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Dem Voters Want Dem Pols Who Do Things

The Joe Manchin wing of the party lost big on Tuesday.

BY ALEXANDER SAMMON MAY 18, 2022



GENE J. PUSKAR/AP PHOTO

Supporters of Pennsylvania Lt. Gov. John Fetterman cheer after the race for the Democratic nomination for U.S.

Senate for Pennsylvania was called for Fetterman May 17

<https://prospect.org/politics/dem-voters-want-dem-pols-who-do-things/>



Senate for Pennsylvania was called for Fetterman, May 17, 2022, at a hotel in Imperial, Pennsylvania.



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Tuesday's primary elections were defined by historic super PAC spending attempting to quash a number of progressive candidates and an attempted hostile takeover of the Democratic primary process like we've never seen. At last count, just a handful of super PACs had dumped \$18 million to influence the outcome in favor of moderates.

The expectation in politics is that the person with the most money wins. And that played out in several races Tuesday night. In numerous races, massive super PAC money backed moderate candidates with institutional endorsements and little enthusiasm. But surprisingly, progressives largely won the argument that voters want to see their representatives fighting for an agenda rather than fighting to stop it. The candidates most tied to trying to slam the brakes on progress were defeated. The candidates who organized their communities in favor of getting things done for the people were successful. And in one incredible instance, voters saw through the hollowness of millions of outside dollars.

The night's early returns were headlined by the triumph of Pennsylvania Lt. Gov. John Fetterman over moderate House Rep. Conor Lamb for the state's Democratic Senate nomination. Fetterman was expected to win, but did so resoundingly, winning every single county while holed up in a hospital bed recovering from pacemaker surgery.

More from Alexander Sammon

Fetterman is a bit of an unorthodox progressive



candidate. He's championed a \$15 minimum wage, weed legalization, Medicare for All, and higher taxes on the rich. He's also embraced Title 42, the immigration policy that the Trump administration enacted to turn away asylum seekers using COVID as a pretense, and pledged to support Israel.

The latter decision likely kept some of the massive super PAC spending from AIPAC's United Democracy Project PAC and Democratic Majority for Israel PAC out of the race. Still, Lamb benefited from millions of dollars in super PAC spending thanks to Penn Progress, a super PAC composed primarily of financial titans and set up specifically to buoy his candidacy, despite the fact that Lamb has previously condemned corporate money in elections.

Fetterman also identified himself as a vocal opponent of the filibuster, and the regime of obstructionism that has come to define Joe Biden's first term as president. Lamb, meanwhile, who had a not-insignificant record of voting against the party and a close personal relationship with Sen. Joe Manchin, the filibuster's Democratic face, was unable to make the case that he would be a Democrat who would actually advance the Democratic agenda.

In House races in Pennsylvania, progressives also won out. In a low-profile race that brought zero outside spending, former Bernie Sanders delegate Chris Deluzio won easily over moderate Sean Meloy in Pennsylvania's 17th District. That seat is currently held by Lamb, who has long claimed that his political canniness in voting against Democratic legislative priorities made him the only Democrat who could win in that district. Now, Lamb could be replaced by a progressive.

Pennsylvania's 12th, meanwhile, was anything but a low-profile contest. Thirty-four-year-old progressive Summer Lee eked out the narrowest of victories over



Steve Irwin, a corporate lawyer whose firm engaged in union-busting campaigns. Just a handful of weeks ago, the race looked like a laugher, with Lee up 25 points. Then, AIPAC began blanketing the airwaves with at least \$2.7 million in attack ads, while DMFI PAC chipped in another \$400,000, bringing the margin of victory to near-zero. Because of Lee's exceptional organization and ground game, and experience running against the Pennsylvania machine in a race just four years ago, she was able to pull it out.

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Tuesday's results showed that money isn't all that counts in elections.

In Oregon, massive super PAC spending on behalf of Democratic obstructionists was also unsuccessful. The race in the Fifth District has yet to be called, but Jamie McLeod-Skinner looks to have defeated incumbent Kurt Schrader, the Democratic representative best known for voting down President Biden's extremely popular drug pricing reform legislation (or for calling the impeachment of Donald Trump after January 6, 2021, a “lynching”). McLeod-Skinner consistently called Schrader “the Joe Manchin of the House,” and was fond of saying that running to Schrader's left just made her a normal Democrat. Voters once again punished obstruction, in the form of Schrader.

Mainstream Democrats PAC, which operates closely with DMFI PAC, renting office space from the organization and paying it for web hosting, spent at least \$800,000 on Schrader's behalf, who also benefited from pharma-funded ads; he was even endorsed by the president. Still, McLeod-Skinner looks positioned to have won out over the pharmaceutical industry's favored candidate, whose campaign was alleged to have



favorite candidate, whose campaign was alleged to have been run by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

In the Sixth District next door, Protect Our Future PAC, a super PAC associated with crypto billionaire Sam Bankman-Fried, put up more than \$11 million for Carrick Flynn, a relative no-namer in an open seat. Crypto PACs are a new entrant into Democratic electioneering, and this race marked the PAC's biggest investment. It was matched by \$1 million in spending from the party's own House Majority PAC, a move that enraged local Democrats and confused national ones.

Yet Flynn lost to Medicare for All supporter Andrea Salinas, and it wasn't close. If anything, the massive amount of spending backfired on the neophyte candidate, turning off voters.

Super PAC spending proved much more effective in North Carolina, where AIPAC's United Democracy Project and DMFI PAC teamed up to take down two progressive women of color in the state's First and Fourth Districts. In the first, Erica Smith lost by a margin of nearly 2-to-1 to Don Davis, who got at least \$2.3 million in spending out of UDP PAC and another \$500,000 from DMFI. Davis, endorsed by retiring Rep. G.K. Butterfield, looks set to become the most anti-abortion Democrat in House, after repeatedly voting with the state's Republicans to defund Planned Parenthood and other anti-choice measures. That could prove a messaging nightmare for a party that will be running on the Supreme Court's strike-down of *Roe v. Wade* in the fall.

In NC-04 as well, progressive Nida Allam was beaten by Valerie Foushee, who benefited from millions in spending from UDP, DMFI PAC, and Protect Our Future PAC. In fact, AIPAC was responsible for such an

overwhelming percentage of Foushee's fundraising that



overwhelming percentage of Foushee's fundraising that it led to an outcry from local Democrats. Local news outlet The Assembly chronicled the shocking development, noting that, in early May, the race had "more spending from outside groups than any state primary for U.S. House in either party." Considering that array of spending, Allam fared decently, losing by around nine points, or 8,000 votes. But the Ohio model for purging progressives continues to work for big-money interests.

Indeed, super PAC spending remains the top story of Tuesday's elections, even if those PACs didn't win across the board. For the ten years since the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision legalized the infinite spending of ostensibly "independent" super PACs, Democrats have broadly signaled support for campaign finance reform that would rein that system in. In recent years, many progressives and even moderates have eschewed corporate PAC donations in favor of small-dollar donations in powering their campaigns. Now, that moderation has disappeared, and super PAC spending has taken over the Democratic primary process. Most of the high-profile progressive incumbents, including all of the Squad, have yet to have their elections. The final spending totals will be massive.

If Democrats had managed to get either of their democracy reform bills passed, this situation would likely look very different. Stricter prohibitions on collaboration between super PACs and candidates would have been enacted, and it's likely those PACs would have been less inclined to be so brazen in their attempts to buy political office. But thanks to a handful of Democratic obstructionists and embrace of the filibuster, those bills never passed. Perhaps most troublingly, no one in Democratic leadership has spoken up to condemn this trend, which has seen unfettered spending targeting progressives, particularly women of



spending targeting progressives, particularly women of color. In fact, many of the candidates receiving this support also got institutional endorsements, from retiring incumbents, House leadership, or the president himself.

Adding a smattering of Democratic House reps to the caucus who won thanks to the absence of meaningful regulations will only make it harder for the caucus to enact the campaign finance reforms they've long sought.

But Tuesday's results showed that money isn't all that counts in elections. Big spending matters, but the progressive policy vision continues to excite voters enough to overcome major fundraising deficits, and with just two major primary days in the books, the Squad already looks poised to add two members. Progressives look competitive both in open seats and in primaries, both of which will be critical to shaping the Democratic caucus for years to come. Meanwhile, the do-nothing moderate brand looks exceedingly weak. That could spell trouble for other high-profile obstructionists like Henry Cuellar in Texas, who has his hotly contested runoff with progressive Jessica Cisneros next week.

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