

# Morning Sentinel

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## **Out-of-state PAC spending on Maine's US Senate race dwarfs candidates' efforts**

By Kevin Miller, Washington bureau chief

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WASHINGTON -- Out-of-state organizations have spent as much as 70 percent more money per voter attempting to influence Maine's U.S. Senate election than the campaigns themselves as cash from national groups pours into a race critical to control of the Senate.

Additionally, outside groups have paid for more than 60 percent of the nearly 10,000 Senate-related television ads that have aired on Maine's major broadcasting networks since the summer.

Those two findings -- based on separate analyses by the Portland Press Herald and an independent ad tracking group -- highlight the dramatic way the political landscape has changed since federal court rulings gave rise to super PACs and unlimited corporate donations.

"Everybody assumed (outside spending) would go up a lot, but I don't think anybody knew on what scale, and it turned out to be very substantial," said Bob Biersack, a senior fellow at the Center for Responsive Politics, which monitors and analyzes campaign spending.

With less than two weeks to go before voters head to the polls, the campaign spigots appear to have opened all the way in Maine's race to choose a successor to retiring U.S. Sen. Olympia Snowe. Groups from outside of Maine are behind much of the spending as Republicans and Democrats fight for every seat in the closely divided chamber.

As of Oct. 23, political action committees, super PACs and other outside organizations had spent roughly \$5.8 million on the race involving independent Angus King, Republican Charlie Summers and Democrat Cynthia Dill. Both the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Republican Senatorial Committee had spent more than \$1.3 million to help Summers, while Americans Elect and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee spent more than \$1 million each to support King or oppose Summers.

The candidates, by comparison, had spent slightly more than \$3.4 million as of Oct. 17, according to the campaigns and reports to the Federal Election Commission.

Put another way, outside groups spent \$7.45 to reach each of Maine's roughly 779,000 registered voters, compared to the \$4.37 spent per voter by the campaigns themselves, although that gap probably has shrunk somewhat because of subsequent campaign spending.

While that \$5.8 million figure is less than the "independent expenditures" seen in a dozen other Senate races -- with Virginia's \$32 million leading the pack as of Tuesday -- the levels of outside spending in Maine become more impressive after considering the size of the target audience.

An analysis by the Press Herald found that, as of mid-week, Maine's Senate race was sixth in the nation in per-voter spending by political action committees, super PACs and politically involved nonprofits.

For instance, Ohio's Senate race has attracted nearly five times as much outside spending as Maine's race -- \$25.6 million as of Tuesday -- but the per-voter spending in that state was only \$4.57 because of the much larger population. The same is true in such Senate battleground states as Missouri (\$3.19 per voter), Connecticut (\$4.33) and Florida (\$2.10).

The leader among Senate races, by far, was Montana, where outside groups have poured \$18 million to reach the state's 491,000 registered voters -- or \$36.46 per voter.

David Parker, an associate professor at Montana State University in Bozeman, said the airwaves in Montana's five television media markets already are saturated with ads in the race between incumbent Democratic Sen. John Tester and his Republican challenger, Denny Rehberg. Out of all of those ads, Parker counted just two funded by outside groups that carried a positive message.

By Nov. 6, Montanans may have seen as much as \$24 million worth of television advertising alone, Parker said. That doesn't include all of the spending on mailers, radio advertising and the get-out-the-vote efforts, he said. While the ad onslaught is eliciting grumbles and some talk of campaign finance reform, however, Parker suggested the efforts probably were working in one key respect.

"If anything, it is going to drive more people to the polls," he said.

Mainers have seen their share of political ads and will see many more before Election Day.

The campaigns and outside groups purchased airtime for nearly 10,000 television ads on major broadcasting networks between June 1 and Oct. 21. More than 5,900 of those ads have aired since Oct. 1, according to an ad tracking survey by the Wesleyan Media Project run by Wesleyan University and other partners.

Outside groups were responsible for more than 6,000 of the ads aired since June 1, with the candidates' campaigns airing another 3,600 ads through Oct. 21, the Wesleyan Media Project reported on Wednesday.

"What is surprising is the amount of (financial) support this late in the game," said Michael Franz, a Bowdoin College associate professor who is co-director of the Wesleyan Media Project. "That indicates that something has people nervous or someone sees an opportunity."

Many of those ads have targeted King, an independent former governor who appears to have the implicit -- if not openly disclosed -- support of national Democrats. King has aired 1,035 ads during the first three weeks of October

while organizations supporting King or opposing Summers paid for another 2,058 ads during that period.

Dill, the Democratic nominee in the Senate race, has not aired any ads and has not been endorsed specifically by any outside groups advertising in recent weeks.

Crystal Canney, spokeswoman for King's campaign, pointed out that King asked his two major-party opponents to disavow outside spending right after they both won their primaries; but Summers did not endorse the proposal. Massachusetts Sen. Scott Brown, a Republican, and Democrat Elizabeth Warren made a similar pact, which has held down outside spending in that state.

The deluge of anti-King ads -- much of them focused on his ties to the wind energy business and his record as governor -- have changed the discussion in the race. With the exception of one wind power-related response ad, Canney insisted the outside spending has not changed King's campaign. King also has benefited from supportive ads by the nonprofit Americans Elect and ads targeting Summers by the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, which has not endorsed Dill and is believed to support King.

"There certainly has been a television ad war," Canney said. "From our perspective, we had a plan in place, we have executed that plan in the past few weeks, and we are not changing course. Things look pretty good."

Drew Brandewie, spokesman for Summers, likewise insisted the outside ads have not changed his candidate's campaign.

Of course, Maine's Senate race is getting a relatively small portion of an infusion of outside spending expected to top \$1 billion by Election Day.

Nationwide, outside groups already have spent more than \$700 million on the 2012 elections, including the race for the White House. That is up from roughly \$260 million in 2008, according to [opensecrets.org](http://opensecrets.org), the website operated by the Center for Responsive Politics.

All of that spending has implications, said the center's Biersack. It adds uncertainty to the election, takes away campaigns' ability to control their messages and forces candidates to spend more time fundraising than listening to voters or debating the issues, he said.

"It's made the money chase in the campaigns much more intense," he said.

Then there is the issue of disclosure. Politically engaged nonprofit organizations, such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and labor unions, are not required to identify their donors and can spend unlimited amounts of money on campaigns. Pro-disclosure groups claim that prevents the public from knowing who truly behind the "dark money" flowing to the groups airing what are often attack ads.

Not everyone is convinced the surge in independent expenditures is a problem -- or if it's even a flood at all.

John Samples, director of the libertarian Cato Institute's Center for Representative Government, argued that the money pouring into outside groups' coffers may have flowed into this election in some form regardless of the Supreme Court's Citizens United ruling and another prominent case.

However, those rulings may have "moved the categories" so that donors and corporations instead are giving to the newly created super PACs and nonprofits emboldened by the new rules.

As for the amount of money being spent in 2012, Samples was nonplussed.

"It's been long known that the amount of (election) spending bears relation to the amount of wealth the country has," he said. "I'm actually thinking that spending overall for the election might be lower than you'd expect" given past history.