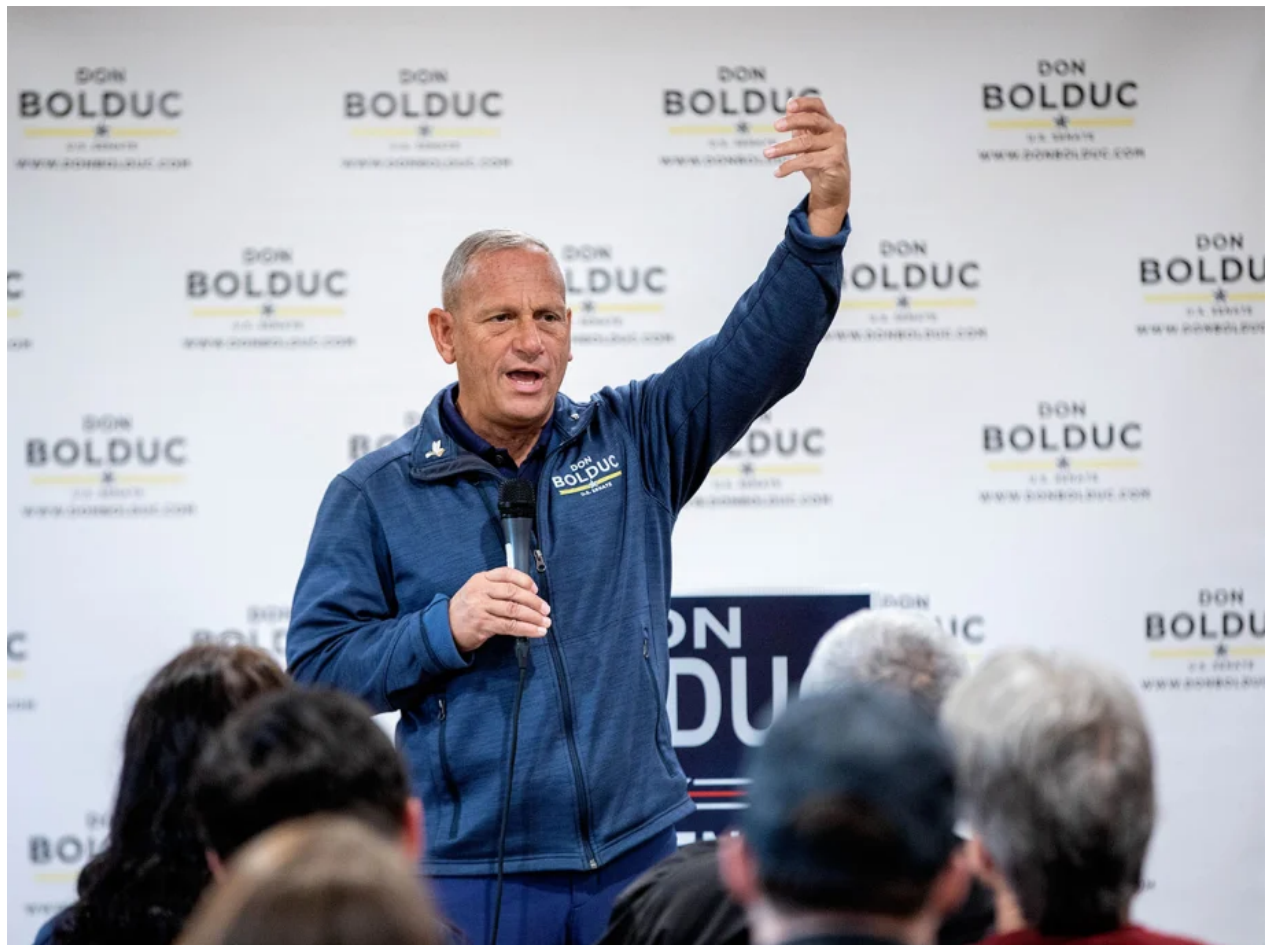# Democrats Spent Loads Boosting Republicans They Thought Were Less Electable. Will It Pay Off?

By Geoffrey Skelley

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Retired Army Brig. Gen. Don Bolduc, the Republican nominee for U.S. Senate in New Hampshire, won a primary in which Democrats spent about $3 million attacking his main, more moderate, challenger.

SCOTT EISEN / GETTY IMAGES

Throughout the primary season, Democrats caused a stir by involving themselves in Republican primary elections — often described as

"meddling" — by spending money to boost potentially weaker GOP contenders in the hopes of improving Democrats' chances in the general election. This brand of opposite-party meddling has a long history in our politics, but because the Republican candidates who stood to benefit in 2022 often embraced extreme positions such as denying the legitimacy of the 2020 election, many observers — including many Democrats — were critical of this interference.

Democratic-aligned groups spent money in more than a dozen Republican primaries, and six of their preferred candidates won congressional or gubernatorial primaries, according to data compiled by The Washington Post. As the table below shows, Democrats are now favored in each of these contests, according to FiveThirtyEight's 2022 midterm forecast.[1]

Races where Democrats seemed to successfully meddle

Chances of a Republican win according to FiveThirtyEight's deluxe forecast in races where Democratic groups spent money to directly or indirectly help the Republican candidate in the GOP primary

RACE	REPUBLICAN	TRUMP-ENDORSED	PRIMARY MARGIN	PARTISAN LEAN	CHANCE OF WINNING
MI-03	John Gibbs	✓	+3.5	D+2.7	31%
NH-Sen	Don Bolduc		+1.2	D+0.6	16
NH-02	Robert Burns		+3.2	D+2.2	5
PA-Gov	Doug Mastriano	✓	+23.6	R+3.0	4
IL-Gov	Darren Bailey	✓	+41.8	D+13.2	<1
MD-Gov	Dan Cox	✓	+8.5	D+26.3	<1

Forecast figures as of 5 p.m. on Oct. 17.

Partisan lean is the average margin difference between how a state or district votes and how the country votes overall. This version of partisan lean, meant to be used for congressional and gubernatorial elections, is calculated as 50 percent the state or district's lean relative to the nation in the most recent presidential election, 25 percent its relative lean in the second-most-recent presidential election and 25 percent a custom state-legislative lean based on the statewide popular vote in the last four state House elections.

However, it's unclear to what extent Democratic interference actually altered the outcomes in these Republican primaries — and, in some cases,

how much the primary's outcome significantly altered the general election outlook.

For instance, four of these six candidates had former President Donald Trump's endorsement, which boosted many Republican candidates in primaries this cycle. Additionally, Democratic incumbents are defending three of these seats, potentially providing a small lift to Democratic chances in both New Hampshire races and Illinois's gubernatorial election. And a couple of these contests are taking place on fairly blue turf, so they would have been more likely than not to favor Democrats regardless.

In the Republican primary in Michigan's 3rd District, the most competitive seat in this batch of races, former Trump administration official John Gibbs challenged Rep. Peter Meijer, one of 10 House Republicans who voted to impeach Trump in 2021. Meijer had a huge spending advantage in the primary, where a financial edge can matter most; Gibbs had Trump's endorsement. Gibbs may have also received a boost from ads run by the

Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee that ostensibly attacked him as "too conservative for West Michigan." After Gibbs narrowly edged Meijer by 3.5 percentage points, our forecast swung from clearly favoring the GOP — we had Meijer as the default nominee until then — to favoring Democrat Hillary Scholten, whom Meijer defeated in 2020. Now, conservative anger toward Meijer over impeachment and Trump's endorsement of Gibbs made the primary race highly competitive from the get-go. Still, the DCCC's spending probably didn't hurt Gibbs, either.

Despite Republicans being a longer shot, Democratic interference may have also tipped the scales in New Hampshire. The Republican primary for U.S. Senate saw a great deal of outside spending in the final weeks before deciding who would face potentially vulnerable Democratic Sen. Maggie Hassan. While they didn't name retired Army Brig. Gen. Don Bolduc in their ads, Democratic-aligned groups spent millions attacking Bolduc's main opponent, state Senate President Chuck Morse. National Republicans, meanwhile, spent millions to boost Morse in the hopes of

defeating Bolduc, whom New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu, a fellow Republican, labeled a "conspiracy-theory type" candidate.

Bolduc went on to finish *just* ahead of Morse, 37 percent to 36 percent. Morse had outraised Bolduc and had ample outside support, and while Bolduc led Morse in primary polls, the sizable number of undecided voters in the campaign's final weeks suggested serious uncertainty about the outcome. And the GOP's crowded Senate primary race may have been more important to Bolduc's victory than Democratic spending, as it complicated Morse's ability to form an anti-Bolduc coalition and helped Bolduc to eke out a win with a plurality of support.

Meanwhile, in New Hampshire's 2nd District, Democratic Rep. Annie Kuster is favored over former Hillsborough County Treasurer Robert Burns. In the Republican primary, Burns faced Keene Mayor George Hansel, an abortion-rights supporter who outraised Burns and received outside backing from a Republican PAC that opposed Trumpy candidates in GOP primaries. But a Democratic-aligned group poured money into ads

ostensibly attacking Burns as an "unapologetic conservative." Burns only won by 3 points, 33 percent to 30 percent; however, here too a crowded primary field probably helped the Trumpiest candidate. Moreover, while the 2nd District is highly competitive turf, Hansel would have been far from a sure bet to win himself, as Kuster has held the seat for five terms, including a reelection victory during 2014's red wave.

In Maryland and Illinois, the bluest-leaning races, it's harder to say Democratic spending dramatically altered either the Republican primaries or the general election picture. (Both Democratic candidates are clear favorites, and given their states' blue hues, would've likely been favored to some extent regardless of their opponent.) Illinois's Democratic governor, J.B. Pritzker, and affiliated groups spent more than $30 million during the primary to portray state Sen. Darren Bailey as a pro-Trump Republican and attack his main GOP rival. Now, these ads probably benefited Bailey at least a bit as his polling position improved amid these efforts, and he went on to receive Trump's endorsement. But Bailey also had ample financial support from GOP megadonor Richard Uihlein, and he ended up winning the primary by such a large margin — 42 points — that it's difficult to imagine Bailey failing to win even if Democrats hadn't become involved.

In Maryland, the Democratic Governors Association spent more than $1 million portraying state Del. Dan Cox as "too close to Trump." Cox, an election denier who chartered buses to the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, had Trump's endorsement, while former Maryland Secretary of Commerce Kelly Schulz had the support of popular outgoing Republican Gov. Larry Hogan. Despite being significantly outraised by Shultz, Cox wound up defeating his opponent 52 percent to 43 percent in the July 19 primary, and is now a huge underdog against Democrat Wes Moore.

As for Pennsylvania, the gubernatorial contest arguably should have been the GOP's best chance at victory out of these six races. But Republican voters opted for state Sen. Doug Mastriano, a far-right candidate who has embraced Christian nationalism, worked to overturn the 2020 election results and was on the grounds of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. Throughout the primary campaign, Democratic gubernatorial nominee and state Attorney General Josh Shapiro and Pennsylvania Democrats spent close to $1 million on ads portraying Mastriano as "one of Donald Trump's strongest supporters." (Trump wound up announcing his support for Mastriano just days before the May 17 primary.) Shapiro is a strong bet to defeat Mastriano in November, as he holds about an 11-point edge in our polling average.

But before Democrats take all the credit — or blame — for Mastriano's advancement, it doesn't take a tremendous leap to imagine him capturing the GOP nomination without Democratic assistance. After all, Mastriano won the GOP primary by more than 20 points. Stop me if you've heard this before, but a more important factor may have been the crowded primary field, which hampered attempts by anti-Mastriano Republicans to coalesce around one candidate. In fact, a last-minute effort by Pennsylvania Republican insiders to stop Mastriano failed in part because they couldn't coax Mastriano's main rivals to drop out and rally behind one candidate.

Hindsight may help assess whether Democratic involvement affected some or all of these races, but it's clear that myriad factors influenced the

primary outcomes. And even if Democrats shifted each race and improved their chances, perhaps only New Hampshire's Senate contest would notably affect which party controls either chamber of Congress and the nation's governorships. Whether all this was worth the intangible cost of aiding candidates who mostly deny the legitimacy of the 2020 election while Congress works to unravel the events of Jan. 6 is another matter entirely.
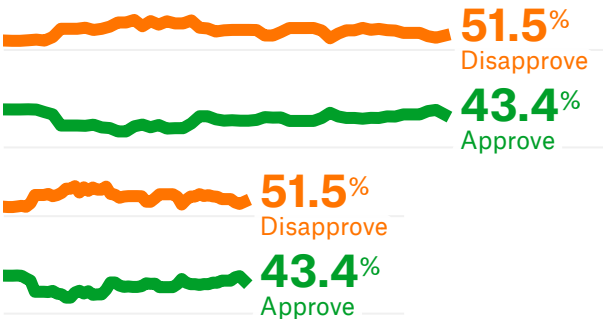
Footnotes

1. All numbers in this article are as of Oct. 17 at 5 p.m. Eastern.

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Approval Ratings

UPDATED 4 HOURS AGO

51.5%
Disapprove

43.4%
Approve

51.5%
Disapprove

43.4%
Approve

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