

# CRS Report for Congress

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## Congressional Campaign Spending: 1976-1996

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### Summary

House and Senate candidates spent a record \$765.3 million in 1996, up from \$115.5 million in 1976. Average House expenditures rose from \$73,000 to \$493,000, while average Senate campaign costs went from \$595,000 to \$3.3 million. Among winners, the best measure of the cost of election to Congress, the 1996 House average was \$680,000 and for the Senate, \$3.8 million. Even controlled for inflation, spending levels in all categories more than doubled from 1976-1996. This report presents data on costs of congressional campaigns, in both aggregate and (mean) average terms.

The data in this report reflect spending by congressional candidates from funds donated by individuals, political action committees (PACs), parties, and candidates. Thus, it includes expenditures under candidate control and does not reflect spending on their behalf, with or without their cooperation, by parties, PACs, and other groups. This outside spending has become an increasingly important factor in U.S. elections, and much of it goes undisclosed, making a true measure of election spending more difficult. However, as official data, reported to and aggregated by the Federal Election Commission (FEC), these statistics represent a consistent measure of the costs of running for Congress since the FEC was established to administer disclosure laws enacted in the 1970s.

### Aggregate Campaign Spending

This section presents total spending levels among House and Senate candidates in elections from 1976 to 1996. Data are shown both in current and constant 1996 dollars (based on the Consumer Price Index, or CPI), in order to control for inflation. Table 1 contains data on aggregate spending by *all* House and Senate candidates in primary and general elections (including runoffs, where applicable) for each two-year election cycle—the election year and the one preceding it. It reports that candidates for Congress spent \$765.3 million in 1996, up from \$115.5 million in 1976. This 560% increase, however, shrinks to 140% in constant dollars. The \$477.8 million spent by House candidates in 1996 constituted 62% of the congressional total, while the \$287.5 million spent by Senate candidates constituted 38%, the same proportions as in 1976.

**Table 1. Total House and Senate Campaign Expenditures, 1976-1996:  
All Candidates\***

	House		Senate		Total	
	Current \$	Constant \$	Current \$	Constant \$	Current \$	Constant \$
<b>1976</b>	\$71.5	\$197.2	\$44.0	\$121.3	\$115.5	\$318.5
<b>1978</b>	\$109.7	\$263.9	\$85.2	\$205.0	\$194.8	\$468.8
<b>1980</b>	\$136.0	\$259.0	\$102.9	\$196.0	\$239.0	\$455.0
<b>1982</b>	\$204.0	\$331.7	\$138.4	\$225.1	\$342.4	\$556.7
<b>1984</b>	\$203.6	\$307.4	\$170.5	\$257.5	\$374.1	\$564.9
<b>1986</b>	\$239.3	\$342.6	\$211.7	\$303.0	\$450.9	\$645.6
<b>1988</b>	\$257.6	\$341.6	\$201.4	\$267.1	\$459.0	\$608.7
<b>1990</b>	\$265.8	\$319.1	\$180.4	\$216.6	\$446.3	\$535.7
<b>1992</b>	\$407.6	\$455.8	\$272.1	\$304.3	\$679.7	\$760.1
<b>1994</b>	\$406.3	\$430.2	\$318.8	\$337.6	\$725.2	\$767.7
<b>1996</b>	\$477.8	\$477.8	\$287.5	\$287.5	\$765.3	\$765.3

\* All dollars in millions, rounded to nearest \$100,000; constant 1996 dollars are based on the CPI (Table B-58. *Economic Report of the President, Feb. 1997*). **Source:** See Table 6.

Table 2 provides data similar to Table 1 but only for general election candidates; primary losers are excluded. As such, Table 2 better reflects spending in the main arena—the general election. Ideally, one could separate spending in primaries by general election candidates, to gauge the true spending level in the general election. But reporting procedures make it impossible to do so, in part because of no clear delineation between spending directed at primary versus general election voters. Also, expenditures before a little-contested primary may be aimed at influencing the general election; those afterwards may be payments of primary debts. These data, although not cited as often as those in Table 1, are used in calculating other statistics, such as the average costs in Tables 3-6.

**Table 2. Total House and Senate Campaign Expenditures, 1976-1996:  
General Election Candidates\***

	House		Senate		Total	
	Current \$	Constant \$	Current \$	Constant \$	Current \$	Constant \$
<b>1976</b>	\$60.9	\$168.0	\$38.1	\$105.1	\$99.0	\$273.0
<b>1978</b>	\$88.0	\$211.7	\$65.5	\$157.7	\$153.5	\$369.4
<b>1980</b>	\$116.9	\$222.6	\$75.2	\$143.2	\$192.1	\$365.9
<b>1982</b>	\$174.9	\$284.4	\$113.2	\$184.0	\$288.1	\$468.4
<b>1984</b>	\$177.6	\$268.2	\$143.7	\$216.9	\$321.3	\$485.1
<b>1986</b>	\$210.3	\$301.1	\$189.7	\$271.6	\$400.1	\$572.7
<b>1988</b>	\$223.1	\$295.9	\$185.2	\$245.6	\$408.3	\$541.5
<b>1990</b>	\$231.3	\$277.7	\$172.4	\$207.0	\$403.7	\$484.6
<b>1992</b>	\$332.7	\$372.1	\$195.9	\$219.1	\$528.6	\$591.1
<b>1994</b>	\$343.8	\$364.0	\$272.5	\$288.5	\$615.4	\$652.5
<b>1996</b>	\$424.8	\$424.8	\$226.0	\$226.0	\$650.8	\$650.8

\* Primary losers excluded; all dollars in millions, rounded to nearest \$100,000; constant 1996 dollars are based on the CPI (Table B-58. *Economic Report of the President, Feb. 1997*). **Source:** See Table 6.

## Average Campaign Spending

Tables 3-6 provide data on average expenditures by major party candidates who were on the general election ballot in the past 20 years, broken down into various categories. While they closely correspond with the data in Table 2, these tables differ in their exclusion of non-major party candidates (whose spending comprised less than 1% of the totals in Table 2).<sup>1</sup> The average expenditure data are the arithmetic mean among all spending figures, derived by dividing the total expenditures by the number of candidates in a set. (As such, they are subject to being skewed by a few extraordinarily large or small spending figures, a potentially more serious drawback in examining smaller versus larger data sets, i.e., Senate rather than House data.)

Table 3 provides average spending figures for all candidates in House and Senate general elections since 1976, in current and constant 1996 dollars. Average spending by House candidates rose from \$73,000 in 1976 to \$493,000 in 1996, a 575% increase. Adjusted for inflation, the average rose by 143% and actually declined three out of 10 times. The \$595,000 average by Senate candidates in 1976 increased by 459% in 1996, to \$3.3 million. The increase amounted to 102% in constant dollars, a lesser rate of increase than in the House; the average in Senate races declined in five out of 10 times.

**Table 3. Average House and Senate Campaign Expenditures, 1976-1996:  
All Candidates\***

	House		Senate	
	Current \$	Constant \$	Current \$	Constant \$
<b>1976</b>	\$73,000	\$203,000	\$595,000	\$1,642,000
<b>1978</b>	\$108,000	\$260,000	\$929,000	\$2,237,000
<b>1980</b>	\$140,000	\$267,000	\$1,092,000	\$2,081,000
<b>1982</b>	\$211,000	\$343,000	\$1,710,000	\$2,782,000
<b>1984</b>	\$218,000	\$329,000	\$2,201,000	\$3,326,000
<b>1986</b>	\$262,000	\$375,000	\$2,697,000	\$3,863,000
<b>1988</b>	\$279,000	\$370,000	\$2,803,000	\$3,720,000
<b>1990</b>	\$289,000	\$347,000	\$2,610,000	\$3,135,000
<b>1992</b>	\$391,000	\$438,000	\$2,705,000	\$3,027,000
<b>1994</b>	\$414,000	\$439,000	\$3,867,000	\$4,097,000
<b>1996</b>	\$493,000	\$493,000	\$3,325,000	\$3,325,000

\* For major party general election candidates; all dollars rounded to nearest \$1000; constant 1996 dollars are based on the CPI (Table B-58. *Economic Report of the President, Feb. 1997*). **Source:** See Table 6.

<sup>1</sup> While these tables are confined to spending by major party candidates only, as more accurate reflections of the true costs of seeking a House or Senate seat, a different methodology would yield different results; hence some published data conflict with these. For example, some have restricted their data bases to major party candidates who had major party opponents; others have divided total expenditures by the number of major party candidates on the ballot, regardless of whether they met the FEC's reporting threshold (the raising or spending of at least \$5,000). The primary value of any such tables is the trends revealed over time, not any specific figure therein; the methodology used becomes less important in that context.

Table 4 lists average expenditure levels of *winning* House and Senate candidates, in current and constant 1996 dollars. Data for winning candidates only may provide the best gauge of the level of funding needed for congressional races, i.e., what it costs to *win* a House or Senate seat. On the House side, the average winner spent \$680,000 in 1996, a 682% rise from the \$87,000 in 1976, a higher rate of increase than among all candidates (in Table 3). Average spending for Senate winners rose from \$609,000 to \$3.8 million during this period, also a larger, steadier rate of increase than among all candidates, but even here the average constant dollar figure declined in five out of 10 times.

**Table 4. Average House and Senate Campaign Expenditures, 1976-1996:  
Winning Candidates\***

	House		Senate	
	Current \$	Constant \$	Current \$	Constant \$
<b>1976</b>	\$87,000	\$241,000	\$609,000	\$1,680,000
<b>1978</b>	\$127,000	\$306,000	\$1,209,000	\$2,911,000
<b>1980</b>	\$178,000	\$339,000	\$1,179,000	\$2,246,000
<b>1982</b>	\$263,000	\$428,000	\$2,066,000	\$3,361,000
<b>1984</b>	\$291,000	\$440,000	\$2,955,000	\$4,465,000
<b>1986</b>	\$356,000	\$510,000	\$3,065,000	\$4,391,000
<b>1988</b>	\$392,000	\$520,000	\$3,747,000	\$4,973,000
<b>1990</b>	\$410,000	\$493,000	\$3,297,000	\$3,960,000
<b>1992</b>	\$554,000	\$620,000	\$3,535,000	\$3,956,000
<b>1994</b>	\$529,000	\$560,000	\$4,307,000	\$4,563,000
<b>1996</b>	\$680,000	\$680,000	\$3,775,000	\$3,775,000

\* For major party general election candidates; all dollars rounded to nearest \$1000; constant 1996 dollars are based on the CPI (Table B-58. *Economic Report of the President, Feb. 1997*).

**Source:** See Table 6.

Table 5 provides average spending of all House and Senate candidates, according to their party affiliation. House Democrats spent an average of \$457,000 in 1996, an increase of 509% over the \$75,000 in 1976. The average for House Republicans rose by an even larger 635% during this period, from \$72,000 to \$529,000. The trends in the relative spending levels of the two parties' candidates are notable. There was near parity in the first four elections, with Democrats slightly ahead in 1976 and 1978 and Republicans in the lead in 1980 and 1982. Beginning in 1984, however, the Democrats' average increased steadily and significantly over the Republicans', through 1992. The gap decreased—to a still substantial \$93,000 Democratic lead, in 1994, the year Republicans won a majority in the House for the first time in 40 years. The Republican averages climbed greatly from 1990 to 1996, when the Republican average exceeded the Democratic average by \$72,000, the first Republican lead since 1982.

It is far more difficult to discern any pattern in the average data for Senate candidates. The average Democratic candidate spent \$3.2 million in 1996, up 462% from the \$570,000 in 1976. The average Republican spent \$3.5 million in 1996, up 460% from the \$617,000 in 1976. The Democratic average was higher in four years, including three in which they were in the majority in the Senate. The Republican average was higher in seven years, in three of which Republicans were in the majority. The largest gaps—

Republican leads of over \$1 million—were in 1986, when the GOP lost its Senate majority, and in 1994, when they regained it.

**Table 5. Average House and Senate Campaign Expenditures, 1976-1996:  
By Party\***

	House		Senate	
	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican
<b>1976</b>	\$75,000	\$72,000	\$570,000	\$617,000
<b>1978</b>	\$109,000	\$107,000	\$730,000	\$1,151,000
<b>1980</b>	\$134,000	\$146,000	\$1,171,000	\$1,011,000
<b>1982</b>	\$203,000	\$220,000	\$1,811,000	\$1,609,000
<b>1984</b>	\$221,000	\$215,000	\$2,035,000	\$2,372,000
<b>1986</b>	\$268,000	\$256,000	\$2,194,000	\$3,199,000
<b>1988</b>	\$292,000	\$265,000	\$2,944,000	\$2,667,000
<b>1990</b>	\$322,000	\$255,000	\$2,533,000	\$2,688,000
<b>1992</b>	\$442,000	\$340,000	\$2,736,000	\$2,674,000
<b>1994</b>	\$461,000	\$368,000	\$3,324,000	\$4,410,000
<b>1996</b>	\$457,000	\$529,000	\$3,202,000	\$3,449,000

\* For major party general election candidates; all dollars rounded to nearest \$1000. **Source:** See Table 6.

Table 6 provides average expenditures for the respective chambers, according to their election status — whether an incumbent, a challenger, or an open seat contender. In all but two of the House elections, the highest average expenditures were among open seat contenders, typically the most competitive races. The \$653,000 average for open seat candidates in 1996 rose by more than 400% over the \$125,000 in 1976. The rate of increase was comparable among challengers during this period, as the average rose from \$51,000 to \$262,000. The average for incumbents rose by the greatest degree—746%, from \$79,000 to \$668,000. Most notable is the incumbent-to-challenger ratio of spending: from a roughly 1.5 to 1 ratio in 1976, the gap widened steadily, reaching 3.8 to 1 in 1992. The gap dropped in both succeeding elections, to 2.5 to 1 in 1996.

In contrast to House elections, it was the incumbents who generally have spent the most on average in Senate races (ranking highest in eight elections, with open seat candidates averaging the most in the other three). The \$4.2 million average for incumbents in 1996 compares with \$650,000 in 1976; challenger averages rose from \$433,000 to \$2.6 million; and open seat candidates averaged \$757,000 in 1976 and \$3.3 million in 1996. While it is generally harder to generalize from the smaller Senate data sets, it is notable that the incumbent-to-challenger ratio has been decidedly closer than in House races, with Senate incumbents typically outspending their challengers by between 1.5 and 2 to 1.

**Table 6. Average House and Senate Campaign Expenditures, 1976-1996:  
by Candidate Status\***

	<b>Incumbent</b>	<b>Challenger</b>	<b>Open Seat</b>
<b>House</b>			
<b>1976</b>	\$79,000	\$51,000	\$125,000
<b>1978</b>	\$111,000	\$75,000	\$199,000
<b>1980</b>	\$164,000	\$98,000	\$203,000
<b>1982</b>	\$261,000	\$128,000	\$282,000
<b>1984</b>	\$278,000	\$125,000	\$377,000
<b>1986</b>	\$337,000	\$126,000	\$431,000
<b>1988</b>	\$381,000	\$116,000	\$521,000
<b>1990</b>	\$403,000	\$111,000	\$504,000
<b>1992</b>	\$586,000	\$154,000	\$428,000
<b>1994</b>	\$549,000	\$211,000	\$579,000
<b>1996</b>	\$668,000	\$262,000	\$653,000
<b>Senate</b>			
<b>1976</b>	\$650,000	\$433,000	\$757,000
<b>1978</b>	\$1,342,000	\$705,000	\$792,000
<b>1980</b>	\$1,302,000	\$925,000	\$1,035,000
<b>1982</b>	\$1,763,000	\$1,171,000	\$4,142,000
<b>1984</b>	\$2,485,000	\$1,114,000	\$4,976,000
<b>1986</b>	\$3,370,000	\$1,832,000	\$3,143,000
<b>1988</b>	\$3,748,000	\$1,820,000	\$2,886,000
<b>1990</b>	\$3,545,000	\$1,758,000	\$1,600,000
<b>1992</b>	\$3,713,000	\$1,817,000	\$2,725,000
<b>1994</b>	\$4,427,000	\$3,906,000	\$3,004,000
<b>1996</b>	\$4,235,000	\$2,554,000	\$3,308,000

\* For major party general election candidates; all dollars rounded to nearest \$1000.

**Source:** U.S. Federal Election Commission. *FEC Disclosure Series No. 6: 1976 Senatorial Campaigns, Receipts and Expenditures* and *No. 9: 1976 House of Representatives Campaigns, Receipts and Expenditures*. April 1977 and September 1977; *FEC Reports on Financial Activity, U.S. Senate and House Campaigns, 1977-1978, 1979-1980, 1981-1982, 1983-1984, 1985-1986, 1987-1988, 1989-1990, 1991-1992, 1993-1994, and 1995-1996. Final Reports* (except for 1978 and 1996: *Interim Reports*). January 1982, October 1983, November 1985, March 1988, September 1989, October 1991, January 1994, November 1995, and April 1997. [Data retrieved or calculated from these volumes and associated computer tapes and press releases.]