

Some GOP House challengers were short on funds, reports show

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Rep. Jim Costa (D-Fresno), shown in 2013, nearly lost his seat to an underfunded Republican challenger last month. (Bill Clark / CQ-Roll Call Inc.)

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Two underfunded GOP challengers came close to upsetting Democratic House members
Two California congressional races were among the costliest in the nation as both parties fought hard

The Republican challengers who nearly upset two veteran Democratic congressmen in California during the Nov. 4 elections ran short on money for their campaigns and got little or no help from their party, reports filed this week showed.

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Rep. Jim Costa (D-Fresno) spent nearly \$1 million to fend off a surprisingly strong challenge from dairy farmer Johnny Tacchera, who spent less than \$321,000 on his campaign, reports filed with the Federal Election Commission showed.

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Yet Tacchera was 700 votes ahead of Costa when the ballots were counted on election night and he maintained his lead for several days as the remaining vote was tallied. Costa ended up holding onto his seat, but by only 1,334 votes.

In another unexpectedly close Central Valley race, retired U.S. Marshal Tony Amador came within less than five percentage points of defeating Rep. Jerry McNerney (D-Stockton). Amador spent less than \$56,000 to McNerney's more than \$1 million.

It is possible that, had Republicans started putting resources into those races, Democrats would have responded in kind and the contests would not have been close.

Nonetheless, the near-misses prompted a scolding of GOP congressional campaign leaders by Republican political analyst Tony Quinn. Writing for the state politics and business blog Fox and Hounds, Quinn said Republicans had a shot at nine House races in California, including the two in the Central Valley, and ended up losing every one.

Quinn called the failures "a testament to the lack of knowledge of the nuances of California on the part of the national party, and their failure at the basic mechanics of winning close elections."

"This was the year for big Republican gains in Congress and in the end they got nothing" in California, Quinn wrote.

That's way off base, said Tyler Q. Houlton of the National Republican Congressional Committee.

"We were very competitive in California and had great candidates," Houlton said. "Monday morning quarterbacks and political spectators will always second guess us but they fail to mention the competitive Republican districts we easily held in California."

Houlton listed several districts he said Democrats could have done better in, including those held by Republican Reps. David Valadao of Hanford and Jeff Denham of Turlock.

Two of the other races the GOP had a shot at wound up among the costliest in the nation, the reports showed. Rep. Ami Bera (D-Elk Grove) and former Republican Congressman Doug Ose of Sacramento spent a combined \$6.2 million on their contest.

When the \$13.5 million spent by the political parties and other groups outside the campaigns is added, the race becomes the most expensive House contest this year, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

In another costly race, the campaigns of Rep. Scott Peters (D-San Diego) and Republican businessman Carl DeMaio spent a combined \$5.7 million. Outside spending topped \$7 million.

The reports, covering the period between Oct. 15 and Nov. 24, added fundraising and spending activities as the campaigns drew to a close.

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