HOW THE 2020 SOUTH CAROLINA SENATE RACE FORESHADOWS A POSSIBLE REPUBLICAN SWEEP IN 2022

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Abstract

As we enter a pivotal election year, Democrats are grappling with the idea that keeping the House and securing the Senate might not come as easily as when the "blue wave" rolled across the nation in 2018. The victory of Glenn Youngkin in the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial race was perhaps the first sign of difficulty ahead for Democrats competing in the 2022 midterm cycle. Were there indicators before the Virginia race that indicated an uphill battle for Democrats? We treat the 2020 South Carolina Senate race as a case study for Democrats' struggle to remain competitive among a rapidly polarizing electorate.

This article analyzes the South Carolina U.S. Senate race between incumbent Senator Lindsey Graham and former Democratic Party Chairman Jaime Harrison. We detail the history of South Carolina Senate races, explore the political legacies of Graham and Harrison, and compare the sources and uses of donations that fueled a historically expensive race. Our analysis concludes that despite increasing competitiveness for Democrats in conservative strongholds, the Harrison-Graham race should have been a sobering bellwether of diminishing confidence among the national electorate in the Democratic Party.

Introduction

South Carolina has long served as a safe Republican call for most statewide races. Yet, in 2020, former South Carolina Democratic Party Chairman Jaime Harrison's underdog bid and unprecedented fundraising against Republican incumbent Senator Lindsey Graham dramatically changed South Carolina's election dynamics. In the months leading up to the election, the race appeared to be a potential tossup, opening up the possibility for South Carolina to lean Democrat. A 2020 Quinnipiac University poll, conducted from July 30 to August 3, showed the race tied at 44%. A September 8, 2020, generic ballot poll from The Economist/YouGov showed that 46% of South Carolina voters would have voted for a Democratic congressional representative if the election were held that day. The same Quinnipiac University poll found Harrison with a sizable lead among independents at 41% to Graham's 37%. Harrison also demonstrated traction among women, at 47% to Graham's 42%, and particularly Black women (*South Carolina US Senate polls*, 2020). With a promising race for Harrison prior to Election Day, the Cook Political Report moved its prediction of the race from "likely" to "lean" Republican. These predictions laid the foundation for the most expensive Senate race in American history.

Despite promising signs for Democrats in South Carolina throughout the campaign, Graham still won the state with over 54% of the vote, leaving Democrats in disbelief over what went wrong. Below, we discuss this election's implications and how Harrison's stunning loss could foreshadow a Republican sweep in 2022.

We suspect that several underlying factors contributed to this Senate race's high stakes and historic number of individual monetary contributions. In 2020, Democratic voters extensively mobilized, perhaps as a reaction to the extreme conservatism in the Executive Branch or acrimony towards Graham's alignment with then-President Trump. Additionally, South Carolina is home to the nation's largest Black voting bloc, making up 60% of the state's Democratic electorate yet only 30% of its population (Jackson, 2020). Moreover, Harrison successfully fundraised over $28 million by the June 2020 filing deadline, closing the donation gap between the two candidates months ahead of the election and setting the stage for an expensive and competitive race. These conditions created a tense, heated race that veered closer to a tossup than the Palmetto State has witnessed in recent decades. Through a discussion of these factors and analysis of the disparity between campaign finance contributions and election results, we seek to investigate how the South Carolina Senate race became so contentious and close and discuss the potential implications for the 2022 midterm elections.

Historic Election Results

Senator Graham, who has represented South Carolina since 2002, is one of the great political giants of the modern Republican Party. He became known for his creative political maneuvering, moderate policies, bipartisan

ties, and powerful fundraising. After Graham helped on the late Senator John McCain's presidential campaign in 2008, he focused his attention on his own state by deploying a barrage of paid staff and volunteers to build six regional offices to mobilize donors (Raju, 2014). Toward the end of the first quarter of 2014, Graham raised $11.6 million, a total his opponents could not fathom—none of his opponents passed the $1 million mark (Raju, 2014). Graham regularly attended major political events for crowds of both political parties, and he even befriended some political adversaries while garnering support from high-funding donors. His fundraising tactics and amiable reputation paid off, allowing the Senator to donate $150,000 to the South Carolina Republican Party while headlining big-donor events that brought in around $50,000 each (Raju, 2014).

Graham was openly critical of his party during his previous Senate runs and advocated for changes in its structure and platform. During his first term in the Senate, he often warned his base of the Republicans' lack of non-white support and the need to foster a more inclusive party. He was headstrong with his stance on climate change as an impending threat to the U.S., expressed support for lenient immigration policies, and advocated for higher taxes on wealthier Americans. Even when criticized by his own party, he showcased his support of liberal justices Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor for the Supreme Court (Raju, 2014). After Tea Party conservatives gained momentum in Congress in 2010, Graham rallied hard in the 2014 primary by warning against an overtly conservative wave and working to eliminate more conservative voices on the ticket. These views and his robust fundraising organized the Republican Party by rallying support from moderates and Black Americans, and they allowed him to steer clear of a Tea Party insurgency in South Carolina. These strategies streamlined his eventual win in 2014 over Democratic state Senator Brad Hutto, and his massive fundraising molded him into a nationally renowned symbol of the Republican Party.

In 2020, Harrison, the former chair of the South Carolina Democratic Party and a newcomer to elected office, posed an unusually intimidating challenge to Graham's weighty political reputation. Harrison cast himself as Graham's antithesis: a candidate of unwavering moderate politics and a man of the people of South Carolina. Following a national galvanization by Democrats seeking to undermine Republican control of the federal government, Harrison gained considerable traction among voters in the state and across the country, putting Republicans on guard. We suspect that two major factors led to such a stark break from historical political trends in South Carolina. First, President Trump's extremist and divisive policies and political rhetoric undoubtedly created measurable polarization among both major parties, an effect that radiated into every echelon of government nationwide. To win over a growing ultra-conservative base, Graham aligned himself and his campaign platform with the president. Second, after the death of liberal Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Graham's chairmanship of the Senate Judiciary Committee shifted the race beyond the scope of South Carolina alone.

Graham's seemingly narrow margin in a staggeringly expensive race ahead of the election reflected Republicans' fears of losing control of South Carolina. Examining the presidential race alone, Republicans faced a steep battle to stay on top in a state where they have won every presidential election since 1980. According to one Quinnipiac University poll from September of 2020, Trump and Biden were neck-and-neck at 47% and 48%, despite Trump's comfortable victory in the state in 2016 (*South Carolina US Senate polls*, 2020). Seizing an opportunity to capitalize on a fracturing Republican Party, Democrats positioned Biden as the frontrunner for national campaign finance expenditures and outspent President Trump by at least $40 million. Outside groups supporting Biden outspent groups backing Trump by around $134 million. Biden's push in "Blue Wall" states, which exceeded Trump by $174 million, paid off to win him the presidency. Similarly crucial was the Democratic push in Texas. Biden's consistently high spending laid the groundwork for the Republican stronghold to turn closer to blue than ever before (Montanaro, 2020).

Biden's aggressive nationwide spending and favorable polling, part of a widespread coalescence against Trump, may have contributed to the narrow races in South Carolina and posed the formidable challenge to Graham's seat. Biden's nearly 30-point win over Senator Bernie Sanders in the state's Democratic primary (Biden 48.4%, Sanders 19.9%) and his electoral win on Super Tuesday gave him the much-needed momentum to ultimately win the Democratic nomination and boost Democratic mobilization (Bernert, 2020). Upon the endorsement of Biden by South Carolina Rep. Jim Clyburn, the highest-ranking Black Member of Congress, half of South Carolina's Democratic voters believed this endorsement to be a driving factor in their vote for Biden (Owens, 2020). Additionally, Biden won 61% of the Black vote in the Democratic primary, reinforcing the

importance of their role as the nation's largest Black voting bloc. Moreover, 85% of Black voters had a favorable view of Biden, given his positive relationship to the Black voting bloc and his time as Vice President to Barack Obama, according to ABC News exit polls (Self and Schechter, 2020). Notably, South Carolina added around 330,853 registered voters in the past four years (*Voter History Statistics*, 2020), contributing to a voter turnout of nearly 16.3% with 540,062 votes cast (*Election Night Reporting*, 2020), compared to 2016's 12.5% turnout (*Voter History Statistics*, 2020).

The increased difficulty Republicans experienced mobilizing their base in this election cycle posed unheard consequences for the South Carolina Senate race. Since he took office in 2002, Graham has enjoyed significant establishment support as a Senator and has benefited from easily outraising his previous Democratic opponents. When Graham first ran for a Senate seat in 2002, Graham raised $5,296,043 to Democrat Alex Sanders's $3,554,293 in total individual contributions (Federal Election Commission [FEC], 2020b, 2020e). After enjoying general favorability during his first term in the Senate, Graham's campaign fundraising cleared the way for a landslide victory in 2008 and 2014. In 2008, Graham raised $8,261,385 to Democrat Bob Conley's $14,705; in 2014, he raised $9,976,231 to Democrat Brad Hutto's $449,226. (FEC, 2020a, 2020b, 2020d). Graham's favorability is reflected in how easily his campaign outraised each of his Democratic challengers and emphasized that Democratic campaigns have not always been viewed as legitimate candidates for office in his state. However, the contributions to the 2020 Senate race demonstrated a considerably tougher bid and a shift towards Democratic viability in South Carolina. By the end of the second quarter of 2020, Harrison almost edged out Graham's $29,229,166 in fundraising by less than $500,000 (FEC, 2020b, 2020c).

Along the Campaign Trail

Though Graham's reputation was a strong selling point in this race, several new developments created a strenuous race for the incumbent Senator. The changing electorate of South Carolina contributed to the unusual divisiveness of the race and led to some fear that Graham's seat was not as safe as anticipated. For many decades, South Carolina had one of the country's whitest, poorest, and least educated state populations. However, its electorate has been slowly changing over the past 10 years and now consists of 28% Black voters alongside an exponential growth of college-educated white voters (Bacon, 2020). This change in the electorate proved challenging for Graham, who has historically relied on a mostly homogeneous voter base. At the time, it was speculated that Graham experienced a negative coattail effect from President Trump on the campaign trail, which could have driven down his poll numbers while the president's polls plunged statewide. Many moderates and Democrats criticized Graham for his about-face support to Trump after a bipartisan and moderate track record in the Senate. Trump's disapproval rating increased by 5 points amongst voters in the state over his term (*Donald Trump: Job approval*, n.d.), which could have signaled an increased willingness of South Carolina voters to move towards other candidates. In response to these events and the fear of a widespread Democratic upset, Republicans from across the nation poured funding into traditionally safe-red seats to curb the potential for an insurgent blue wave.

While Democrats built an increasingly intimidating presence in South Carolina politics, Graham's campaign turned to a dramatically different strategy from his 2014 run. He did not shy away from contradicting himself, reversing policy positions, working with more extreme candidates, or creating partnerships with former adversaries. While Graham portrayed himself as an opponent of the conservative Tea Party movement in 2014, he campaigned in 2020 alongside conservative House candidate Nancy Mace who ran against him in the bitter and contentious 2014 Senate Republican primary. Similarly, Graham employed Trump-like rhetoric on the campaign trail, a move that contradicted his previous public disapproval of the president when they ran against each other in 2016 (Desiderio, 2020). Graham also openly reversed a crucial stance on judicial politics by claiming that Republicans had a constitutional duty to confirm Judge Amy Coney Barrett to the Supreme Court despite blocking Merrick Garland's 2016 nomination due to that upcoming election. After Sen. Mitch McConnell's push to confirm a judge to Justice Ginsburg's vacant post, Graham reversed his belief against confirming a Supreme Court Justice before a presidential election to push for Judge Amy Coney Barrett's confirmation:

> As I have repeatedly stated, the election cycle is well underway, and the precedent of the Senate is not to confirm a nominee at this stage in the process. I strongly support giving the American people a voice in choosing the next Supreme Court nominee by electing a new president. (Graham, 2016)

Despite the thin margins that emerged prior to the election and the outpouring of financial support for Harrison, several factors made the race more favorable for Graham. While Democrats relentlessly attacked Graham for his Supreme Court confirmation hypocrisy, his support for the Barrett confirmation may have actually strengthened his support. He gained praise from President Trump, rebuilding the trust of far-right conservatives who were skeptical of Graham's moderate policy stances in 2014. Additionally, in a poll conducted prior to Barrett's confirmation, 28% of registered voters in South Carolina said they would be more likely to back Graham if he voted in favor of Trump's nominee, and 27% said they would be less likely (Bacon, 2020).

Another factor that contributed to Graham's victory was South Carolina's inelasticity, or its unlikeliness for partisans to switch party lines at the ballot box (Bacon, 2020). Previous Democratic candidates in South Carolina have easily achieved 45% of the vote but have never reached 50% of combined Black voters and white Democrats statewide. This is largely because Graham enjoys consistent popularity among white voters, who make up over two-thirds of the state's population and overwhelmingly vote for Republicans. In a YouGov poll, Graham led by 26 percentage points among white voters overall, by 31 points among white voters without a college degree, and by 20 points among white voters with degrees (Bacon, 2020).

Lastly, Harrison's lack of name recognition, relatively short time in elected politics, and reputation outweighed the strengths of his impressive campaign chest and favorable polling. Graham frequently capitalized on Harrison's low name recognition in South Carolina as a campaign tactic, and polls suggest that Harrison's unfavorable ratings were partially a result of South Carolina voters lacking information about him. When polled, 48% of likely South Carolina voters viewed Harrison favorably, 35% viewed him unfavorably, and 14% said they had not heard enough about him to have an opinion (Bacon, 2020). Graham leveraged this to link Harrison with progressive and Democratic Socialist leaders in a state dominated by blue-collar conservatives, casting Harrison as a leftist leader whose policies were too radical to benefit working-class and rural South Carolinians.

In response to Graham's clever strategies and hefty political history, the Harrison campaign built an enormous war chest in an effort to counter Graham's name recognition. Harrison outraised Graham in every quarter of 2020, demonstrating a competitive edge in hopes of gaining the attention of moderate or politically indifferent voters on both sides of the aisle (Taylor, 2020). Even after amassing an unusually large sum of contributions in the first two filing periods of 2020, Harrison continued to shatter fundraising records by raising over $57 million in the third quarter. Attributing his opponent's inundation of cash to "liberals hating [Senator Graham's] guts" (Peirce, 2020), Graham's third-quarter fundraising trailed in total individual contributions at $57,148,452.65 (FEC, 2020b). At the conclusion of the election, Harrison had $107,645,931.99 in individual contributions against Graham's $63,511,932.78 (FEC, 2020b, 2020c). Sustained record-breaking fundraising led to an influx of out-of-state donors and a national following, particularly among liberal, affluent donors who poured money into Congressional races that could undermine the Republican Senate majority. By June 30, 2020, Harrison had counted 18,931 contributors from South Carolina and 105,008 from the other 49 states. In contrast, Graham had 8,136 contributors from South Carolina and 52,655 contributors from outside of South Carolina (FEC, 2020b, 2020c).

Ideologically, Harrison positioned himself as a moderate to fend off Graham's political accusations and attacks on the Democratic Party. Though Graham often portrayed Harrison as a radical Democrat whose policies were too liberal for the conservative South Carolina political sphere, Harrison's platform was consistent with the moderate wing of the Democratic Party. Regarding national issues, Harrison backed expanded protections for military members and veterans, backed gun safety laws rather than a broader ban on guns, and did not support a single-payer healthcare system. He also espoused rhetoric for stronger national security and did not support defunding the police. On the local level, he voiced concern for the crumbling infrastructure, shuttered hospitals, underfunded public schools, and rural poverty that afflict South Carolina. Much like the strategies that created coalitions backing Joe Biden, these policies were crafted to attract moderate, undecided, or even Republican voters disaffected with Trump.

The focal point of Harrison's campaign strategy was their digital and television advertising campaign, where they used their massive war chest to boost Harrison's name recognition and publicly attack Graham. When asked how they would spend the plentiful individual contributions that flooded in after the third quarter, the Harrison campaign planned to use "every dollar donated" for TV ads, digital organizing measures, and outreach efforts to Black voters via seven different TV markets (Kinnard, 2020) This strategy is consistent with his early

campaign history, which has placed a heavy emphasis on television and internet advertising to communicate his platform to voters. From the time he began his run in 2019, Harrison spent over $7 million on digital advertisements, while Graham spent approximately half that amount (Choi, 2020). Harrison also spent or reserved more than $61 million in TV ad spots, $14 million of which aired in the three weeks leading up to the election.

Harrison's advertisements ran the gamut of political strategy, ranging from positive ads that emphasize his down-to-earth character and narrative of struggle to vicious attacks on his opponent's partisan loyalties. In one negative ad, Harrison accused Graham of "attacking" South Carolina by ignoring the skyrocketing unemployment rate in South Carolina and refusing to extend COVID-19 unemployment benefits (Jaime Harrison, 2020a). Though Graham had aligned himself with Trump to appeal to the conservative stronghold, Harrison used ads to garner the votes of anti-Trump Republicans and disaffected Democrats, moderates, or Independents who voted for Trump in 2016 due to their distaste for Clinton. In a February 2020 ad from the Harrison campaign, Trump is quoted as saying: "The guy is a nutjob ... I think you have one of the worst representatives I have ever seen" (Jaime Harrison, 2020b). Harrison portrayed Graham as a flip-flopper and two-faced politician to gain support from voters, especially those who felt betrayed by Graham's ultra-partisan loyalties and reversal from previous policies.

Harrison and Graham successfully debated once during this election cycle after several cancellations. Harrison declined to appear at the first debate after the Graham campaign refused to comply with Harrison's request for COVID-19 testing prior to the event. Graham bowed out of the second scheduled debate due to the Supreme Court confirmation hearings of Judge Amy Coney Barrett. On Twitter, Graham claimed that "Mr. Harrision [*sic*] is ducking the debate because the more we know about his radical policies, the less likely he is to win. It's not about medicine, its [*sic*] politics. His liberal views are a loser in South Carolina - and he knows it!" (Graham, 2020). Harrison portrayed Graham's cancellation as a failure to the people of South Carolina in favor of Washingtonian politics (Choi*,* 2020). Once the candidates finally debated, their constant clashes over economic issues, the Supreme Court, and priorities in Washington made it clear that they offered radically different priorities and loyalties to their voter base.

Since moderates comprise a substantial part of the Democratic voting bloc in South Carolina, Biden's early support of Harrison could have built him an advantage among Democrats in the state. Biden endorsed Harrison in a tweet for the Democratic Primary on May 30, 2019: "South Carolina would be lucky to have @harrisonjaime representing them in the Senate. He has the character, intelligence, and integrity needed to serve his community well. I hope you'll #JoinJaime" (Biden, 2019). This bloc voted for Biden overwhelmingly in the primary elections and showed up in record numbers on Election Day. Though neither Harrison nor Biden won South Carolina, this Senate race has indicated that Republicans should prepare for the possibility that South Carolina is no longer a *deep* red state and instead has become a red state with a rapidly strengthening Democratic coalition. In the next section, we analyze how money contributed to the incumbent's win and investigate other potential reasons for Harrison's eventual defeat.

Results

November 6, 2020, officially put an end to Harrison's Senate bid as incumbent Graham swept the Palmetto State. As mentioned above, money is essential in American electoral campaigns. Without funds, candidates have an exceptionally hard time amplifying their message as money is primarily used to pay for communication and staff, which, in turn, mobilize voters. Ads hold the greatest expense for most campaigns, and, on average, a Senate campaign between 2012 and 2014 spent 43% of its budget on ads compared to an average of 33% for House campaigns (Koerth, 2018). Graham certainly proved his financial might in his previous Senate wins by massively outraising and outspending his Democratic opponents.

Figure 1: *Indicates by how much Lindsey Graham outraised and outspent each of his Democratic opponents in each South Carolina Senate Election since the start of his Senate career in 2002 (Gratzinger, 2020).*
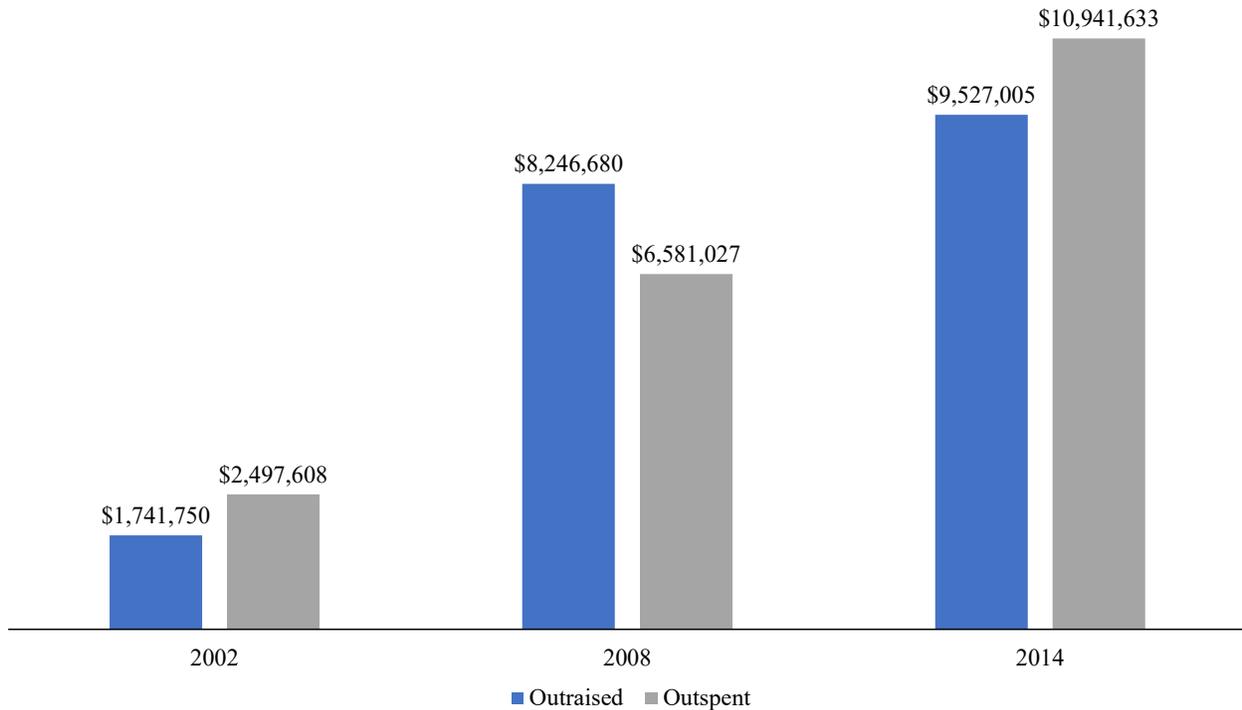
Even before potential candidates air their first advertisements or receive their nominations, early money from big donors during the foundational period of the campaign can bring a serious edge in the primary. This early fundraising occurs during the "invisible primary." Generally, money matters more for challengers than it does for incumbents. Incumbents already have the name recognition that leads to free media coverage, and opponents have to work extra hard to build name recognition that can challenge an incumbent's powerful existing war chest (Robbins, 2018).

Political scientists acknowledge there is no simple causal link between fundraising and election success. Incumbent reelection rates are increasingly high, and research shows that incumbent spending does not necessarily guarantee reelection. Incumbent spending also does not increase vote shares, though challenger spending does increase vote shares (Koerth, 2018). Additionally, though most campaigns spend a great deal of their money on political advertisements, the decentralization of media has made it challenging to track the effectiveness of political ads across different contexts and audiences (Koerth, 2018).

Furthermore, research has shown that attack ads have less of an impact on election outcomes than previously thought, especially in presidential elections. For example, partisan politics played a significant role in voter alignment in the 2016 election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. "In 2016, about 7 in 10 voters identified as either a Democrat or Republican, according to exit polls; 89% of Democrats voted for Clinton, and 90% of Republicans voted for Trump" (Koerth, 2018). As partisan polarization reached high levels in 2016, attack ads on rivals were virtually futile because voters were less likely to switch party alignment.

Table 1: This table displays the amount raised, spent, and distributed by each presidential candidate in the 2016 election. Clinton outspent and outraised Trump yet still lost the general election (Malbin et al., 2018).

	Raised	**Spent**	**Distributed to National Party Committees**
Hillary Clinton			
Hillary Victory Fund	$529,943,913	$529,524,143	$107,533,318
Hillary Action Fund	$46,575,709	$44,061,995	$36,651,492
Democratic Total	*$576,519,622*	*$573,586,138*	*$144,184,810*
Donald Trump			
To Make America Great Again Committee	$263,736,052	$258,488,089	$37,599,727
Trump Victory	$108,424,871	$105,261,232	$51,060,088
Republican Total	*$372,106,923*	*$363,749,321*	*$88,659,815*

Though money generally matters in election success, a district's existing partisan divides tend to predetermine House and Senate races. Moreover, in highly polarized election cycles, funds alone might not be enough to tip the scale in favor of one candidate over the other. This is likely what happened in South Carolina in 2020, where Graham won the Senate election by 54.9% to Harrison's 44.21% despite his inability to outspend and outraise Harrison.

Table 2: This table shows Lindsey Graham and Jaime Harrison's fundraising and spending totals during the 2020 Senate election. Additionally, this table highlights each candidate's online ad spending total divided between Google and Facebook. As shown, Jaime Harrison outraised and outspent Graham in each category (OpenSecrets, 2020).

Total Raised and Spent			
Candidate	*Raised*	*Spent*	*Left Over*
Lindsey Graham	**$72,690,495**	$60,015,745	$13,130,873
Jaime Harrison	**$107,568,737**	$104,092,829	$3,475,909
Online Ad Spending			
Candidate	*Total*	*Google*	*Facebook*
Lindsey Graham	**$13,745,070**	$5,749,100	$7,995,970
Jaime Harrison	**$17,732,916**	$6,550,200	$11,182,716

Graham's power as Chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee could be among the most important reasons for his victory. Graham previously earned praise for his bipartisan support of President Barack Obama's two liberal Supreme Court appointments, which caused him his anger over the Democrats' opposition to Justice Kavanaugh's nomination in 2018. He passionately defended Kavanaugh's nomination in the face of sexual assault allegations, which fired up the South Carolina voting base that supported a conservative Court appointment. His support for Justice Barrett's confirmation after the death of Justice Ginsburg in 2020 was also hugely consequential for his reelection. While Harrison led in fundraising and spending efforts setting a historic Senate candidate record, Graham shifted his concentration to the confirmation of Justice Barrett. Polls conducted in September 2020 showed that 54% of South Carolinians were in favor of filling the Supreme Court vacancy left by the death of Ruth Bader Ginsburg (Bustos, 2020). With Graham as the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, the spotlight shone on him as a leading figure during the nationally televised hearings of Justice Barrett. He cemented himself as an ally to conservative women and helped solidify the conservative stronghold on the Supreme Court (Fandos, 2020). Graham relied on his relationship with Trump and his influence in

Washington, D.C., to bring him victory in his state. Trump swept South Carolina in the election, and by aligning himself with the President, Graham amassed the votes he needed to secure his Senate seat.

An important contextual factor that likely supported Graham's victory was his orthodox vision for the South. Graham's customary Southern ethic and rhetoric played a significant role in garnering voter support, specifically due to the emerging extreme factions of both major political parties. Drawing on voters' fear of social unrest and change, Graham played into conservative relics of previous decades in his campaign, even speaking as specifically as telling women that "there's a place for you in America — if you are pro-life" or stating that there is mobility for minorities in South Carolina, but they "just need to be conservative" (Glenza, 2020). He portrayed Harrison as a liberal who, through his policies, would take away Southerners' stability, agency, and liberty in their lifestyles. For South Carolinians who grew apprehensive about the Democratic Party's left-leaning contingent and progressive messaging, this deep-seated conservatism was perhaps a refreshing return to the political and social status quo of days past. In addition, Graham's alignment with Trump and the conservative wing of the party likely convinced many rural white voters of his viability despite his moderate platform in 2014.

Lastly, Graham received a last-minute boost from out-of-state billionaires that might have contributed to his win. Eight billionaires gave around $1 million to a pro-Graham super political action committee (PAC). Additionally, $4 million more came from "dark money" groups that can contribute money to political organizations without disclosing their donors. In total, Graham could trace about $10.9 million in fundraising brought by super PACs, of which 25% came from billionaires that all live outside of South Carolina (Tindera, 2020). While Harrison's fundraising efforts led political scientists to conclude that there, in fact, might be a limit to how much money can improve the chances of winning an election, Graham still raised objectively large sums of money of $72 million to solidify his reelection campaign. Graham understood that South Carolina was effectively a Republican state, and swinging the state to the left in a highly polarized climate was too big a hurdle for a newcomer like Harrison. With Trump largely silent to the world, Graham is well-positioned to become the leading conservative in the Republican Party with at least four more years in the Senate.

Table 3: *Displays the billionaire contributions to pro-Graham Super PAC through October 14, 2020, in the last leg of his election campaign (Tindera, 2020).*

Billionaire	Net Worth	Source of Wealth	Residence	Contributions
Sheldon & Miriam Adelson	$31.4 billion	Casinos	Las Vegas	$1,000,000
Frank VanderSloot	$3.5 billion	Nutrition, wellness products	Idaho Falls, Idaho	$300,000
Larry Ellison	$74.2 billion	Software (Oracle)	Woodside, CA	$250,000
Donald Friese	$1.1 billion	Manufacturing	Los Angeles	$250,000
Laura Perlmutter	$4.6 billion	Marvel Comics	Palm Beach, FL	$250,000
Jimmy John Liautaud	$1.7 billion	Sandwich chain (Jimmy John's)	Key Largo, FL	$150,000
Charles & Ann Johnson	$4.1 billion	Money management	Palm Beach, FL	$110,000
Jim Davis	$6.9 billion	New Balance	Newton, MA	$100,000
Douglas Leone	$4.9 billion	Venture capital (Sequoia Capital)	Atherton, CA	$100,000
Warren Stephens	$2.6 billion	Investment banking	Little Rock, AR	$200,000
Linda McMahon	$1.6 billion	Entertainment (WWE)	Greenwich, CT	$50,000
Sam Zell	$4.6 billion	Real estate, private equity	Chicago	$30,000
John Catsimatidis	$2.8 billion	Oil, real estate	New York	$25,000

Discussion

Graham's victory may seem peculiar on the surface because it defies the average individual's conception of campaign finance theory. One might expect that the candidate who raises more money should be able to run a more effective campaign, have a better advertising and outreach strategy, and eventually win the seat. However, the South Carolina U.S. Senate race emphasized the importance of studying the influence of money in a variety of contexts. Harrison campaigned intelligently and expediently, vigorously tapping into diverse voter bases, boosting

voter registration among historically disenfranchised voters, and campaigning on a platform that promoted bipartisanship and avoided extremism. By conventional wisdom, he could have won, but several factors outside of his control precluded him from winning the election.

For Harrison, beating a political giant like Graham was only half the battle of running for Senate. In addition to attempting to take down one of the most prominent members of the Republican Party, Harrison ran against a history of systemic racism and disenfranchisement that is still deeply ingrained in the state's politics, elections, and social divides. South Carolina has several measures in place that disproportionately disenfranchise Black people, who comprise about a third of the state's population and are overwhelmingly Democratic voters. The state has stringent photo ID requirements for voters, mandates all absentee or mail-in votes to have a witness's signature, and prohibits "ballot curing," in which election officials can notify voters if they are at risk of an invalidated ballot and provide an opportunity to correct their signatures. These measures create an overwhelming possibility of inadvertent but record-high rates of disenfranchisement in future elections.

In addition to these forms of voter suppression, South Carolina's Congressional map distinctly segregates the state's voters along both racial and political lines. U.S. House district SC-6, represented by Black Democrat Jim Clyburn, is drawn around the cities of Columbus and Charleston to maximize the number of Black voters in one area and minimize the dispersal of Black voters to its other six Congressional districts. These urban centers also contain the bulk of the state's Democratic voters, who consequently lack the opportunity to elect Democrats in other districts and are systematically blocked from forming a majority coalition. South Carolina's only other Democratic Congressional representative, Joe Cunningham, was voted out of office in 2020 after only one term.

Harrison's competitiveness and national following are also symbolic of the changing undercurrent of systemic racism in the United States. The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter protests in May 2020 awakened a movement for racial equity and a push for more political representation for Black people in all levels of elected office. If Harrison were elected, he would have been the second Black Senator to represent South Carolina, a role he would have shared with current Senator Tim Scott. His national following, successful fundraising, and mobilizing of South Carolina Democrats provided a personal victory to Harrison as well. Throughout his campaign, Harrison emphasized his humble origins and narrative of personal struggle as a Black man growing up in predominantly white rural South Carolina. He ran on a platform of equity and opportunity against an opponent who upheld traditionalist, ultra-conservative, and antiquated positions that have disenfranchised swaths of South Carolinians for decades. Though the latter mindset prevailed in Graham's victory, Harrison's run offered an inspiring and hopeful future for all South Carolinians: "A new South is rising ... leaders who reflect the community and serve the interests of everyone will be here soon enough" (Harrison, 2020).

Harrison's run is also laudable due to his record-breaking fundraising and skillful, strategic communication with voters, which generated more threatening polling numbers than any of Graham's previous Democratic challengers. A September 30, 2020, Quinnipiac University poll showed Graham and Harrison tied at 48% each. Two October 1, 2020, Data For Progress polls showed Harrison at 44% and Graham at 45%, as well as at 46% and 47%, respectively (*South Carolina US Senate polls*, 2020). Compared to 2014 elections polls, Graham had a much tougher battle to fight on election day than ever before: according to a late September 2014 poll from CBS News/NYT Upshot, Graham had a wide lead of 43% to 28% over his Democratic opponent Brad Hutto (*Senate races: Headline results*, 2014). In 2008, Graham enjoyed a 16-point lead over Bob Conley in the month preceding the election and led Conley 56% to 40% (Survey USA, 2008). Though Graham enjoyed a comfortable 10-point victory over Harrison in 2020 in a race called early on election night, this margin was significantly closer than any of Graham's previous challengers.

Though polling and fundraising are generally perceived as two major indicators for a candidate's success, these metrics can also be highly unreliable and inconclusive. Pollsters work diligently to overcome biases from race, education, income, and other demographics. However, the widely speculated inaccuracy of 2020 polling could have led to false confidence and optimism for Harrison's victory. Polls were widely criticized as improperly weighted after the 2016 presidential election, but significant demographic errors remained salient in 2020 that particularly impacted South Carolina elections. Nationally, polling errors among white voters and senior citizens created a much slimmer margin of victory than anticipated for Biden, who appeared on track to coast to victory up until election day. Errors among these demographics—especially those that mismeasured the size of these groups and their likeliness to vote—created a large underrepresentation of Trump's national base. Given Graham's

alignment with Trump and the white majority of South Carolina, mismeasurements of this demographic group likely contributed to the underestimation of Graham's public support. Future polling for presidential and statewide elections has a large challenge to overcome:

> [This polling error] suggests a fundamental mismeasurement of the attitudes of a large demographic group, not just an underestimate of its share of the electorate. Put differently, the underlying raw survey data got worse over the last four years, canceling out the changes that pollsters made to address what went wrong in 2016. (Cohn, 2020)

Given the national scope of this race with Graham's role in the Senate, this fundraising speaks to Democrats' desire to support any and all campaigns that might undermine Republicans' authority. Polling and fundraising exist in a feedback loop, where one positive outcome triggers increased support for the other. These metrics may be misleading when predicting a candidate's likelihood of winning a race. Though most Senate races receive the majority of their funding from out-of-state donors, the national popularity of Harrison's campaign could have clouded a realistic view of his chances of victory at home. Many liberal donors, enraged by the Trump Administration and determined to change the outcome of the next election, sent money to "glamorous" Senate races across the country in hopes of ousting powerful Republicans such as Graham. Three zip codes alone in the affluent, left-leaning Upper West Side of New York City sent $1.5 million to "doomed" candidates like Harrison and Amy McGrath in Kentucky (Bellafante, 2020). Since irrational and emotional factors primarily motivate political donations, forecasters possibly placed too much weight on fundraising data's objectivity when projecting the Harrison campaigns' potential for success.

A Precursor to the 2022 Midterm Elections

Graham's win should have been the first sign for Democrats to sound the alarm. Senator Graham's win was not a fluke—but rather, an early look at our nation's current political tilt. Despite the historic coalescence of Democrats in the 2020 cycle, Republicans are shaping up to sweep the 2022 elections. Many Republicans in 2022 will benefit from the same weaknesses that have plagued the Democratic Party for decades. The Democratic Party lacks a central leadership figure, and its ideological coalitions constantly oppose one another. To voters, this dynamic exudes inconsistency and unpredictability. As shown by this Democratic Congress's inability to pass the Build Back Better Act—the centerpiece of President Biden's campaign agenda—the party's sheer unruliness and disorganization has failed Americans most in need of economic relief and rebuilding. If Democrats continue to overpromise and underdeliver as they have this year, Republicans are right to define the Democratic Party as shapeless, spineless, and even untrustworthy.

If Democrats continue to operate in the same ways that have set them up for upsets, these issues will resonate in the 2022 cycle and could lead to a Republican Congress and a red sweep in state elections. By fixating on Trump's evils instead of the strengths of their agenda, Democrats have allowed Republicans to capitalize on their weaknesses to coast to victory. A timely case study is the Virginia gubernatorial race in the fall of 2021, in which Democrats' fixation on defeating Trumpism set Democrat Terry McAuliffe up for an unexpected failure. Like Harrison in 2020, McAuliffe appeared strong in the polls until election day in 2021. Republican Glenn Youngkin ultimately won by a mere 2 percentage points, a slim margin that could foreshadow similarly tight battles this year. Youngkin also underspent McAuliffe by just under $1 million, demonstrating that the campaign tactics of the right wing are likely more powerful than the force of money if Democrats use donations on ineffective strategies (Virginia Public Access Project, n.d.).

Virginia Republicans were successful for several reasons. Republicans took advantage of an electorate that was weary of the pandemic restrictions and blamed Democrats for the ongoing challenges posed by COVID-19. The Youngkin campaign distanced itself from directly naming Trump while luring voters into the same ideological traps that helped Trump succeed in 2016. Though his rhetoric was largely Trump-aligned, Youngkin focused on critical issues that resonate with average voters: returning kids to in-person schools, supporting conservative values and families, and shunning the seeming complacency of the party in power. Democrats offered no viable counterargument to the Republican fear-mongering, and the Democratic Party's overconfidence fueled their loss of power.

Conclusion

Even if Harrison's bid was ultimately unsuccessful, the cost and competitiveness of the Graham-Harrison race represent marked shifts away from the traditionally conservative politics of South Carolina. Though Harrison may have unified some liberals, moderates, and Republicans disaffected with Trump, his efforts could not carry him to the plurality of votes needed to win. In what became a scathing and bitter race, the Harrison campaign defied a major tenet campaign finance theory: its historic stockpile of individual contributions was not enough to take down one of the giants of the South Carolina political establishment. Harrison's unprecedented fundraising combined with polling errors to generate misleading election predictions, which instilled false confidence in Democrats that a victory was within arms' reach. Future research on how individual contributions impact challengers' chances of success should not compare candidates' war chests in a vacuum—particularly in the callous, turbulent, and polarized political and economic climate we currently face.

Harrison's most significant contribution is best described in his own words. By creating a tenable challenge to a major figure of the Republican establishment, Harrison "proved that public office is not a lifetime job" (Harrison, 2020). He shattered a glass ceiling to rise to political stardom, and he built a fundraising and organizing base unlike any South Carolina Democrat in recent decades. Despite these successes, the race's implications are more consequential on the national stage. The historic cost of this Senate campaign indicates that both Democrats and Republicans across the nation attempted to unify their splintering and disarrayed political parties. Graham's lower margin of victory may pose troubling long-term consequences for future Republican Senate candidates in Southern states, and narrower, more expensive races may become the norm as Democratic candidates increase their competitiveness in South Carolina. Despite potentially promising signs of Democratic mobilization in the South due to demographic change, Republicans are likely to sweep elections while Democrats struggle to modernize their party platform and strategy.

Democratic and Republican voter coalitions are becoming more volatile as political polarization becomes even more prevalent in everyday American life. Future candidates in red states such as South Carolina should prepare for more competitive races to become the norm as the two major parties grow diametrically opposed in their values, demographics, and strategy.

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