This paper explores the effects of Donald Trump’s nomination on competition and spending in Republican Senate and House campaigns. Trump’s nomination prompted many Republican donors and interest groups to decrease their spending on the presidential race and increase their spending in support of other candidates. The rapid change in the party’s beliefs about its ability to win the presidency, coupled with loosened regulations on political spending, created the most fluid pattern of campaign spending the nation has seen in decades. I document the effects of this shift in resources on downballot primary and general election campaigns, and I compare 2016 to a variety of previous presidential election years to determine whether new campaign finance regulations enable parties to reallocate money more quickly than in the past.

Donald Trump’s presidential campaign has been, to put matters mildly, the most disruptive American campaign in decades. Among other things, the Trump campaign has upset traditional theories about how campaigns are run; it has cast doubt on the reliability of polls and other election projection mechanisms; and it has fundamentally reshaped what people understand to be the coalitions and issue positions of the Republican and Democratic Parties. The premise of this paper, however, is that this disruption was most acutely felt by the other candidates on the ballot during 2016. Republicans and Democrats running for the House and Senate in 2016 had to orient their campaigns around the unusual dynamics of the presidential election campaign, and they and their supporters had to make campaign decisions based upon their beliefs about Trump’s prospects of victory, Trump’s effects on the electorate, and the damage that Trump was expected to do to the party that nominated him.

Many of these beliefs may well have been inaccurate. What matters, however, is that they were commonly held beliefs; as such, any inaccuracies do not change the lessons we can

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1 This paper draws upon data originally collected for two different projects. Data on primary elections are taken from the author’s ongoing project on primary election timing and competitiveness, funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. Independent expenditure were provided by the Campaign Finance Institute. Neither the Hewlett Foundation nor the Campaign Finance Institute bears any responsibility for the content of this paper. Thank you to Brendan Glavin and Clifford Vickery for their work with these data sources, and to Valerie Sperling for comments.
draw from the campaigns of downballot candidates in 2016: very few people thought that
Trump could win, and primary election campaigns, party and interest group spending decisions,
and candidates’ choice of campaign issues were, as we shall see, based upon this prediction. In
this paper, I document several “Trump effects” in the primary and general election campaigns,
and I show as well that several other alleged “Trump effects” did not materialize in these
campaigns. Specifically, I dismiss claims that there was any sort of populist, Trumpian surge
among Republican voters; that Trump’s campaign rewarded other populist candidates seeking
office; or that Trump’s free media success was transferable to other candidates.

Collectively, these points lead us to a clear, and potentially troubling (depending on one’s
opinion about Trump) conclusion: House and Senate candidates in 2016 campaigned as if
Trump was going to lose and that there was no particular mandate for his campaign or his views.
Consequently, it is hard to argue that Trump owes anyone anything for his victory. It is also,
however, hard to argue that he has support from his own party to pursue any particular agenda.
Although the Republican Party has unified control of government, we ultimately did not learn
anything from the 2016 campaign about how they would use this control – largely because they
themselves did not think they would have it.

This paper begins with a review of literature on the relationship between presidential and
congressional campaigns. I then explore patterns in competition and spending in the 2016
primary elections and general elections. For each, I explore differences between 2016 and
previous years, in order to establish baselines for what we might have expected in a “normal”
presidential election year. I close with some thoughts on the implications of this year’s
congressional elections for the new presidential administration and for our understanding of how
we might study presidential coattails.

The Wave That Never Crested

There is a substantial political science literature on the effects of presidential campaigns
on downballot races. Most of this material considers the relationship between presidential and
congressional election outcomes. Typical voters know less about the candidates in downballot
races, and many of them therefore tend to base their vote choice in these races on partisanship,
incumbency, or their evaluation of the presidential candidates. For decades, political scientists
have debated whether presidential candidates have “coattails.” In one of the most authoritative
studies of the subject, Campbell (1997) identified an enduring presidential “pulse” to
congressional elections, in which the party of the winning presidential nominee picks up seats in
the House in presidential election years and then loses seats in the subsequent midterm election.
In fact, just twice in the past 40 years and just three times since the turn of the 20th century has
the president's party picked up House seats in the midterm election. Conversely, the party of the
victorious presidential candidates typically gains seats in the House, although this was not the
case in three of the past seven presidential elections (1988, 1992, and 2000). Implicit in these
arguments is the idea that the larger the popular vote margin of the victorious president, the
larger the number of fellow partisans swept into Congress. In 1976, for instance, the narrow
presidential margin corresponded to a gain of only a single House seat, while more comfortable presidential victories, such as 1972 and 1980, were paired with Republican seat gains of 12 and 34 seats, respectively. The lone race in here where the presidential victor lost the popular vote—the 2000 election—is also a year in which the losing party gained seats in the House and the Senate.

The literature on coattails has two components. First, voters who choose one candidate over the other use the partisanship of their preferred presidential candidate as a heuristic for choosing a congressional candidates; second, because voter turnout in presidential years exceeds that of midterm years, the voters who are driven to show up at all in presidential years tend to be lower information voters—people who will have less reason than more informed voters to split their tickets. Cumulatively, these factors have been said to produce downballot effects, or coattails, in many presidential election years (Jacobson 2013, 170-176).

There is, however, a “just so story” to many of these accounts. If we are able to observe patterns in election outcomes, these patterns should be known to political parties, and parties should be expected to act based upon expected outcomes. Thus, some particularly lopsided presidential election years have failed to provide any coattails at all. The uncompetitive 1972 and 1984 elections, for instance, produced lower seats swing than did immediately adjacent midterm elections. And Senate elections have been far less sensitive to changes in the presidential vote than have House elections. One potential reason for this is the ability of parties to prepare for the anticipated outcome. An impending presidential loss, for instance, may prompt incumbents to break with their party on roll call votes or to take other steps to insulate themselves from partisan trends. This is particularly relevant for the Senate. Given the smaller number of competitive seats in the Senate in any given year, parties may also be able to determine which races are likely to be the most competitive and to pour resources into these races. Parties may also effectively cede other races. In both chambers, holding majority status is of course highly important, but the difference between holding 53 percent of the seats and 51 percent is far less important than is the difference between holding 51 percent and 49 percent; majority parties may thus effectively concede some seats in order to maximize their chance of retaining control. What we observe in election outcomes may, then, be the result of parties’ decisions about where to vigorously contest the election and where to cut their losses. Such decisions may be apparent in candidate fundraising practices, in parties’ decisions about where to focus their efforts, and, post-Citizens United, in the spending choices of independent expenditure groups.

2016, even apart from its eventual outcome, serves as a particularly unusual case for any theory about coattails. First, not all economic forecasting models provided evidence that 2016 would be a wave election (e.g. Campbell 2016). Predictions that downballot Democrats would be advantaged by the 2016 election were premised on three things: Hillary Clinton’s at times substantial lead in the polls; the perception that Democrats stood to gain seats simply because presidential year electorates have been more favorable to them than midterm-year electorates in every election since at least 2000; and, in the case of Senate elections, characteristics of the

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3 See the various David B. Magleby edited volumes (e.g. Magleby and Squires 2004, Holt 2000) on party spending in elections for support on this point.
particular states holding elections in 2016. There were, thus, reasons to expect Democrats to
gain seats (which they did), and for this expectation to shape party strategies regardless of who
the Republican nominee was. Yet these reasons did not necessarily suggest that there would be
any sort of partisan wave. These sorts of predictions, when they emerged, tended to focus on the

The crucial questions here, of course, are how early anyone sees the wave and whether
there is anything that can be done to either ride the wave or seek shelter from it. Boatright and
Moscardelli (2017) have studied the effects of general election outcomes on primary elections,
arguing that impending partisan waves tend to shape primary election competition. While one
might expect open seat and challenger primaries to be more competitive within the party that
expects to gain seats in the general election, they argue that incumbent primaries also become
more competitive in the party that is advantaged. For instance, Republican gains in the 2010
general elections were preceded by an unusually high number of conservative challenges to
centrists Republican incumbents; similar challenges took place among Democrats in 2006 and
1974. Implicit in such arguments is the claim that primary candidates have beliefs about what
the general election will yield, and that primary competition is driven in part by beliefs rather
than by actual events.

How do we use this information to make sense of the 2016 election? There were
structural features that suggested a modest Democratic gain, even though these features did not
seem to forecast a resounding general election victory for the Democratic presidential nominee.
And then there was Donald Trump and the relatively unprecedented (at least in modern times)
possibility that the character of the nominee might cost Republicans votes and put Republican
candidates who might be safe in any other election year on the defensive. The unusual nature of
the Trump campaign also may have had, as we shall see, effects even before Trump secured the
nomination – the extent to which Trump dominated media coverage during the early primaries
may well have shaped the fortunes of primary candidates, who had to run campaigns in the
shadow of a particularly divisive Republican primary.

These characteristics of the 2016 race suggest that the literature on downballot effects
and party waves or presidential coattails may well not have been useful in 2016. It suggests that
in 2016, perhaps more so than in other years, perceptions about the Republican nominee may
have shaped primary outcomes and general election spending decisions. In other words, the
2016 election may have been one in which perceptions about the impending general election
outcome shaped downballot races far more than the actual outcome of the 2016 election did. In
addition, it suggests that it is not just the vote share or popularity of the candidates that mattered;
rather, the particular issue positions and statements of the candidates dominated downballot
candidates’ races far more than did the strength of their campaigns themselves. In many races,
candidates’ responses to questions about Donald Trump received greater scrutiny than did
candidates’ statements about their own policy views, and a willingness, or lack thereof, on the
part of Republicans to publicly break with Trump became in itself a sort of campaign platform.
The Trump Effect in the 2016 House and Senate Primaries

In order to understand the effects of the Trump campaign on the 2016 primaries, a few details on what is “typical” in House and Senate primaries are in order, as are some details on the timing of House and Senate primaries. Downballot primaries traditionally exhibit low turnout, and few voters tend to know very much about House and Senate primary candidates at all. (Boatright 2014, ch. 3; Gerber, Huber, Biggers, and Hendry 2016). In recent years, this lack of visibility has changed, in part due to aggressive efforts by interest groups to back ideological or anti-establishment candidates in the primaries. As I have documented (Boatright 2013a), this sort of strategy has created the perception that moderates of both parties risk “getting primaried” if they engage in bipartisan policymaking or adopt positions at odds with the preferences of the party base. The Republican Party, in particular, has seen a spate of particularly divisive House and Senate primaries over the past decade, while Democratic primaries have been less competitive. Despite the defeat of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, however, there were signs that this Republican unrest had begun to subside in 2014. Republican primaries remained more contentious than Democratic primaries, and the number of Republican House and Senate incumbents facing opponents continued to climb, but, Cantor’s upset aside, most “establishment” incumbents comfortably beat back their opponents. This was, I have argued, to be expected – primary election tumult is positively correlated with the level of general election interparty competition, and there was no reason to expect “wave” elections of 2006-2012 to be followed by still more general election instability.

Going into 2016, then, one would have expected that Republican primaries would be more competitive than Democratic primaries, but that the level of chaos in Republican primaries might be expected to decline in comparison to 2012 and 2010. Such predictions, however, do not take into account any sort of spillover effects from the presidential campaign. In one sense, Trump is of a piece with the sorts of Republican insurgents who have run against incumbents in GOP primaries. He cast his campaign as a run against the party establishment and against career politicians. Unlike these candidates, however, Trump did not cast his campaign in strictly ideological terms; he ran as an outsider, but not necessarily as a Tea Party candidate or a candidate of the far right. It was hypothesized, at various points in the primaries, that Trump led a sort of movement. More specifically, it was claimed that Trump

a) Had highly enthusiastic supporters whose views diverged from those of traditional Republicans; it was unclear what these voters (if they indeed existed) would do in other primaries (see Railey 2016; Phillips 2016)


b) Would upend conventional understandings about the relationship between campaign fundraising and victory; because Trump raised so much less than his opponents, he would inspire other poorly funded candidates to adopt similar rhetorical techniques or efforts to accrue free media coverage (Everett 2016).

We cannot prove whether or not any of these things did take place, but we can look at Republican congressional primary competition in 2016, as compared to previous years, to see
whether Trump’s presence on the ballot seems correlated with any unusual patterns in candidate emergence, the level of competitiveness, or spending in the primaries. We are able to do this both by comparing all 2016 Republican primaries to those of previous years, by comparing them to Democratic primaries, and by comparing concurrent primaries – those in states where the presidential and state primaries were held on the same day – to nonconcurrent ones. This also gives us a means of comparing early and late primaries, in that concurrent primaries tend to take place earlier than do nonconcurrent ones. In short, we can explore whether the 2016 House and Senate primaries were unusual, and speculate about whether any abnormalities had anything to do with the unusual presidential race.

Figure 1 shows patterns over time of primary competition for Democrats and Republicans (shown separately), with the lines in each graph representing incumbent primaries, open seat primaries, and challenger primaries. The election year is on the x-axis. The variable on the y-axis is the mean fractionalization index. The fractionalization index is a measure of competitiveness which ranges form 0-1, where higher values are indicative of greater competition or fractionalization of the party primary vote. The mean of this is simply the average level of fractionalization across all primaries of a particular type. As this figure shows, there was little change in House primary competitiveness between 2014 and 2016. Republican incumbent primaries became slightly more competitive than 2014, but otherwise there was little change. It is worth noting, in addition, that the increase in primary competitiveness was not necessarily driven by successful “insurgent” candidates. Among the most successful primary challengers in 2014 were mainstream Republicans running with the support of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other business groups to reclaim seats that had been won by Tea Party candidates in 2010 or 2012.

Candidates’ decisions about whether to run for office are, of course, made well in advance of the presidential race, and there was little reason to expect anyone who decided in mid-2015 or early to run for Congress to have gamed out the consequences of running in a year when Donald Trump would be the Republican nominee. It is possible, however, that the presence of Trump on the ballot on the same day as one’s own primary would influence turnout. That is, people inspired to vote for Trump might not be the sorts of people who would reflexively vote for Republican incumbents in downballot races. Figure 2 compares concurrent downballot primaries (primaries held on the same day as the presidential primary) and nonconcurrent primaries, again using the fractionalization index and comparing 2016 to prior election years – although in this case, we are only considering prior presidential election years. While it is important to note that the characteristics of the states holding concurrent or nonconcurrent

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4 Specifically, the fractionalization index is operationalized as

\[ F = 1 - \sum [(C_1)^2 + (C_2)^2 + (C_3)^2 + (C_4)^2 + \ldots] \]

where F is the fractionalization index, C_1 is the percentage of the total vote received by the first candidate, C_2 is the percentage of the total vote received by the second candidate, and so on. This yields an index where a one candidate race has a fractionalization index of zero and a race where two candidates split the vote would have a fractionalization index of 0.5 (or \(1 - (0.5^2 + 0.5^2)\)). The larger the number of similarly competitive candidates, the closer the index is to 1 – that is, a race with ten candidates who received ten percent of the vote each would have an index of \(1 - (0.1^2 * 10)\), or 0.9. This index was originally developed by Canon (1978), and is used by, among others, Herrnson and Gimpel (1995) and Hogan (2003).
primaries might differ, the graphs here provide absolutely no evidence that characteristics of the voters who turned out for presidential election days had any meaningful effect on competition in Republican House primaries. If anything, it was the Democrats who had more contentious primaries on these days, despite the overall lack of competitiveness in Democratic primaries.

[Figure 2 about here]

Next, let us consider spending in the 2016 House primaries. We can understand spending in two different ways. First, expectations of victory in the general election may inspire more spending in the primary election. Although we have seen that there was little evidence of an increase in primary competition, candidate spending may have served to increase or decrease the level of competition, or particular types of candidates may have spent money in anticipation of the threat of competition. Second, I noted above that during previous election cycles independent expenditures have become consequential in Republican primaries – and particularly, in incumbent primaries – as mainstream and conservative groups have sparred over the future of the party’s congressional delegation.

Figure 3 shows two different measures of Republican primary spending. The figure on the left distinguishes between incumbent, challenger, and open seat primary spending. In order to exclude primary spending that is most likely aimed at the general election, I limit the cases included in the graph here to primaries that were at least somewhat competitive (using only primaries where the ultimate vote share ratio was 75-25, or its equivalent using the fractionalization measure). In these races, open seat primary spending increased, although open seat race spending can vary idiosyncratically, according to the number of open seats in some elections. The other two types of spending, however, declined. The drop in incumbent primary spending is particularly noteworthy, suggesting that even though the fractionalization of Republican incumbent primaries has continued to climb, these races had become less costly. This is a measure of aggregate spending, by incumbent and their primary challengers, suggesting not only that fewer primary challengers spent large sums of money, but that incumbents spent less to ward off such challenges.

[Figure 3 about here]

The right-hand graph in Figure 3 compares spending in concurrent and nonconcurrent primaries, again limiting consideration to somewhat competitive races. Averages for nonconcurrent primaries are far more variable than averages for concurrent ones, in part because the number of somewhat competitive nonconcurrent primaries has fluctuated wildly. There was an average of 14.5 somewhat competitive nonconcurrent primaries in each year from 1984 through 2012, ensuring that one or two very expensive primaries could skew the results, as happened in 2004. There were a total of 66 somewhat competitive nonconcurrent primaries in 2016, however. As the earlier figures on fractionalization show, this larger number did not

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5 I use this as a minimal threshold for competitiveness; the expectation here is that in an uncompetitive race. Since we cannot conclusively determine whether a prospective nominee is spending money to combat his or her primary or general election foes, there is no way to be certain whether the right amount of money is being included here, but in my 2013 book on primaries I provide a lengthy justification for this with reference to several particular primary elections from the past few election cycles.
translate into a higher average level of competition overall, but this figure clearly does indicate that Republican spending in concurrent primaries was unremarkable.

House primaries provide a useful gauge of general unrest within a party’s primary electorate because the number of them is sufficiently high that the effect of any unusual races does not unduly distort the averages presented here. Averages for Senate primaries, on the other hand, may be influenced by one or two particularly idiosyncratic primaries. However, on average the 2016 Senate primaries were less competitive than they had been since 2008. To take one example, Figure 4 shows average primary vote share for Republican and Democratic incumbents, with a dot for each incumbent (since most incumbents face no opposition at all, the dots at the top of graph represent multiple candidates). There was only one Republican incumbent in any danger of losing his primary – this was Arizona Senator John McCain – and there were two other Republican incumbents who were held to less than seventy percent of the primary vote yet did not have opponents who raised enough money to pose a serious threat. The Senate primaries, in short, also show little evidence of any sort of ideological turbulence.

[Figure 4 about here]

The story is much the same regarding independent expenditures during the primaries, as Figure 5 shows. Despite the smaller number of competitive Democratic primaries, independent spending was substantially higher among Democrats in 2016 than it ever had been. In Senate races, this was largely driven by two competitive open seat primaries in the safe Democratic states of California and Maryland. Independent expenditures in Republican primaries, however, fell precipitously in the House and in the Senate. While the decline in the Senate may have been a function of the smaller number of competitive races, the fact that House competition did not drop dramatically but independent spending did suggests a lack of interest in congressional elections on the part of the major Republican-allied and conservative Super PACs. Super PACs are a new enough phenomenon that we do not yet have a sense of what is “normal” Super PAC spending behavior in a presidential year. Yet the independent spending data provide more evidence that Republican donors and groups were not particularly interested in the 2016 primaries.

[Figure 5 about here]

The primary data, then, suggest that the 2016 downballot primaries were, if anything, rather dull. There was no ideological or anti-establishment wave going on in the Republican Party. If anything, it is possible that the presidential race so overshadowed these races that some potentially troublesome Republican candidates were starved of attention. Early in the primary season, there was speculation that Trump voters, and perhaps Cruz voters as well, would complicate the renomination efforts of people like Alabama Senator Richard Shelby or Alabama House members Bradley Byrne and Martha Roby. All three of these incumbents had been the targets of conservatives in the past, and each did face an opponent who might have served as a rallying point for conservative media figures or interest groups. Yet neither of the two House challengers raised over $200,000, and although Shelby’s Senate challenger raised more ($766,000) he was not financially competitive with Shelby. Most consequentially, there was no independent spending on behalf of any of these candidates.
As the 2016 primaries wore on, the media identified a few candidates who appeared to be vaguely “Trump-like” – candidates such as conservative talk show host Jason Lewis, who ran in a southwestern Minnesota open seat House race, and Darryl Glenn and Robert Blaha, who both ran in the Colorado Senate primary. These were candidates with a history of incendiary statements, although each of these candidates had run before, and each had been associated in some way with the Tea Party movement. Only Blaha actually supported Trump in the primary; he wound up running a distant third. As his hold on the nomination tightened, Donald Trump also publicly associated himself with two different primary candidates, Renee Ellmers, an incumbent House member from North Carolina, and Paul Nehlen, who ran against Speaker of the House Paul Ryan. Neither candidate won; Ellmers received just 23.6 percent of the vote in losing an unusual incumbent-vs.-incumbent race brought about by the state’s court-ordered redistricting, and Nehlen received only 15.9 percent of the vote in his challenge to Ryan. Nonparty groups spent $57,000 on behalf of Nehlen; Ellmers was the beneficiary of over $300,000 in independent expenditures, but over $1.1 million was spent in support of her opponent. Spending in the Ellmers race would certainly have taken place without Trump’s involvement in the race. Trump also publicly feuded with Senator John McCain, although he ultimately did support McCain and Ryan. Slightly over $870,000 in independent expenditures were made against McCain, as compared to over $4 million spent in support of McCain.

The track record of candidates who seemed to those in the media to resemble Trump, or who received support from Trump in some fashion, was thus not impressive. Of these candidates, only Lewis won, and it is by no means clear that any resemblance between the two, apart from their shared partisan affiliation, had anything to do with his victory. Lewis was treated by election handicappers as a likely loser for much of his campaign, and he downplayed any efforts to link him to Trump; tersely saying he would support Trump if he were the nominee, on the grounds that he did not want to “turn the White House over to the Clintons” (Zurowski 2016). In addition, much of the spending in these races may well have been there without Trump’s intervention.

It seems that if there was any sort of Trump effect in the primaries, then, it had to do with a stifling of ideological competition within the Republican Party. Almost all of the primaries that attracted spending from ideological interest groups either were in districts that had been redrawn (as was the case in Florida and North Carolina) or were competitive open seat races with multiple strong candidates, as was the case in states such as Nevada and Arizona. There were only two House races that featured high profile battles between competing Republican groups: the three-way open seat primary race in New York’s 22nd Congressional District, won by Claudia Tenney, and the successful challenge to Representative Tim Huelskamp in the Kansas 1st District. Tenney was a second-time candidate who had come within six percentage points of defeating moderate Republican Richard Hanna in 2014, and Huelskamp, a prominent Tea Party candidate in 2010, had repeatedly tangled with agricultural and business interests in his district. Both of these races, in other words, featured candidates who had already established a track record of garnering outside support. No new House primary candidates emerged in 2016 with significant backing from outside groups.
One could argue that Trump had little to do with this – that the 2016 primaries were merely a placid set of races. But candidacy decisions are made long before the dynamics of the presidential race become clear, and the candidates were there in 2016. There was the potential for competition. The fact that little money showed up to support this competition was not something candidates could have known in advance, and is likely a decision of independent expenditure groups not to focus on primaries. This could have merely been an acknowledgment that the money would be wasted on elections that would not receive public attention, as perhaps might have been the case in the early, concurrent primaries, or a decision in the later, mostly nonconcurrent primaries to save money for a general election in which Republicans would be on the defensive.

And finally, what of the Democrats? In many of the seats expected to be competitive, Democratic donors and interest groups coalesced around promising candidates and effectively winnowed the field before the primary was underway. Table 1 shows this phenomenon: here we see primary election fundraising and independent expenditures in four open seat primaries. Each of the seats listed here was expected to be close, but Democratic money was far more concentrated than was Republican money. The difference between Democrats and Republicans here is not unique to 2016, and it is also not necessarily indicative of the general election results – Republicans won all of these races save for the Nevada one. Over the past decade Democrats have consistently had less competitive primaries than Republicans, and when they have had competitive primaries, they have been among ambitious office-seekers running in safe Democratic states or districts. 2016 was, then, not an aberration for the party, nor is there reason to expect that the nature of the impending general election or the Democratic or Republican presidential primary races had an obvious effect on this dynamic.

[Table 1 about here]

The Trump Effect in the 2016 House and Senate General Election Campaigns

What are general election campaigns for the House and Senate usually like, and how do presidential elections affect them? This is a more complicated question than is the equivalent question for primaries. There is some evidence that political parties seek to shape primaries by, for instance, encouraging some candidates to run and discouraging others, but the parties have traditionally avoided directly intervening in primary elections through endorsements, contributions, or independent spending (Dominguez 2011, Hassell 2015). Competition and spending in primaries, then, are driven by a wide range of beliefs about what the general election might hold. In addition, primaries take place long before the general election, and often before it is clear who the presidential nominees will be or how they will fare, so beliefs about the general election suffer from a lack of data.

General election strategy, on the other hand, is dictated more by the gradual development of consensus regarding which House and Senate seats are likely to change hands and by considerations about which states will receive attention from the candidates. During the 1990s
and 2000s, party campaign committees actively worked to winnow the number of races upon which they would focus (Kolodny and Dwyre 2006). The party campaign committees and PACs sought to signal, through PAC donations and independent expenditures, which races they believe to be the most important to them. Following the enactment in 2002 of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act (BCRA), parties and party-allied groups sought to focus individual contributions in these races as well. Eventually, the development of online fundraising tools such as ActBlue enabled political parties and their allies to direct small contributions toward the most important races as well (Cigler 2011; Kerber 2009, ch. 4).

Following the Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (558 US 310 (2010)) and SpeechNow.org v. Federal Election Commission (599 F.3d 686 D.C. Cir. (2010)) decisions, leading figures within the extended Democratic and Republican Party networks created Super PACs that were technically independent of the parties but which served as conduits for large donations that could not legally be given to the party committees themselves. From 2010 through 2016 the principal Democratic groups – the House Majority PAC and Senate Majority PAC – centralized Democratic money somewhat more efficiently than did Republican groups. Among Republicans, former Bush administration Senior Advisor Karl Rove created American Crossroads, a Super PAC, and Crossroads Grassroots Placement Services, a 501(c)(4) organization, but other conservative organizations were established to challenge Rove’’s groups (Pitney 2013). Collectively, however, these new Super PACs were able to raise and spend money much more quickly than had been the case for PACs and party committees in the past, but they would not always be able to do so in a coordinated fashion or to draw upon the sort of “ground war” research and planning that party campaign committees have been able to use.

For the purposes of the general election, these developments present the possibility that political parties and their allies can respond much more quickly to changes in the political environment than had been the case in the past. In the years since the protracted general election of 2000, we have come to expect that presidential elections will be very close, but for much of the year the 2016 election appeared as if it would not be. This meant that if the parties’ House and Senate campaign committees were to draw on past elections for hints about what to do when there is an uncompetitive presidential race, they would be drawing on lessons from years where laws regulating campaign spending were quite different. Again, the fact that the 2016 presidential election wound up being very close, and that Trump won it, should not distract us from looking at the decisions parties, party allies, and candidates made as the campaign was going on, and while Trump was running relatively far behind Clinton and was being counted out by most observers.

To understand these decisions, two pieces of context are in order: a consideration of party strategy in previous uncompetitive presidential election years, and a comparison between 2016 and the normal patterns of party and interest group activity in other recent general election campaigns.

In measuring 2016 against these other election cycles, I shall focus mainly upon independent expenditures (IEs). IEs can be used to quantitatively measure changes in party strategy, in terms of which races are deemed to be competitive and how such measurements change over the course of the campaign. Especially since the Citizens United decision, the party
committees have been responsible for only a small percentage of IE spending. Yet IE groups often work collectively to support party-preferred candidates in competitive elections (Skinner, Masket, and Dulio 2013). Not all IE groups do this; some people (including me, see Boatright 2016) argued in 2012 that many IEs were made on behalf of candidates that the party campaign committees had abandoned. Yet by the time of the 2014 election, the increasing concentration of IE spending in the most competitive races suggested that there was a growing degree of coordination among such groups. IE groups are able to reflect short-term concerns of party committees in a more direct and quick fashion than we can observe in other types of activities or expenditures.

Independent spending provides a different metric of competition than do the candidate spending and election results measures employed above for primaries. This is the case in part because the question here is different. If we are concerned with how the presidential election shaped the campaign, it is legitimate to look at primary elections as a part of the campaign. House and Senate general election results are certainly influenced by presidential campaigns, but part of the inquiry here is into whether and how House and Senate general election candidates (and in particular, Republican candidates) sought to insulate themselves from problems at the top of the ticket. If they were successful in doing this, and won, it is hard to distinguish their cases from candidates who were unsuccessful but did so and yet were buoyed by higher-than-expected turnout for Trump. This is a point to which we return later in this section in discussing Democratic campaigns.

Lessons from Previous Elections

What would general election candidates, and their parties, do if they were seeking to insulate themselves from problematic presidential candidates? For guidance here, we can look at several different previous election cycles:

2008: The 2008 presidential election was a race in which one candidate, Barack Obama, had a substantial financial advantage; although the battleground states in 2008 were clear early on, there were occasional efforts by the Obama campaign to decoy McCain, spending money in places like Georgia or Arizona where Obama couldn’t really win but where the cash-strapped McCain campaign might potentially be tricked into spending money (Currinder 2009). Even though the election outcome was not particularly lopsided, this financial pattern convinced many Republicans that the election was not winnable and that Democrats had a legitimate chance of increasing their Senate majority from 51 seats (including independents) to 60. As a consequence, a pitched battle ensued between organized labor and the Chamber of Commerce over Senate races, and the Chamber developed a well-calibrated strategy to do what it could do prevent Democrats from acquiring a filibuster-proof Senate. The Chamber sought to frame the election as a matter of preventing Democrats from gaining a filibuster-proof majority, and consequently it spent heavily in states such as Colorado, New Hampshire, North Carolina – states with relatively moderate GOP Senators and where the presidential election remained competitive (Boatright 2013b; Francia 2013; Franz 2013).
1996: The 1996 presidential election yielded a comfortable ten percentage point win for incumbent President Bill Clinton. Although Clinton’s victory did not appear a certainty during the primaries, by the summer of 1996 Clinton had established a comfortable lead in the polls. Republicans used a strategy similar to what they would use in 2008, arguing that incumbent president Bill Clinton should not be given a “blank check” by Congress. Unlike 2016, Republican control of both chambers of Congress was believed to be in jeopardy. Republicans had gained the majority in both chambers in 1994, the first time the party had held control of both in nearly forty years. Democrats and their allies, however, believed the Republican House majority was more vulnerable than its Senate majority. Many first-term Republican House members held districts that tended to vote Democratic, and the DCCC and the AFL-CIO thus developed a relatively consistent strategy, used across the country, to connect Republicans with particularly controversial votes. Republican groups were, by most accounts, rather slow to respond, but the Chamber of Commerce and other business organizations did eventually work to match labor spending. This effort by organized labor was not particularly dependent on the presidential race; it was, instead, based on the belief among labor leaders that the Republican Party was somewhat overextended and that labor had not been aggressive enough in 1994.

The initial circumstances of the 1996 election somewhat resembled those of 2016 in that the election was not initially expected to be particularly lopsided. Republican nominee Bob Dole, however, was certainly no Donald Trump; his status as Senate Majority Leader (until he stepped down to concentrate on his campaign) ensured that there were few conflicts between the Dole campaign and downballot Republican efforts. The existence of presidential public financing, the increasing use in that year of party campaign committee soft money, and the presence of a strong third party presidential campaign complicate efforts to compare 1996 and 2016, however.

1984: Ronald Reagan easily won reelection in 1984; his Democratic opponent Walter Mondale received only 40 percent of the popular vote and won the electoral votes of only one state nad the District of Columbia. As Klinkner (1997, 155-178) recounts, there was general consensus among Democrats (and among people in the Mondale campaign) that Mondale would lose. However, the Mondale campaign did in fact coordinate campaign efforts, where possible, with efforts to help congressional Democrats. There was, no shifting of financial resources, but Mondale spent some time campaigning in states where he was particularly unlikely to win yet where his presence might be helpful to downballot Democrats. Democrats also invested heavily in a multi-state voter registration effort. This effort was believed to be a failure, but the Democrats gained two seats in the Senate and lost only fifteen seats in the House – putting them in better position in both chambers than they had been following Ronald Reagan’s 1980 victory. Even more so than in 1996, the party’s presidential campaign appeared to have worked somewhat in tandem with its House and Senate counterparts (Jacobson 1985; Gillon 1992, 386-388; Hunt 1985, 145-163).

1972: The 1972 results were similar for Democrats; their nominee, South Dakota Senator George McGovern, won slightly less than forty percent of the popular vote and never posed a serious threat to incumbent Richard Nixon. There was a poor relationship between McGovern and the Democratic National Committee, and, according to many accounts, an apparent lack of

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6 For summaries of spending dynamics in this election, see Jacobson 1997, 1999; Sorauf 1998.
serious McGovern effort to identify battleground states and a viable path to winning 270 electoral votes. There were also complications in organizing a joint strategy. On the Republican side, Richard Nixon seems to have recognized early on that McGovern was not seen by voters as a “typical” Democratic candidate, and that he could not count on McGovern’s campaign to sink other Democratic candidates. As a consequence, Nixon’s campaign maintained an almost total separation from the Republican Party and from Republican candidates for other offices (White 1973, 276-279). This effort – the Committee to Reelect the President (CREEP), eventually became part of the Watergate scandal. The Nixon campaign’s decision not to ally itself with Republican candidates ensured that Democrats would not be at quite as much of a disadvantage as they could otherwise have been. In his comprehensive summary of campaign finance in the 1972 election, Alexander (1976, ch. 4) argues that organized labor’s unhappiness with the McGovern nomination led it to devote less money to the presidential race and to focus somewhat more on congressional elections. Democrats gained two Senate seats and lost thirteen House seats.

1964: In many ways, 1964 still stands as the archetypal landslide election. In most recounting of that race, no Republican could have defeated incumbent Democrat Lyndon Johnson, but the eventual Republican nominee, Barry Goldwater, was far outside of the Republican mainstream, and was more of a liability for downballot Republicans than his chief primary competitor, New York Governor Nelson D. Rockefeller, would have been. Democrats gained 47 House seats and two Senate seats; they might well have gained more Senate seats, but they already held 25 of the 34 seats where elections were held.

Histories of the 1964 election suggest that Goldwater’s unpopularity forced him to avoid traditional Republican donors and focus more on raising small contributions, often through the use of direct mail (Alexander 1972). This unorthodoxy was reflected in his campaigning choices as well; he focused attention on Southern states that had received scant attention from prior Republican nominees (Perlstein 2001 Shadegg 1965, White 1965). The Goldwater team also had an interest in control of the Republican National Committee (RNC) and in retiring existing party debt. Historical accounts of the party committees point out that the Goldwater campaign’s efforts, therefore, were studied and built upon by subsequent RNC chairmen (Klinkner 1997, ch. 3; Miles 1980, ch. 15-16). We cannot know for certain to what extent this degree of foresight was part of the Goldwater effort, but it does, again, suggest a sort of party-focused strategy. In the short run, however, these decisions would appear to have liberated the party’s traditional big donors to focus their attention on other races. There is little campaign finance data to document such a process, however.

What lessons can we draw from these elections? First, all of these races, except 2008, were essentially referenda on relatively popular incumbents, where the losing candidate was not obviously harmed by poor fundraising, strategic mistakes, and the like. So there was, again, ample time for party allies to map out their strategy. 2008 is a partial exception, given the late market crisis, but the Republican establishment also did not give up on McCain to the extent that it did on Trump.
Second, in the more recent pair of elections listed here, the conflict over control of Congress has largely been one between business and labor. This has been the case in part because of the issues at stake in these particular election years, but also because of the characteristics of labor and business groups. Both the AFL-CIO and the Chamber of Commerce have national membership bases; have interests in legislation that are more important than the electoral fates of individual members of Congress; and have the resources and campaign expertise to influence elections even without coordination with the parties. In other words, these were the only organizations that could feasibly have mounted a credible campaign across multiple states and congressional districts. Although the story with these groups can certainly be traced through looking at campaign finance data, it is also a model that may not necessarily apply now that the lines between parties and groups have been blurred and the role of wealthy individuals and potentially idiosyncratic Super PACs has become more prominent.

Third, all of the losing candidates in these years, except perhaps for McGovern, appear to have had some sort of a strategy. In the cases of Mondale and Goldwater, the strategy involved working with the party, to some extent, to experiment with spending money in ways that might help other candidates or might help the party in the long run. Every single one of these candidates had some reason to care about what their party might think about them after the election. Although we do not have data to show this, a case can be made that in many of these years the losing candidates did some things that improved their party’s future prospects – by assembling new donor lists or volunteer lists, or at the very least doing what they could to keep in touch with supporters of the prior candidate. It’s not at all clear that Trump ever had any intention of doing this, so in this sense the Republican Party has not really built anything this year that is transferable to future nominees. Given changes in the campaign finance landscape – most consequentially, the development of Super PACs and their ability to raise and spend money quickly – it is not clear that this matters as much as it would have in previous elections. Trump’s victory, of course, also complicated analogies here. However, the discussion below suggests that one can see elements of all of these election years in the behavior of Democrats and (in particular) of Republicans in 2016. All of these reference points suggest a variety of things about how Democrats and Republicans might have behaved.

How the 2016 Downballot Races Differed from Other Recent Elections

Figure 6 shows the increase in independent expenditures over the past decade for Senate general election campaigns. The Senate has arguably been “in play” in each of these elections. IEs have grown 77 percent since the 2012 election. The increase has been similar across parties, as well – in contrast to other types of spending, which can reflect which party is favored by the electoral landscape. Much of this increase would, of course, have happened regardless of who the presidential nominees were.

[Figure 6 about here]

As noted above, however, there has not just been an increase in independent spending; there has also been a change in the concentration and timing of that spending. If we consider the Senate alone – that is, leaving aside the likelihood that many IE groups or donors to IE groups
will have an interest in House or presidential campaigns – it is evident that an early consensus
developed regarding which seats were necessary for each party to win in order to maintain or
gain control of the chamber. Table 2 provides some examples of this. Very early in the year,
Republicans identified five Senate seats that were expected to be competitive – four of these
(New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) were held by incumbents, and one, an
open seat in Nevada, had a clear primary frontrunner. A total of $126.5 million in independent
expenditures was made in these states before September 1. Four of these five states had been
places where there had been competitive races in 2012 or 2014, but the independent spending in
these states had started later, and in all but Wisconsin there had not been nearly as much of it.
The fifth state, Pennsylvania, was not competitive in 2012 or 2014; for the sake of comparison, I
show spending patterns in North Carolina, the site of the largest amount of independent spending
in 2012 or 2014.

[Table 2 about here]

These states were not the only ones where there was significant independent spending.
Figure 7 compares these states to the four others that ultimately received more than $25 million
in independent expenditures. These four were arguably somewhat surprising. News accounts
suggested that North Carolina Senator Richard Burr and Missouri Senator Ray Blunt failed to
prepare adequately for their campaigns, and that their opponent, North Carolina State Assembly
member Deborah Ross and Missouri Secretary of State Jason Kander outperformed expectations.
Florida’s election was complicated by the state’s late primary and incumbent Marco Rubio’s late
decision to seek a second term. And in Indiana, the Democratic nominee, former Senator Evan
Bayh, entered the race after the Democratic primary had been held, changing a likely Republican
hold into a competitive race. Only two of these states (North Carolina and Florida) were
competitive at the presidential level while all five of the states in the first category were.

[Figure 7 about here]

The substantial early spending in 2016 arguably equipped Republicans to deal more
effectively with races that became competitive later. The level of concentration was also
striking. While it is difficult to develop any sort of precise numerical estimate of spending
concentration, it should be noted that although there were similar numbers of races with more
than $10m in IEs in 2012 and 2014 (nine in 2012 and eleven in 2014) the spread in IE spending
across these races was more consistent, and there were several other races in each year that
received just less than $10 million in independent spending. In 2016, nine races received over
$25 million, and the next-closest races – in Arizona, Colorado, and Illinois – all received less
than $4 million. In Arizona, incumbent Senator John McCain had ample campaign funds of his
own and arguably never needed the IE support; the other two Republican candidates lost by
substantial margins. The gap in IEs between the haves and have-nots was much greater in 2016
than it had been in 2012 or 2014.

How much of this story is specifically about Donald Trump, as opposed to being about
the broader possibility of a pro-Democratic tilt given the seats that were up for election and the
perception that Democrats tend to do better in presidential years? There were plentiful stories
throughout the fall of Republican Super PACs’ efforts to save the Senate from any sort of voter
backlash against Trump (e.g. Gold and Kane 2016). This chatter increased whenever Clinton’s lead in the polls increased. Spending data from the weeks preceding the election also provide suggestive evidence of this. Figure 8 compares Trump’s polling deficit to the weekly IE spending in Senate races by Democratic and Republican organizations (including parties and nonparty groups). The first presidential debate was held on September 26; this debate was viewed by many observers as a decisive win for Clinton, and it was argued by some that Trump’s failure to effectively respond to allegations of misogyny raised by Clinton at the close of the debate would be a turning point in the campaign (Lett 2016). Republican spending in the nine competitive Senate races shot up during that week, exceeding Democratic spending for the next two weeks. This growth was largely fueled by one pro-Republican Super PAC, the Senate Leadership Fund. This group was formed during the fall specifically to protect vulnerable Senate seats, and it worked to corral the money of traditional Republican donors such as Sheldon Adelson and Peter Singer who had been suspicious in the past of groups like American Crossroads but were also uncomfortable giving money to the Trump campaign (Isenstadt 2016). In early October, following the disclosure of Trump’s “Access Hollywood” tapes and another drop in the polls, both parties’ spending shot sharply upward again. The spending data seem to corroborate the various media accounts regarding nervousness among Republican donors and groups.

The increase in Republican Senate IEs also coincides with a substantial increase in IEs in support of the Democratic presidential ticket; there is no corresponding increase in pro-Trump IEs. Figure 9 shows the presidential IE pattern across the general election time period. This pattern suggests that donors to Republican IE groups were deliberately choosing to support Senate campaigns rather than to support Trump.

This is, to be sure, only circumstantial evidence, and it is to be expected that in any election year independent expenditures would ramp up sharply in the weeks preceding the election. The media accounts surrounding this increase, coupled with the early spending in many of the competitive races, suggest that early plans were in place to shield Republican incumbents in an election cycle where they would be on defense. The spending patterns are certainly consistent with the sort of characterizations we have seen above of the 2008 and 1996 elections. In contrast to these election years, however, the availability of IE data enables us to actually see the spending unfolding more directly than in those years. In contrast to all of those years, however, the candidates of the party expecting to lose had no help whatsoever from their presidential candidate, and perhaps, from his point of view, justifiably so. The trajectory of the general election campaign may tell us why – in the landslide election years discussed above, downballot candidates had reason to distance themselves from their presidential nominee, but the distance was arguably less, and more consistent, particularly because in most of these cases the nominee was either one of their colleagues or one of their former colleagues. And the distance had more to do with the ideological characteristics, real or perceived, of the nominees than with their temperament. Or to put matters in other words, a blue state Republican running in 2008 could run a campaign that minimized discussion of his or party identification, but that
Republican would not have had to worry about offensive tweets by the nominee or about having his or her campaign dominated by the need to respond to the nominee’s latest outrageous statement.

A Short Note on Democrats and on House Races

I have said less here about Democratic general election strategy than about Republicans. This is so in part because Democratic spending is less unorthodox. While the data here suggest that Republicans sought for much of 2016 to distance themselves from their presidential nominee, some retrospective analyses faulted Democrats for not doing the same (Kane 2016). Such an approach may be justified if one considers election results – Democrats gained only two Senate seats, an Illinois seat that was not vigorously contested by Republicans and a very close race in New Hampshire, and they held the Nevada seat left open by Minority Leader Harry Reid’s retirement. There was not a single state in the country where one party won the presidential vote but lost the Senate election.

The question of whether Democrats did enough to distance themselves from Clinton is more a question of campaign style and messaging, however, than of their choice of how much money to spend and where to spend it. Both parties largely followed the same pattern – both abandoned one race, the Ohio Senate race, by early fall, and the unexpected development of competitive races in Missouri, North Carolina, and Indiana prompted Democrats as well as Republicans to increase their investments there. Given the Democrats’ failure to win a majority of Senate seats it is plausible to argue that they might have been wise to more narrowly focus their spending or perhaps to recruit different candidates. If one assumes that Democrats anticipated being the beneficiaries of a comfortable Clinton victory, however, the logic of their Senate effort makes perfect sense.

I have also said little about the House of Representatives. Because control of the House of Representatives was not expected to be at stake in 2016, there was less independent spending in House races than in the Senate, and there was also, as Figure 10 shows, far less early spending. Some media accounts noted that the Democrats erred in not recruiting stronger candidates to run; at times during the general election campaign some journalists argued that if Democrats had known early in the year how weak of a general election candidate would be, they might have been able to plan a strategy to take back the House (Meyer and Bland 2016; O’Keefe and DeBonis 2016). The lack of a legitimate Democratic plan to recapture the House, however, makes comparisons to other election years different – one might contend that the sort of national strategies employed on both sides in the 1996 downballot races were less applicable to 2016, and that the election conflict was correspondingly not as explicitly a battle between business and labor. While spending was concentrated in particular races, the sources of money varied and the groups and donors involved sought not to call attention to themselves.

[Figure 10 about here]

Using IE data for the House shows, perhaps, the limits of using IEs as a proxy for party preferences. Although Democrats did not necessarily have reason to expect to win a House
majority, IE groups did spend enough to be competitive with Republicans overall. In many instances, these IEs were made by groups loyal to individual Democratic representatives or to particular causes. Table 3 shows some interesting differences between the chambers in who was spending money. More of the IE money in both chambers came from the two major “party allied” Super PACs. Although party contribution limits increased after the 2014 election, these groups still operate as receptacles for unrestricted large contributions from major party donors. In the House, these groups were dominant; the groups that fill out the list of the ten largest spenders include five well-established, issue-oriented, multi-candidate groups and one candidate specific Super PAC, Maryland USA, which backed an unsuccessful House candidate. In the Senate, the gap between the two major party-allied groups and the other groups was smaller, and the top groups overall spent a lower percentage of the total nonparty group IE total. The Senate list also includes one candidate-specific Super PAC (Granite State Solutions, which backed New Hampshire incumbent Kelly Ayotte), but in addition to the Senate Leadership Fund it also includes Freedom Partners and Americans for Prosperity (both funded by the Koch Brothers’ organization) and Independence USA, Michael Bloomberg’s Super PAC. The Senate groups, in other words, are less tied to issues, more dependent on individual large donors, and as a consequence, more flexible in choosing how much to spend and where to spend it. The only House Super PAC that fits this category is the Ending Spending Action Fund, a project of the Ricketts Family. And the decisions of the groups that appear on both lists are also striking: the Chamber spent thirteen times as much on the Senate as on the House, and Women Vote!, a project of EMILY’s List, also invested much more in the Senate than in the House.

[Table 3 about here]

Some Implications and Qualifications

The evidence presented here paints a picture of a Republican Party preparing for the worst, and a Democratic Party cautiously preparing to take advantage of Republican disarray. These preparations made sense, and regardless of the election result, it seems evident that they did shape the 2016 campaign. Perhaps the 2016 downballot races would have been different if the parties had not assumed Trump had little chance of winning. On the other hand, we have a president who has come into office in a year when his party lost ground in both chambers of Congress, so a case can be made that the parties did adequately prepare for an election year that, in a broad sense, favored Democrats.

By way of conclusion, two different summary points are in order, as are some more speculative ones. First, I have sought to document the relatively placidity of the 2016 congressional primaries. The lack of competition, both electoral and financial, suggests that the presidential race choked off the sort of ideological competition that has characterized primaries, and in particular, Republican primaries, for the past decade. This is an important development. Will such competition reemerge in the next few election cycles? It is certainly possible that at least in the next midterm elections congressional primary candidates will have more of a megaphone for their campaigns. On the other hand, the groups that have instigated ideological
competition have done so in part to draw attention to themselves and their agendas; given Republican dominance of government, it would seem more complicated for conservative anti-government groups to continue to inspire a national following by railing against moderate Republicans. The phenomenon of “primarying” may well have begun to go into remission.

Second, as to general election competition and spending, this paper has contended that both parties, and their allies, prepared for a year where Democrats would have substantial tailwinds. In anticipating an uncompetitive presidential election, both parties had cause to draw on the lessons of other uncompetitive presidential elections from the not-too-distant past. The question here, and the question that undoubtedly confronted Democratic and Republican strategists, is how well these lessons apply in the post-Citizens United campaign finance regime. The evidence regarding independent expenditures suggests that parties are now better able to adapt campaign fundraising and spending to changes in the broader political environment than they once were. The lopsided presidential election results of 1996, 2008, and other elections further in the past were predictable well in advance; even so, it was the party committees or large umbrella organizations that led the response effort. Today, Super PACs are able to raise and spend money quickly, but face coordination problems. In 2012, in particular, it is hard to argue that these groups could direct money toward competitive elections in a coordinated and politically effective fashion. The 2016 elections suggest that they now can do this.

These two conclusions follow, I would argue, from the data I have provided. Let us move on, however, to some more speculative or cautionary points. First, why is this paper so focused on “Trump effects” as opposed to “Clinton effects?” This is a matter again of perceptions about what the election would yield, not about the ultimate performance of the candidates. Both parties expected Clinton to be the Democratic nominee, and any claims that Clinton cost the Democrats seats or that another Democrat might have brought about different outcomes at the congressional or presidential level are based entirely on hindsight. Democratic primary results looked similar to those of prior years – competition was muted, and Democratic general election efforts seem premised on the assumption that 2016 would be a good Democratic year – not necessarily because of any unique characteristics Clinton brought to the table but because of the particular Senate seats that were up and the expected pro-Democratic tilt of the presidential year electorate. Maybe an argument could be made about some sort of Clinton effect on Republican downballot candidacies, but this, again, is a matter more of issue selection or the nature of election communications than of the competition and spending data presented here.

What does the evidence here suggest about Donald Trump’s fortunes in the next few years? Given the preparations that were made for his loss, it seems evident that he does not owe the Republican Party anything for his victory. Perhaps a few Republicans in tight races, such as Wisconsin’s Ron Johnson, owe him. Trump does not necessarily come into office with a mandate, but the distance created by Republicans from his campaign suggests that he does not need to check boxes in his cabinet appointments or otherwise reconcile his plans with those of congressional Republicans. This is already evident in his cabinet selection process. Such a result may well yield a particularly unaccountable president – one that seeks to do what he wants, for better or worse. On the other hand, the return to Congress of so many Republicans
who opposed or ignored Trump may also point to a presidency that is largely irrelevant to legislative policymaking. Either scenario may be disastrous, but in very different ways.

And finally, let us revisit the notion of “Trump effects.” Many such effects have been posited, and most have had more to do with political discourse than with electoral competition and spending. It is certainly beyond the scope of this paper to connect these factors to things like media coverage of politics, the quality of political discussions among citizens, or misogyny, bigotry, and other assorted ills – all of which have been said to be affected by this year’s election. But the information here does serve as a preliminary step in looking at how Trump (as well as Clinton) were actually discussed by other candidates for office. Given Republican donors’ efforts to shield general election nominees from the effects of the Trump campaign, how did that distance shape what the candidates in question said about Trump? Did candidates who had greater reason to worry about Trump ruining their reelection chances speak more harshly of him, or break with him on important campaign issues? In the nation’s closest general election race, in New Hampshire, did political spending on both sides separate that election from the presidential race? Was there anything these candidates could have said, or that was said about them, that might have made the difference? And in the primaries, where we have seen that money and competition suffered as a result of the presidential race, how was campaign discourse affected? Did these changes prompt candidates to talk any differently about the myriad issues raised in this year’s election?

All of these questions are certainly relevant to any analysis of “Trump effects.” National policy over the next few years will be shaped by many politicians who are not Donald Trump, yet, as the data in this paper show, many of these politicians had to cope with Trump’s candidacy in 2016. The effect of the presidential election in terms of setting context has been the subject here; the way in which they dealt with this context, the choices they made about their own campaigns, were shaped by this context but were ultimately far more under their control and may turn out to be of far greater concern to us during the next four years.
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Democrats
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**Republicans**

**Democrats**
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<td>John Bergman</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>38.60</td>
<td>309,082*</td>
<td></td>
<td>W</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom Casperson</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>32.00</td>
<td>384,189</td>
<td>177,000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Allen</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>29.40</td>
<td>309,647</td>
<td>222,682</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Total includes $100,000 or more in self-financing. IE totals include money spent in favor of candidate and in opposition to principal opponent.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>2016 IE Total to 9/1</th>
<th>2016 Total</th>
<th>2016 9/1 Amount as % of Total</th>
<th>2016 D/R IE Balance</th>
<th>Prior Comparable Race</th>
<th>Prior Race IE Total to 9/1</th>
<th>9/1 Amount as % of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
<td>$21.4</td>
<td>$69.0</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>60/40</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>$2.8*</td>
<td>$31.1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>87.4</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>45/55</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>4.5*</td>
<td>28.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>88.7</td>
<td>35/65</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>35.1*</td>
<td>116.6*</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>55/45*</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>10.5*</td>
<td>80.7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>57/43</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>8.0*</td>
<td>39.5*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>20-30%**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: FEC CFI CRP FEC FEC

All dollar figures in millions.
* Includes money spent in a competitive primary.
** Excluding the Ohio race, which wound up being uncompetitive.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>House</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Senate</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House Majority PAC (D)</td>
<td>$44,491,461</td>
<td>Senate Leadership Fund (R)</td>
<td>$85,994,338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congressional Leadership Fund (R)</td>
<td>40,078,294</td>
<td>Senate Majority PAC (D)</td>
<td>73,993,770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Action Network (R)</td>
<td>5,759,685</td>
<td>Freedom Partners (R)</td>
<td>29,693,236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Club for Growth Action (R)</td>
<td>5,527,811</td>
<td>US Chamber of Commerce (R)</td>
<td>26,914,248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Association of Realtors (B)</td>
<td>5,353,731</td>
<td>Granite State Solutions (R)</td>
<td>20,975,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ending Spending Action Fund (R)</td>
<td>4,057,508</td>
<td>Women Vote! (D)</td>
<td>16,691,590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Vote! (D)</td>
<td>3,936,158</td>
<td>AFSCME (D)</td>
<td>15,048,869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland USA (R)</td>
<td>3,194,092</td>
<td>Americans for Prosperity (R)</td>
<td>13,763,139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defending Main Street Super PAC (R)</td>
<td>2,738,909</td>
<td>Independence USA PAC (B)</td>
<td>12,261,977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Chamber of Commerce (R)</td>
<td>2,131,785</td>
<td>National Rifle Association (R)</td>
<td>11,388,267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>117,269,434</td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>306,724,832</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a % of all nonparty IEs 73.3  As a % of all nonparty IEs 60.1

Party supported in parentheses; “B” is for bipartisan.