

## Cost of Congressional Campaigns Skyrockets

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PHILADELPHIA -- Two dozen Democrats braved a torrential downpour last week to personally deliver \$250 checks to congressional candidate Allyson Schwartz at a fundraising reception here at a city law firm. Her thanks: to beg them to donate even more.

"I know it seems never-ending, but if you can write another check, that would be great," Schwartz, a Pennsylvania state senator, told the soggy audience. And while they were at it, she added, it would be good if they could find "a colleague or a friend" to contribute, as well.

She may seem a tad ungrateful, but Schwartz needs every dollar she can get. If she hopes to beat her opponent, Republican physician Melissa Brown, Schwartz figures that she must raise and spend \$2.5 million for the general election. Her campaign spent \$2 million to win the primary.

Not long ago, a race for a seat in the House was a relatively low-key -- and low-cost -- enterprise. A decade ago, it cost on average about \$500,000 to win a House seat, according to the Campaign Finance Institute. Not anymore. Largely because of the ever-increasing cost of television advertising, the average price tag for waging a winning campaign is likely to zoom past the million-dollar mark this year for the first time, analysts say. In the four competitive congressional races that ring Philadelphia, each of the major candidates plans to raise about \$2 million or more in the general election campaign.

Three of the four races are for open seats: Schwartz and Brown are battling to succeed Rep. Joseph M. Hoeffel III (D), who is running for the Senate. Schwartz is ahead in the polls. Democratic business executive Joe Driscoll and state Sen. Charles W. Dent (R) are vying to replace Rep. Pat Toomey (R) in a district that leans Republican. And Democratic lawyer Virginia Schrader and GOP Bucks County Commissioner Mike Fitzpatrick are battling to succeed retiring Rep. James C. Greenwood (R) in a district where Republicans hold the edge. Freshman Rep. Jim Gerlach (R) is being challenged by Montgomery County lawyer Lois Murphy (D) in a Republican-leaning district.

The Philadelphia story is far from unique. Overall spending on House races is on track to increase by approximately 25 percent over what was spent two years ago, said Michael Malbin, a congressional scholar and executive director of the nonpartisan Campaign Finance Institute. One reason for the jump, ironically, was the passage two years ago of the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform law, which was supposed to rein in the

burgeoning influence of money in politics.

While the statute bans unlimited contributions to political parties called "soft money," it also doubles the maximum amount that an individual can donate to a candidate for federal office, to \$2,000. That has led to a big increase in total giving to congressional aspirants.

"Because of these higher limits, even candidates in races that aren't among the two dozens or so most competitive are raking in more and more money, and they're spending it," said Kent Cooper, co-founder of PoliticalMoneyLine.com, a Web site that tracks electoral giving.

But the larger factor is the cost of television time. House candidates in this expensive, urban market, for instance, say that they expect to pay at least \$400,000 a week to fill the airwaves with a full complement of commercials. That is about in line with other major metropolitan areas, such as Las Vegas, Cincinnati and Denver, where close congressional races also cost millions.

The House's most expensive contest is expected to be in the Dallas area between two veteran incumbents, Reps. Pete Sessions (R) and Martin Frost (D), who have been thrown together by redistricting. "When it's all said and done, both sides together could spend between \$7 million and \$8 million," said Frost press secretary Justin Kitsch.

When efforts by outside groups attempting to influence the outcome of races are counted, the full tally in other congressional races could reach that high, as well. "If you look at total spending in a tight House race, including spending by the political parties, interest groups and the candidates themselves, you could see \$8 million easily," Malbin said. "That's an amount that used to be enough to run a Senate race in a good-sized state."

Such a huge financial burden has altered the way parties recruit their candidates. "Candidates who say they want to talk about issues, we love 'em," said Rep. Robert T. Matsui (Calif.), chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. "But running for political office requires discipline and hard work -- being on the phone eight to 10 hours a day, calling people they don't know. . . . Candidates who do that are the most successful."

The four neck-and-neck races that collar Philadelphia are crowded with candidates who are willing to commit that time and effort. Gerlach said he dials for campaign dollars one to three hours every day. Murphy, his opponent, spends a quarter of her time raising money, an aide said. Schwartz's opponent, Brown, "spends about 50 percent of her time making phone calls and going to events that can assist with fundraising," said Carl Fogliani, Brown's campaign manager.

Gerlach does not like pleading for donations but said, "You gotta do what you gotta do." Schwartz, who spends part of every day asking people for money by phone or in person, enjoys the process. "It's like greeting voters," she said. "It's also one of the more concrete things that I do. At the end of the week, you can count it up in a way you can't count up other things that I do in a campaign."

Her persistence paid off last week. One of the people at her fundraiser, Bryna Silver, a trademark lawyer, finally agreed to go to the event -- and bring a check. "I was trying not to give," Silver said, "but she called me one more time and I said, 'Okay, enough! I'll come.' "

Despite their support for Schwartz, some of the other attendees had misgivings about a system that requires candidates to expend so much energy on fundraising. "The whole game is about raising money, it's disgusting," said Sam Menaged, a health care administrator.

But the candidates here say they do not have a choice. Getting their messages across to voters will be harder than usual. Pennsylvania is a presidential battleground state and has a high-profile Senate race between Sen. Arlen Specter (R) and Hoeffel. As a consequence, Philadelphians are seeing so many political ads that a congressional candidate has to buy a significant amount of airtime to be heard above the clamor.

Each candidate has a different strategy to deal with the problem. Dent, who represents several towns north of Philadelphia in the state Senate, has hired finance experts to help him raise money. Driscoll, his Democratic opponent, said he has organized a network of volunteers to help him find enough money to compete. "It's a team effort and nothing less will get us to where we need to get," he said.

Schwartz has hired 20 professional canvassers to contact voters door to door. They have visited more than 100,000 homes.

All of which takes money -- more than ever. In a competitive contest, said Amy Walter, the House election analyst for the Cook Political Report, "you can't run a race for under a million dollars; that's become the starting point."