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Group's study backs pact that limited outside political spending

By: Joshua Miller – May 2, 2013

Lauding a pact that limited outside spending in last year's Senate race, a new study by a nonpartisan government watchdog group to be released Thursday called for the agreement to be replicated.

The report from Common Cause Massachusetts compared the Massachusetts Senate contest to three other competitive 2012 Senate races and concluded that the so-called People's Pledge significantly reduced outside spending in the race and thus increased transparency in who was funding campaign activity.

The pledge, inked by candidates Elizabeth Warren and Scott Brown, also resulted in comparatively fewer negative ads on the Commonwealth's airwaves, the study found.

"The People's Pledge was remarkably successful," the report concluded.

As a result of the pact, only 9 percent of total spending in the race between Brown and Warren came from outside groups, the study found, none on television ads after the pledge was signed.

In a similarly competitive Senate race in Virginia where the candidates did not agree to a pact, outside group spending made up 62 percent of total spending, the report said.

Less than 40 percent of ads in the Massachusetts race were negative, whereas about 80 percent of the ads in a similar race in Ohio that did not have a pact were negative, the study found.

The report did not address how a similar pact signed between Democrats Edward J. Markey and Stephen F. Lynch in their primary may have affected Markey's win Tuesday night.

As the general election campaign got underway Wednesday, Markey and his Republican opponent, Gabriel Gomez, wasted no time sparring over whether to implement a new pledge in the weeks leading up to the June 25 election.

Markey and his allies have repeatedly called on Gomez to agree to a pact limiting outside spending. Gomez has declined to do so.

"I will only take one pledge, and it's the pledge I took when I was a naval officer, and that's to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States," Gomez said Wednesday.

Both Markey and Gomez could benefit from outside spending in the race, as each has national groups that would probably be inclined to work on their behalf.

The 2012 pledge imposed weighty financial penalties on candidates when outside groups spent on their behalf.

That meant that the vast majority of money contributed to the race went directly to the candidates, the report said.

Since campaigns, unlike some outside groups, are required to disclose their donors, the people who were financially supporting each candidate became more transparent than in races with more outside money, it reasoned.

Pam Wilmot, the executive director of Common Cause Massachusetts, said it was in the public's interest to have a pact like the Pledge because without it, "it turns into a huge arms race, where you have one side's billionaires going against the other side's billionaires."

And, she said, it is to the public's benefit to have candidate's air the ads in the race, - instead of outside groups.

"It's just all too easy for a candidate to disavow the [outside] negative advertising that is attacking their opponent in untruthful ways," Wilmot said.

"They can disavow it and receive the benefits from that advertising. They can have their cake and can eat it, too."

But there is not unanimity that less outside group spending in political races is a public good.

Some political analysts believe that third-party spending allows underdog candidates to compete against incumbents and can also help inform the electorate.

John Samples, an analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, said that outside spending leads to a more informed electorate.

GOP consultant Rick Wilson said it can help level the playing field when a challenger is running against a well-funded incumbent.