

**Article: “Overview - The Noncandidate Campaign: Soft Money and Issue Advocacy in the 2002 Congressional Elections”**

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# The Noncandidate Campaign: Soft Money and Issue Advocacy in the 2002 Congressional Elections

In competitive congressional races, noncandidate soft money and issue advocacy spending rivals and often exceeds spending by candidates. This symposium reports on research into noncandidate campaign activities in the 2002 congressional elections. The abstracts briefly summarize case studies investigating 26 battleground U.S. Senate and House races and another 17 control races.<sup>1</sup> The research was funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts under the auspices of the Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy at Brigham Young University <csed.byu.edu>. A full-text version of each case study as well as an overview of the

findings can be accessed online through the APSA web site <[www.apsanet.org/PS/July03/](http://www.apsanet.org/PS/July03/)>.

Soft money and election issue advocacy spending in 2002, as in 1998 and 2000, matched or exceeded candidate communication spending

in several competitive races and played a critical role in defining issues and candidates and funding voter mobilization efforts (Magleby 2000; 2001; 2003). Most congressional contests in 2002 did not see outside money activity because they were not competitive. But in the battleground races there were again extraordinary levels of spending, especially by the political parties, in what may have been the last hurrah of soft money. In the South Dakota Senate race, candidates, parties, and interest groups spent over \$24 million, which amounted to \$70.50 per voter (Meader and Bart 2003). This made South Dakota in 2002 one of the most expensive elections in dollars per voter in U.S. history. South Dakota was not alone. Several races described in this symposium saw astonishing levels of spending.

In competitive races, candidates, parties, and interest groups are all players, the tone of the campaign is more negative, and voters find themselves swimming in TV

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## The 2003 E-Symposium

While it's a given that the 2002 midterm elections determined the American political landscape along ideological terms, they also, and perhaps more importantly, set a higher bar for outside influence, and funding, in political campaigns. Featuring the last hurrah of soft money and with the fate of Congress hanging in the balance, the 2002 midterm election proved one of the costliest on record.

To better present current research in the timeliest of fashions, *PS* brings its readership the e-symposium. This format provides our readers with the most current research on the midterm election, research that, due to typical publication deadlines for the traditional journal format, would otherwise not be available to the scholarly community for several more months.

The following abstracted articles can be accessed whole at the APSA web site, [www.apsanet.org/July03/](http://www.apsanet.org/July03/).

and radio ads, mail, and phone calls. Based on a survey we commissioned in the Minnesota Senate race, for example, registered voters received an average of 18 pieces of political mail in the last three weeks of the campaign; one voter received 80 pieces of such mail (Monson and Magleby 2002). In surveys conducted in cooperation with a bipartisan panel of pollsters, we found that voters in battleground environments blame the parties and interest groups for the greater negativity in campaigns.<sup>2</sup>

With outside money, voters often can not determine the sources of the money spent in their race. Party soft money contributions often come from large donors, many of whom have interests in particular races. Contributing through a political party permits an issue activist or interest group to mask its identity while still targeting its

money to a particular race. The United Seniors Association, a nondescript name for a group reportedly largely funded by the pharmaceutical industry, was the most active issue advocacy group in our sample races. Our survey data demonstrated that voters have very different impressions of “pharmaceutical or drug companies” versus the “United Seniors Association.” Fifty-eight percent of respondents across the nation had an unfavorable view of pharmaceutical or drug companies, while only 5% had a negative impression of the United Seniors Association (Monson and Magleby 2002).

## Political Parties

While the courts will ultimately determine whether 2002 was the last hurrah for soft money, both parties and especially soft money donors behaved as if it was. The four congressional campaign committees set new records in soft money receipts, up \$64 million over 2000 (Federal Election Commission 2002). Only the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) saw a decline in 2002. The overall levels of soft money activity in 2002, including the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Republican National Committee (RNC), far exceeded any previous non-presidential year, and came very close to the level of the 2000 presidential election year in soft money receipts and expenditures. Yet, even with the enactment of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), it remains to be seen whether soft money will find new avenues through quasi-party interest groups and other entities (Corrado et al. 2003; Malbin forthcoming).

In 2002, as in 2000, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC) raised more soft money than the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC). In 2002, the difference was about \$28.6 million (Federal Election Commission 2002). The DSCC once again transferred more soft money into battleground races included in our 2002 case studies in Arkansas, Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota. The NRSC transferred more in New Hampshire and Missouri, and additional NRSC spending at the national level helped mitigate somewhat the DSCC advantage in soft money transfers.

While there was near parity in party soft money spending, the Republicans enjoyed a large hard money advantage. All GOP committees combined raised more than \$400 million in hard money compared to \$220 million for all Democratic committees (Federal Election Commission 2002). This persistent advantage in hard money was particularly evident at the RNC and National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC). As the parties adjust to a post-soft money world under BCRA, which includes higher limits on hard money contributions, Republicans have a clear advantage.

## Issue Advocacy

The overall level of issue advocacy in 2002 did not grow as much as the level of soft money, and for some groups, especially progressive groups, spending substantially declined from 2000 levels. Planned Parenthood, for example, had \$8 million less to spend in 2002 because Jane Fonda did not make a large contribution as she did in 2000 (Williams 2002). Other groups who reported less overall activity in 2002 than 2000 include the Sierra Club, National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action

League (NARAL), and the NAACP Voter Fund. Conservative groups may have increased spending in 2002. Groups reporting they spent more in 2002 include the Club for Growth and the National Federation for Independent Business (NFIB). In addition, several significant new groups appeared in 2002 including the Alliance for Retired Americans and the United Seniors Association. Groups such as the Human Rights Campaign, the Trial Lawyers, and the League of Conservation Voters (LCV) reported doing similar levels of advocacy in 2000 and 2002. Because 2002 was not a presidential election year, it is not surprising that issue advocacy by some groups dropped. The economic difficulties of 2001 and 2002 also no doubt contributed to there being less money for issue advocacy for some groups. Finally, some interest group leaders told us that parties were more aggressive in fundraising, capitalizing on 2002 as the possible last year for soft money.

The case studies in this symposium demonstrate that the ground war and voter activation and mobilization efforts were critical in 2002. Both parties and several allied groups waged expanded ground war campaigns. Republicans, pointing to the successes of the Democrats and their interest group allies in voter mobilization in 1998 and 2000, invested heavily in voter mobilization in 2002. The RNC, under the leadership of the White House, initiated the “72 Hour Task Force,” and the Republican leadership in the House initiated the Strategic Taskforce to Organize and Mobilize People (STOMP). A major element of their program included visits by President Bush or other Republican luminaries including Vice President Dick Cheney, First Lady Laura Bush, or former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani to energize the paid and volunteer workers and dominate news coverage. The GOP ground war included direct contact with voters, telephone calls, mail, and get-out-the-vote (GOTV) activities on Election Day. Interest in voter mobilization on the part of Republican allied groups such as the Business Industry Political Action Committee (BIPAC), the Chamber of Commerce, the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB), and the National Rifle Association (NRA) provided significant help for Republican ground war efforts.

The Democrats and their allies, particularly organized labor, also made the ground war and GOTV a major priority. Democrats conducted extensive mail and phone drives. Labor union mobilization efforts were particularly strong in our case studies of the Senate races in Iowa and Missouri and the Connecticut Fifth Congressional District. The AFL–CIO remains the model program for grassroots mobilization, and they maintained a strong initiative in voter mobilization in 2002. Groups such as the Sierra Club, NARAL, and Planned Parenthood, with less overall money to work with in 2002, invested a greater proportion of their resources in ground war activities.

Noncompetitive races saw little or no soft money and issue advocacy spending. The opposite is true in non-competitive elections. For purposes of comparison we included a series of non-competitive control races in our 2002 study.<sup>3</sup> While parties and interest groups occasionally misjudged the competitiveness of a race, they rarely spent money in an election judged to be uncompetitive. The control races follow the familiar pattern known to scholars of congressional elections—lopsided candidate-centered races usually dominated by incumbents with little, if any, involvement by outside groups.

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## Notes

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1. For a discussion of our research design and methodology as well as our sample design see the online e-symposium Appendix.

2. The four pollsters were Linda DiVall of American Viewpoint (Republican), Ed Goetas of the Tarrance Group (Republican), Mark Mellman of the Mellman Group (Democratic), and Fred Yang of Garin-Hart-Yang Research Group (Democratic). For a detailed report of the survey see David B. Magleby and J. Quin Monson, "Campaign 2002: 'The Perfect Storm,'" *Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy*, 13 November 2002. Available at <<http://csed.byu.edu>>.

3. Comparisons between competitive and noncompetitive control races are made in nearly all of the case studies in this symposium. There are two types of control cases. We included several cases in the 2002 study that were competitive races in 2000. We also asked most of our academics to select a control race that was adjacent to the competitive race. The two cases usually shared the same media market which aided in the comparison.

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