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**Republicans keep grip on Legislature despite Democratic spending spree**

*By Peter Cameron, The Badger Project / Wisconsin Watch*

Billionaire liberals like Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker and other super rich donors used a loophole in Wisconsin campaign finance law to dump money into the coffers of the Democratic Party, which routed a considerable chunk of contributions to state legislative candidates.

More favorable to Democrats in the last election, the loophole allowed four Democratic candidates and one Republican to destroy the previous record for most cash raised for a Wisconsin state legislative race. Each candidate brought in at least $1 million, most of it from their party. A seat in the state Senate pays an annual salary of $53,000.

Whether those candidates definitely shattered campaign spending records is somewhat unclear. The Wisconsin Ethics Commission has records dating back to 2008, with older records destroyed or housed in a state building somewhere, Administrator Daniel A. Carlton Jr. said. But in 2015, the GOP-run Legislature significantly loosened campaign finance laws that had limited spending in state political races, making it probable that new highs were, in fact, set last year.

In that election cycle, Republicans complained about getting pounded by all the negative advertising those dollars bought. Liberals, highly motivated to beat then-President Donald Trump, felt good about their chances.

The result: Democrats achieved a negligible gain, picking up a couple of seats in the Assembly, where they remain outnumbered 60 to 38. The party’s Senate results were more discouraging, losing two more seats and handing Republicans 21 of the 33 seats.

Some Republicans said their strong showing was proof that their ideas were more popular.

Democrats see the results as Republicans reaping the benefits of political boundary manipulation.

“The fact that Democrats spent huge amounts of money on campaigns around the state, with little positive results, shows the strength of the gerrymandered legislative districts in Wisconsin,” said David Czarnezki, a Democrat and former state senator who now serves as a Milwaukee County supervisor.

Since Republicans, aided by hyper efficient computer programs, redrew the districts under great secrecy in 2011, they have consistently won a greater share of the seats in the state Legislature than their share of the total votes cast.

In 2020, Republicans won about 50% of all votes cast in state Senate races, but about 64% of the seats up for re-election, according to an analysis by The Badger Project. In the Assembly, Republicans won about 54% of all votes, but about 62% of seats.

**Fewer GOP votes needed to win**

In 2014 and 2016, Democrats received more than 50% of all votes cast for state Senate seats, but won only about 40% of the seats, according to an analysis by the Wisconsin State Journal.

Gerrymandered districts are “the most important driver of election outcomes,” said Barry Burden, a political science professor and director of the Elections Research Center at University of Wisconsin-Madison.

“Although there are improvements to be made in the campaign finance system and in other election rules and practices,” he said, “the configuration of districts has proved to be the most powerful determinant of state legislative election results.”

Burden noted both parties have won recently in statewide elections for president, U.S. Senate and governor — races that can’t be gerrymandered — calling it “a sign of the inherent political competitiveness of Wisconsin.”

“But that competitiveness has not been apparent in the state Legislature, where the majority party has been able to rely on extremely stable majorities that seem immune to partisan swings that affect other elections,” Burden said. “A wave election such as the 2018 midterm or a big financial advantage is not going to allow the Democrats to take back control of a state Legislature designed to resist public influence.”

Many experts, including a federal court, have called Wisconsin the most gerrymandered state in the country.

**Big spending, few victories**

Thanks mainly to six-figure infusions of cash from their party, the fundraising of Democratic candidates dwarfed Republicans in many swing districts. (That does not count millions spent by independent and so-called issue ad groups in the fall election.)

But they got meager returns, at best, for their money.

State Sen. Brad Pfaff, D-La Crosse, was one of the few Democrats to win a swing district. Pfaff raised and spent a state record $1.5 million and squeaked past his Republican challenger Dan Kapanke, who raised and spent about $600,000, by less than half a percentage point.

Jonathon Hansen, a De Pere city councilman, raised and spent more than $1.4 million, while his Republican challenger Eric Wimberger raised and spent about $800,000.

Hansen lost by more than 8 percentage points and 8,000 votes.

“We raised a lot of money, but campaign spending can only go so far in terms of overcoming gerrymandering and the partisan lean of a district, especially given that the numbers of voters willing to ticket-split continues to dwindle,” Hansen told The Badger Project.

Neal Plotkin, a substitute teacher, raised and spent more than $1.2 million in his challenge to powerhouse fundraiser and longtime state Sen. Alberta Darling, R-River Hills, who spent about $1 million.

Plotkin was beaten by more than 8 percentage points, a total of 10,000 votes.

And Paul Piotrowski, a Democrat and former police officer from Stevens Point, raised and spent more than $1.1 million in his challenge to incumbent state Sen. Patrick Testin, R-Stevens Point, who spent more than $700,000.

Piotrowski lost by more than 12 percentage points or 12,000 votes.

**Loophole allows campaign cash to flow**

Huge donations from outside the state are becoming the norm in Wisconsin, where legal changes have allowed ever-increasing political donations in recent years.

Following the 2014 U.S. Supreme Court case, McCutcheon vs. FEC, that deemed Wisconsin’s annual $10,000 limit on total political donations unconstitutional, the Republican-controlled Legislature went even further in loosening campaign finance laws, including doubling the limit on direct donations to political candidates.

In 2018, the Wisconsin GOP benefited from the loosened restrictions, outraising the state Democratic Party by millions.

In 2020, liberals turned the tables and flooded America’s Dairyland with cash.

Beyond that, independent groups on both sides of the aisle [poured $8.5 million](https://www.wisdc.org/images/files/campaign2020/independent-expenditure-pac_totals-2021-01-22.pdf) into the 2020 legislative races, according to tallies from the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign. Big spenders on the Democratic side included A Better Wisconsin Together, which spent just over $2 million; and Service Employees International Union Committee on Political Education, which spent about $833,000.

On the GOP side, the largest spenders were the Koch Network’s Americans for Prosperity, which spent $748,000, and Jobs First Coalition, which spent $674,000. Dark money groups also weighed in on the right with [“issue ads,” which do not require disclosure](https://www.wisdc.org/interest-group-spending/129-hijacking-campaign-2020/6435-hijacking-campaign-2020-issue-ads). The Democracy Campaign estimates the Wisconsin Realtors Advocacy Fund spent $500,000; WMC Issues Mobilization Council spent $660,000; and the Wisconsin Alliance for Reform spent $150,000, all favoring Republican candidates or attacking Democrats.

**Other reasons for GOP dominance?**

Bob Kulp, a Republican who served in the Wisconsin State Assembly from 2013 until last year, said money doesn’t really buy elections, at least at the state legislative level.

“A legislator who’s doing their job and is responsive to their friends and neighbors and they’re handling their business, I think that you could put a lot of money against the incumbent and it won’t necessarily change the election,” he said.

“Unseating an incumbent is a pretty tough thing.” he added.

Democrats are currently far behind in both houses of the state Legislature in terms of seats, so the party has to run against incumbents in many districts.

Like every state, Wisconsin must draw new district maps before the next state election in 2022. But Wisconsin is different from many states in that the governor can veto any maps drawn by the Legislature. That’s an almost certain outcome, considering Gov. Tony Evers is a Democrat and Republicans control both legislative houses. In that case, the courts must settle the issue.

Republicans are proposing that the state’s Supreme Court, which has a conservative majority, take direct control of the bevy of likely lawsuits and make the final decision regarding the maps. But in a recent hearing, the court’s right-leaning Chief Justice Patience Roggensack expressed skepticism with the idea, saying the state court lacks the staff to draw maps.

The last time Wisconsin state government was split — in 2002 — the state Supreme Court flirted with overseeing a process for drawing districts, but ultimately declined and kicked the issue to the federal courts. Roggensack and Justice Annette Ziegler, both conservatives on the court then and now, rejected the state court overseeing the process at that time.

Anticipating the upcoming court battles for redistricting, Republicans have already hired lawyers that could cost the state $1 million or more in legal fees, according to a report from WisPolitics. Evers has launched The People’s Maps Commission to draw what he says will be fair maps. But the commission has no legal authority, as the state’s constitution gives the Legislature the ability to approve the districts.

Even if the federal courts give Wisconsin more competitive maps for the coming decade, Democrats still might face an uphill climb to win majorities in the Assembly and Senate.

Liberal voters tend to gerrymander themselves by residing in concentrated urban areas. Modern Republican voters are much more spread out across the state and country, including in vast rural areas where Democrats are less popular. That gives Republicans a natural advantage in the redistricting process, Burden said

While he lost ground in many urban and suburban areas from 2016 to 2020, President Donald Trump dominated rural precincts, helping Republicans maintain and even gain seats while he lost re-election.

Kulp, the former Republican Assembly member, scoffed at the idea that favorable redistricting helped him win his district in rural central Wisconsin that includes parts of Marathon and Clark counties.

“Hard left people indicate that I was only there because of gerrymandering, which is really stupid,” he said, “because you have to go a long way from my former residence in Stratford in the 69th District, in order to carve out a purple district., let alone a blue district.”

“We are just a heck of a lot redder than we’ve ever been,” he added.

*The Badger Project is a nonpartisan, citizen-supported journalism nonprofit in Wisconsin. Wisconsin Watch Managing Editor Dee J. Hall contributed to this report.*