional campaign committees in allocating resources have focused on the question of whether they were making those allocations efficiently. Jacobson (1985) described the dilemma concisely: congressional committees behave efficiently when they maximize the number of seats their parties hold after an election. A typical barrier to committee efficiency is the party's individual candidates, all of whom wish to have the committee send scarce resources their way, regardless of whether they in fact need those resources to win or retain their seats. In the 1982 midterms, Republicans built a more centralized committee decision-making structure that distributed resources in a "strategically efficient" manner, thus saving seats they otherwise might have lost in a difficult national political environment. Other congressional scholars followed up on Jacobson's efforts with a similar focus on efficiency. Herrnson (1989) illustrated that the minority Republicans had developed a

strong organization for congressional elections that possessed better methods for making decisions than their opponents, based more strongly on campaign quality and overall competitiveness. Nokken (2003), for instance, argued that party committees put little priority on candidates' "ideological congruence" to party beliefs when it came to spending decisions, instead focusing on candidates' chances of winning their respective contests. Political parties, he declared, were "true Downsian vote maximizers" (CK), concentrating spending on the most competitive contests, whether in the pursuit of vulnerable incumbents of the opposing party or the protection of their own. Glasgow (2002) defined efficiency in spending as the percentage of total committee contributions to House campaigns that were contributed to marginal races that are competitive, as opposed to sending money toward "safe incumbents and weak challengers." Glasgow concluded his article by wondering if both parties' congressional campaign committees had become *too* efficient at their tasks, thus leaving potential seat pickups "on the table":

Today, both the DCCC and NRCC are very efficient campaigners, concentrating their resources in the closest races. *In fact, some scholars believe that party committees are now too focused on contributing to competitive races, and are thus missing opportunities to win seats in districts that may not look promising in early polls but that would be competitive with party support. Thus it may be that the best distribution of resources in terms of efficiency may not be the best electoral strategy for winning seats.* It remains to be seen if this trend towards efficiency by the congressional campaign committees will continue, or if they will begin to gamble on less likely challengers. (emphasis mine)

Methodology

To measure the efficiency of independent expenditures by Hill committees and party-allied organizations, I am in the process of adopting Glasgow's measure of relative efficiency (2002).

The aim of this measurement is to compare the closeness of each race to the amount of resources contributed by the Hill committee (or party-allied organization) to each race.

Thus far, I have determined (a) the proportion of expenditures in three types of contests: (a) contests in which the Democratic share of the vote was between 40 percent and 60 percent; (b) contests in which the Democratic share of the vote was between 45 and 55 percent of the vote; (c) contests in the 25 most marginal districts.

Data sources

House of Representatives election data was provided by the MIT Election Lab. Independent expenditure data was downloaded from the Federal Election Commission. I classified organizations as allied with the Democratic or Republican parties, or non-partisan, by consulting OpenSecrets, the website of the Center for Responsive Politics, which offers summary data of the allocation of group spending for or against a particular party's candidates.¹

¹ My thanks to my research assistant, Mitchell Scacchi, for his assistance with this.

Table 1: Democratic-allied independent-expenditure groups

Group	Allocation to 40-60 races	Allocation to 45-55 races	Allocation to most competitive	Total spending
House Majority	100	92.1	42.9	174525342
DCCC	100	96.5	46.1	144085763
Women Vote	100	88.8	14.9	13406576
314 Action	100	100	19.3	6605057
LCV Victory	100	94.9	33	5214267
End Citizens United	100	100	33.2	5015493
Everytown	100	99.6	30.3	4576487
Center Forward	100	90.9	60.7	3292532
EDF	100	93.8	56	3233697
Vote Vets	99.9	85.8	29.6	3032724
AFSCME People	100	100	74.4	1763898
AFSCME AFL-CIO	97.7	97.7	22.9	1582009
NEA Advocacy	100	72	9.7	1456818
The Wilderness Society	100	82.4	4.1	1191870
SEIU COPE	86.3	73.4	18.2	1191553
CHC Bold	100	100	27.6	1133691
DMFI	58.1	58.1	25	1113819
Black PAC	100	78.7	18	1073121
Congressional Black Caucus	87.4	68.9	15.4	1069078
NRDC	100	100	31.5	1060071
Michigan Planned Parenthood	94	68.2	43.4	1043826

The Super Super PACs

In this paper, I examine the spending strategies of every group that made independent expenditures of (a) at least a total of \$1 million, (b) in more than one House races. These criteria intentionally left out independent-expenditure groups that only supported a single candidate, under the assumption that such groups are mere extensions of a candidate’s campaign under the guise of an “independent” organization. Instead, this paper focuses on groups that were making choices in spending, allocating expenditures among at least some subset of House races, if not all 435 contests. All told, 40 groups met these criteria. Together, they made independent expenditures on House races totaling \$677.4 million, 94 percent of the \$717.5 million in independent expenditures tallied by the FEC.

Even among these highest-spending organizations, just a few dominated all others. For instance, of the 40 independent-expenditure groups examined here, Democratic-allied organizations comprised a small majority of 21. Combined, they made \$376.7 million in independent expenditures. Two groups dwarfed all others. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), the “Hill committee” of the Democratic Party, spent \$144.1 million. But even the DCCC was outspent (by more than 20 percent) by the House Majority PAC, a super PAC created a decade ago by a former DCCC official in reaction to the spending of conservative groups in the 2010 midterms. For the 2020 cycle, House Majority stated its goal was “holding Republicans accountable and helping to hold the newly won Democratic majority in the House” (FactCheck.org, 2020). Combined, these two organizations alone spent \$318.6 million, or 85 percent of these Democratic-allied groups. The next-highest spending group, Women Vote!, a super PAC affiliated with Emily’s List that supports pro-choice Democratic women candidates (FactCheck.org, 2018), spent \$13.4 million, or less than one-tenth as much as the DCCC. Women Vote!, in turn, spent twice as much as 314 Action, which operates “to elect STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) professionals to the U.S. Senate, U.S. House of Representatives, state legislatures and governor’s offices. It also holds among its goals to “promote the responsible use of data driven fact based approaches in public policy” (Ballotpedia, 2021).

Table 2: Republican-allied independent expenditure groups

Group	Allocation to 40-60 races	Allocation to 45-55 races	Allocation to most competitive	Total spending
Congressional Leadership	99.9	90.7	44.3	138214423
NRCC	100	91.9	42.7	90069843
Club for Growth	100	84.3	27.6	26409277
Citizens Free Enterprise	100	100	64.8	8400084
Americans for Prosperity	94.4	75.8	33.5	7616359
House Freedom Action	100	90	1.2	2910841
Defend Main Street	100	34.2	0	2730487
House Freedom Fund	99.3	91.6	27.6	2273070
Women Speak Out	100	99.5	22	2162575
RJC Victory	100	100	0	1738976
The Governing Majority	100	76.1	44.9	1400419
American Liberty	52.9	52.9	22.7	1251762
NRA Political Victory	66.7	30.5	13.8	1239124
WFW	100	90	57.8	1159266
Protect Freedom	90.1	60	25.7	1109587
SEAL PAC	100	92.6	42.9	1008000
Nat'l Association Realtors	100	86.5	86.5	5043976
With Honor	95.6	78	23.3	4336528
UA Union	100	93.9	56.5	1618519

The concentration of money among these top-spending groups is similar on the Republican side, albeit to a slightly lesser degree. Of the 16 that spent at least \$1 million, two towered above the rest. Congressional Leadership, formed in 2011 as the conservative counterpart to House Majority PAC and dedicated to the goal of a GOP House majority (FactCheck, 2020), spent more than \$138 million during the 2020 cycle. The Republican “Hill committee,” the National Republican Congressional Committee, made \$90.1 million in expenditures. Combined, these two groups accounted for 79 percent of the \$289.7 million in Republican-allied independent expenditures by groups spending \$1 million or more. The next highest spender, the super PAC of the conservative organization Club for Growth, spent more than \$26 million. All others spent \$10 million less, most of these not even reaching \$3 million.

Three groups – the National Association of Realtors, With Honor, and the UA Union – were non-partisan in their orientation. Combined, they were minor players in independent expenditures, with total spending of \$11 million, or less than 2 percent.

Efficiency of independent expenditures

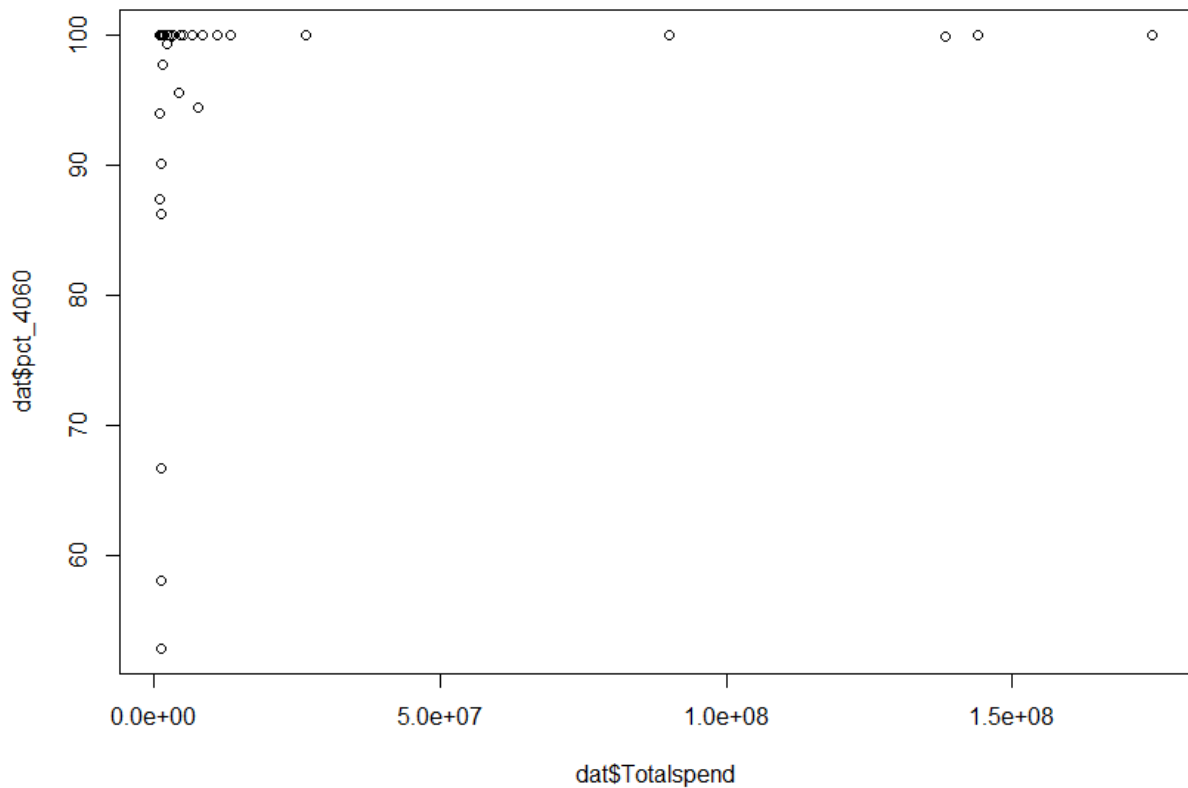
Next, I examined the pattern of expenditures for each of the 40 groups that made independent expenditures, to determine the efficiency of their spending. In other words, how much of a group's spending was focused on the most competitive House contests, versus others that were relatively less competitive? Again, following Glasgow's methodology, I calculated the percentage of each group's expenditures on races that fell within these three tiers of competitiveness. These tiers ranged from the broadest measure of competitiveness to the most stringent measure: (a) contests in which the Democratic candidate received 40 percent to 60 percent of the two-party vote, (b) contests in which the Democratic candidate received 45 percent to 55 percent of the two-party vote, (c) the 25 most marginal districts of all House races.

Independent expenditures in competitive races (broadly speaking)

The groups examined here made the great majority of their independent expenditures in competitive races most broadly defined, in which the Democratic candidate carried 40 to 60 percent of the two-party vote. The average portion of total expenditures made in these races was 96 percent, and the median group made the entirety of its expenditures on these races. As one

might suspect, partisan differences in expenditures were slight. The median Democratic group and the median Republican group both made 100 percent of their spending in this broadest category of competitive races. Practically the same was true, in fact, for three-quarters of both Democratic and Republican groups. Only a few groups made considerably less than 90 percent of their expenditures on this category of competitive races. These included the National Rifle Association Political Victory Fund (66.7 percent) and American Liberty (52.9 percent) among Republican groups, and Democratic Majority for Israel's hybrid PAC / super PAC, DMFI (58.1 percent), among Democratic-allied groups. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Independent-expenditure group allocations to (broadly) competitive races



Independent expenditures in competitive races (more strictly speaking)

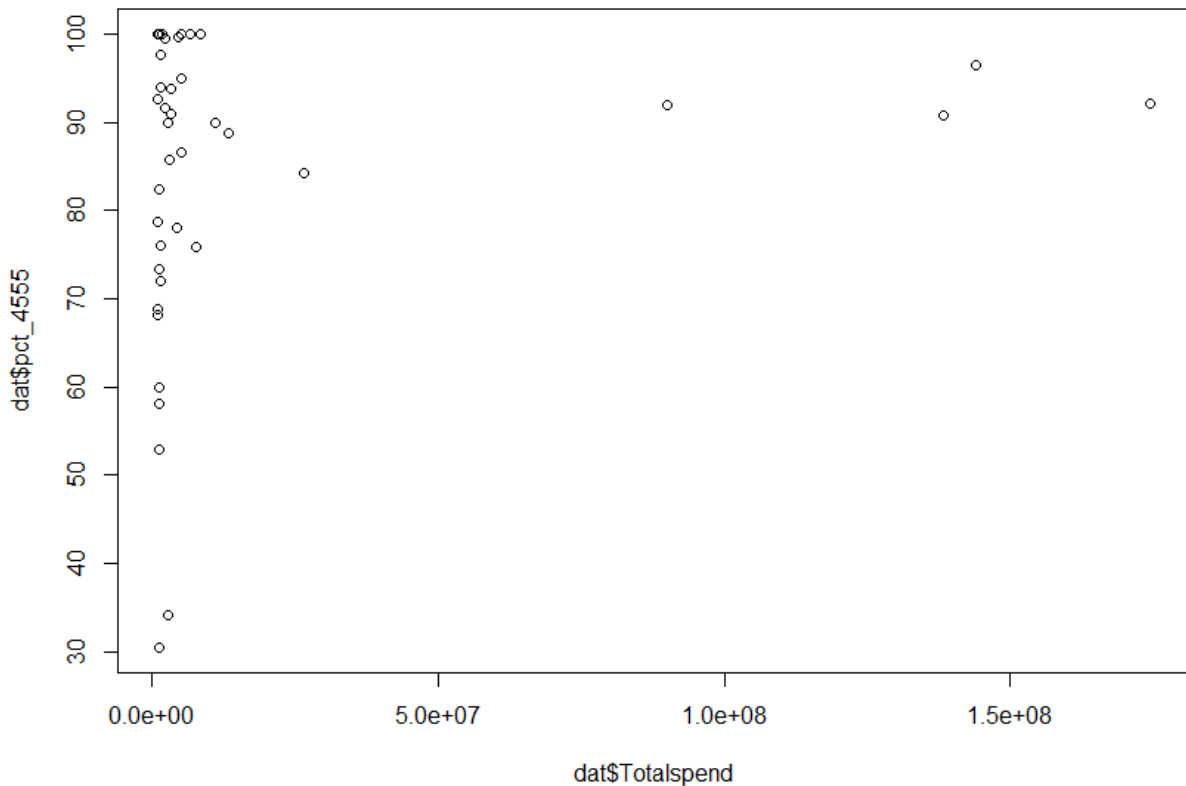
I now shift my attention to a smaller band of competitive races, those in which the Democratic candidate carried between 45 percent and 55 percent of the vote. Using this somewhat more stringent measure, these groups again exhibited efficiency in their spending decisions. On average, they allocated 84 percent of their spending to these contests. The median group allocated 90 percent of its expenditures to this set of races, and the highest quartile devoted 97 percent of their monies. The range of allocations did extend further here than it did for races with the broadest definition of competitive: A couple of groups allocated less than half of its expenditures here, and the bottom quartile targeted three-quarters or less of their funding to these races. (See Figure 2.)

Allocations among the “big four” independent-expenditure groups – the DCCC and House Majority for the Democrats, and the NRCC and Congressional Leadership – were even more efficient than the average. All four spent more than 90 percent of their independent expenditures on these races. Second-tier groups (spending more than \$10 million, though far less than the top four) also displayed average or above-average efficiency. On the Democratic side, Women Vote (the super PAC affiliated with Emily’s List that spent \$13.4 million) focused 89 percent of its spending on this group of seats; among Republican groups, Club for Growth assigned 84 percent of its \$26.4 million here. As Figure 2 shows, the most variation in allocations to this group of contests occurs among the lowest tier of groups, those making \$3 million or less in independent expenditures.

Comparing groups by their partisan alliances yielded little in terms of variation. Lower-spending groups allied with the Republican Party were slightly more likely to allocate

expenditures outside of this group of contests, compared to their Democratic-allied peers. While the least efficient Democratic group still spent almost 60 percent of their expenditures in this group of races, the least efficient Republican group (NRA Political Victory) allocated roughly half that much (30.5 percent). The least efficient Republican-allied quartile was less efficient than the same Democratic-allied quartile. That said, only the “tail” of the Republican groups showed dissimilar levels of efficiency. The median Republican group allocated 90 percent of its independent expenditures to this group of competitive House seats, a portion virtually identical to the median Democratic group’s allocation of 92 percent.

Figure 2: Independent-expenditure group allocations to more competitive races



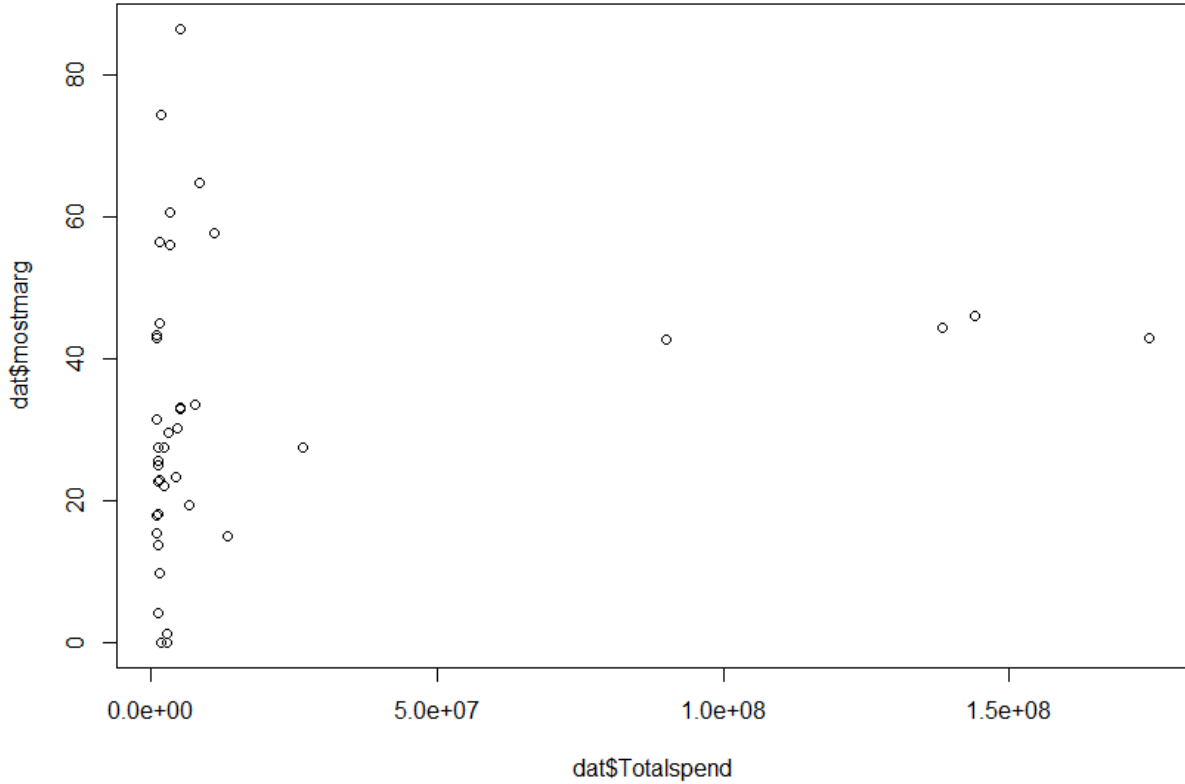
Independent expenditures in the 25 most competitive House seats

The third, most restrictive tier of competitive House seats was the group of 25 closest contests (again, measured by the Democratic candidate's share of the two-party vote). On average, these groups spent almost one-third of their expenditures on these races; the median group spent 29 percent. The lower quartile of allocations ranged from zero to 19 percent, while the highest quartile allocated anywhere from 44 percent to 87 percent.

Once again, the four giant independent-expenditure groups in House races – the DCCC and House Majority for Democrats, the NRCC and Congressional Leadership Fund for Republicans – pursued similar allocation strategies of above-average effectiveness. All four apportioned between 43 and 46 percent of their expenditures to these 25 most competitive seats, far above the median. This similar allocation suggests a tit-for-tat strategy (although this needs to be verified by a closer review of allocations to individual seats) among these top four groups, with an eye toward ending the 2020 cycle with a majority of House seats. Beyond the top four, allocations to these most competitive seats varied greatly, regardless of their amount of expenditures (Figure 3).

Once again, comparing independent-expenditure groups by their partisan alliances yielded little variation. The average allocation of a Democratic-allied group was 31.3 percent, just slightly more focused than the average allocation of a Republican-allied group (29.5 percent). The median allocations for Democratic- and Republican-allied groups also were quite similar (29.6 percent and 27.6 percent, respectively).

Figure 3: Independent-expenditure group allocations to 25 most competitive races



Conclusions and next steps

How did multicandidate super PACs change the campaign environment in 2020 House races? First and foremost, I note the great consolidation and centralization of independent-expenditure resources in the hands of just a couple organizations (Congressional Leadership, House Majority) outside the Hill committees. Second, these twin giants executed spending strategies quite similar to their Hill committee allies, at least by the measure of efficiency used here. Third, partisan differences between the two party-allied groups proved to be minimal.

Next steps include a closer look at individual House races, to see how closely super PACs imitated their allied Hill committees in choosing particular contests. I also will examine what common traits, if any, outliers to the above possess.

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