



ALMOST UNBEATABLE: MONEY AND INCUMBENCY, 2002

By
MARK DIXON

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to winning a state legislative seat, it's hard to beat the advantages that money and incumbency give a candidate.

An Institute on Money in State Politics review of state legislative races in 2002 showed that fewer than 10 percent of the candidates were able to win their races when they raised less money than their opponents and didn't have any incumbency advantage.

In the 2002 election cycle, made up of election years 2001 and 2002, there were races for House or Assembly seats in 47 states. This study looked at the results of 4,688 contests for House and Assembly seats in 45 states¹ to see how many of the winners enjoyed the advantage of having the biggest war chest or being the incumbent officeholder seeking re-election. The review found that:

- **84.5 percent** of the winners raised more money than any other candidate in the race, or were the only candidate running for the seat.
- **69.8 percent** of the winners were the incumbent for that seat, or another seat. Redistricting in a few states caused incumbent representatives to run in new districts or districts with a different number than the previous election.
- **90.9 percent** of the winners had one or both of these two advantages. Often the incumbent raises the most money in a race, and many times, they are not challenged.

In the 2002 election cycle only **9.1 percent** of state House or Assembly races were won by a candidate who raised less money than other challengers and was not an incumbent.

Forty-four states held elections for state Senate seats in the 2002 election cycle. In 1,311 contests in 43 states:

- **83.8 percent** of the winners raised the most money or were unchallenged.
- **75.5 percent** of the winners were the incumbent for their seat, or another seat. For example a member of the House of Representatives who decided to run for Senate was considered to have the incumbency advantage.
- **92.6 percent** of the winners had one or both of these advantages.

In the 2002 Senate races, just **7.4 percent** of the seats were won by challengers who did not raise the most money in their race and thus managed to beat the odds.

¹ New Hampshire House races and Hawaii House and Senate races were not included in the study because the Institute was unable to obtain data for all candidates.

ADVANTAGES STATE-BY-STATE

Across the country, candidates who raised the most money won more frequently than their opponents who raised less. In every state, half or more of the winners were those who had the biggest campaign war chests.

Vermont had the smallest percentage of big-money Senate winners, at 53.3 percent, followed by Maine at 57.1 percent and North Dakota at 61.5 percent. Vermont also had the smallest percentage of big-money House winners, at 64 percent, followed by Maine at 64.9 percent, Arizona at 65 percent and North Dakota at 69.4 percent. But in all other states, 70 percent or more of all legislative winners were those who had a fund-raising advantage over their opponents. In four states — Connecticut, Massachusetts, Wisconsin and Texas — all the Senate winners had raised the most money for their contests.

The incumbency advantage was similar. In all but three states, more than 50 percent of the House winners were incumbents. Only in Montana did fewer than half the Senate winners have incumbency. Fifteen of the 25 Senate seats up for election in Montana that year were open seats because the incumbents were subject to term limits.

But term limits and contribution limits appear to have no consistent effect on how often incumbents or big-money candidates won in 2002. Those candidates still had significant advantages even in states with term limits and, often, even in states with strict contribution limits.

For example, in Florida, legislative candidates can raise a maximum of \$500 per individual for a primary election and \$500 for a general election. Even so, 94 percent of the House winners and 90 percent of the Senate winners were those who raised the most money. Neighboring Alabama places no limits on contributions from individuals. And there, 93 percent of the House winners and nearly 89 percent of the Senate winners were those who raised the most money.

Note that the two states with public funding systems in place for the 2002 election cycle, Maine and Arizona, had the most level playing fields for House candidates, with some of the lowest percentages of winners who had a money or incumbency advantage. However, even in these two states, more than 80 percent of the winners had at least one of the advantages.

In Senate races in 11 states, 100 percent of the winners had a money or incumbency advantage, or both. Not one state had House or Assembly races with a 100 percent advantage in any category.

While the national averages for the money advantage are very close between the House and Senate races, the incumbency advantage nationwide is noticeably higher in the Senate. This may be due to the lesser number of seats available in the Senate or to the perceived senior position of the Senate in relation to the House.

The tables on the following pages show the percentage of incumbents and top-dollar candidates who won their races in each state in the 2002 election cycle.

PERCENT OF HOUSE/ASSEMBLY WINNERS WITH MONEY/INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGES, 2002

STATE	SEATS ELECTED	MOST MONEY	INCUMBENT	ONE/BOTH ADVANTAGE
Alabama	105	93.33%	70.47%	93.33%
Alaska	40	90.00%	62.50%	95.00%
Arizona	60	65.00%	41.67%	81.67%
Arkansas	100	89.00%	62.00%	92.00%
California	80	91.25%	60.00%	91.25%
Colorado	65	84.61%	67.69%	90.76%
Connecticut	151	87.41%	76.82%	92.71%
Delaware	41	90.24%	85.36%	92.68%
Florida	120	94.16%	70.83%	95.00%
Georgia	180	85.00%	69.44%	88.88%
Idaho	70	78.57%	61.42%	88.57%
Illinois	118	94.07%	70.33%	95.76%
Indiana	100	91.00%	82.00%	93.00%
Iowa	100	83.00%	62.00%	87.00%
Kansas	125	94.40%	76.00%	95.20%
Kentucky	100	86.00%	88.00%	93.00%
Maine	151	64.90%	53.64%	82.11%
Maryland	141	70.92%	51.06%	78.01%
Massachusetts	160	91.82%	86.16%	96.85%
Michigan	110	77.27%	52.72%	80.90%
Minnesota	134	82.83%	67.16%	88.05%
Missouri	163	87.11%	42.33%	87.73%
Montana	100	74.00%	67.00%	89.00%
Nevada	42	83.33%	61.90%	88.09%
New Jersey	80	90.00%	70.00%	98.75%
New Mexico	70	91.42%	80.00%	94.28%
New York	150	88.00%	84.66%	97.33%
North Carolina	120	79.16%	55.83%	86.66%
North Dakota	49	69.39%	63.27%	81.63%
Ohio	99	83.83%	58.58%	93.93%
Oklahoma	101	90.09%	81.18%	97.02%
Oregon	60	88.33%	68.33%	91.66%
Pennsylvania	203	89.65%	89.16%	95.56%
Rhode Island	75	82.66%	76.00%	89.33%
South Carolina	124	95.16%	82.25%	97.58%
South Dakota	70	80.00%	64.28%	91.42%
Tennessee	99	87.87%	76.76%	88.88%
Texas	150	92.00%	76.00%	96.00%
Utah	75	86.66%	76.00%	94.66%
Vermont	150	64.00%	73.33%	90.00%
Virginia	100	88.00%	74.00%	92.00%
Washington	98	91.83%	78.57%	93.87%
West Virginia	100	77.00%	75.00%	89.00%
Wisconsin	99	82.82%	84.84%	92.92%
Wyoming	60	81.66%	63.33%	86.66%
NATIONAL	4,688	84.49%	69.77%	90.94%

PERCENT OF STATE SENATE WINNERS WITH MONEY/INCUMBENCY ADVANTAGES, 2002

STATE	SEATS ELECTED	MOST MONEY	INCUMBENT	ONE/BOTH ADVANTAGE
Alabama	35	88.57%	82.85%	88.57%
Alaska	17	88.23%	76.47%	94.11%
Arizona	30	70.00%	80.00%	90.00%
Arkansas	35	82.85%	77.14%	91.42%
California	20	90.00%	65.00%	90.00%
Colorado	17	88.23%	70.58%	94.11%
Connecticut	36	100.00%	91.66%	100.00%
Delaware	21	90.47%	90.47%	100.00%
Florida	40	90.00%	57.50%	90.00%
Georgia	56	91.07%	80.35%	94.64%
Idaho	35	74.28%	51.42%	85.71%
Illinois	59	86.44%	83.05%	91.52%
Indiana	25	96.00%	92.00%	100.00%
Iowa	35	85.71%	57.14%	91.42%
Kentucky	19	84.21%	94.73%	100.00%
Maine	35	57.14%	71.42%	88.57%
Maryland	47	72.34%	80.85%	89.36%
Massachusetts	40	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Michigan	38	81.57%	78.94%	92.10%
Minnesota	67	89.55%	70.14%	92.53%
Missouri	17	76.47%	52.94%	82.35%
Montana	25	72.00%	24.00%	72.00%
Nebraska	28	85.71%	75.00%	85.71%
Nevada	11	90.90%	90.90%	100.00%
New Hampshire	24	83.33%	62.50%	91.66%
New Jersey	40	90.00%	77.50%	95.00%
New York	62	88.70%	85.48%	95.16%
North Carolina	50	90.00%	52.00%	94.00%
North Dakota	26	61.53%	73.07%	92.30%
Ohio	17	82.35%	82.35%	100.00%
Oklahoma	24	87.50%	70.83%	87.50%
Oregon	15	73.33%	93.33%	100.00%
Pennsylvania	25	100.00%	84.00%	100.00%
Rhode Island	38	81.57%	84.21%	97.36%
South Dakota	35	80.00%	60.00%	94.28%
Tennessee	17	76.47%	64.70%	82.35%
Texas	31	96.77%	80.64%	96.77%
Utah	16	81.25%	68.75%	81.25%
Vermont	30	53.33%	73.33%	90.00%
Washington	24	87.50%	91.66%	95.83%
West Virginia	17	70.58%	76.47%	82.35%
Wisconsin	17	100.00%	82.35%	100.00%
Wyoming	15	86.66%	86.66%	100.00%
NATIONAL	1,311	83.78%	75.45%	92.56%

OPEN HOUSE RACES COMPARED TO RACES WITH INCUMBENTS

When no incumbent is running in a particular legislative district, the seat is considered "open." Such open seats typically draw more candidates, because there is no incumbent to defeat.

In 2002, 37 percent of the House and Assembly seats in the Institute's study were open, while 63 percent had an incumbent seeking re-election. In the Senate, 43 percent of the races were open. In those open seats, the fund-raising advantage was less significant for winners than it was in races where an incumbent was running, as shown in the table below.

WINNING ADVANTAGES BY TYPE OF RACE, 2002 ELECTION CYCLE

LEGISLATIVE CHAMBER	TYPE OF RACE	# OF SEATS	MOST MONEY	INCUMBENT	ONE/BOTH ADVANTAGE
House/Assembly	Open	1,755	76.1%	Not Applicable	Not Applicable
	Incumbent	2,933	90.3%	93.1%	97.0%
Senate	Open	561	74.3%	Not Applicable	Not Applicable
	Incumbent	750	88.4%	91.9%	97.1%

When the incumbency factor is removed, as seen in the open races, the percentage of big-money winners drops. This is due in part to the related increase in candidates running. In addition, candidates in an open race often do not have the name recognition and the money-raising apparatus in place that incumbents do. Many races featuring an incumbent go uncontested; in these races with only one candidate, that candidate is considered the big-money winner. However, even with the increased competition in the open races, a significant majority of the winners of the open races are those who raised the most money.

When an incumbent ran in 2002, the percentage of winners who raised the most money shot up to 90.3 percent in the House and 88.4 percent in the Senate, higher than in the open races only and higher than the 2002 House and Senate national averages of all types of races. This indicates that fundraising is a huge factor in these races. It is also indicative of the reality that often, these races have no challenger.