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# Meager Returns for the Democrats' Biggest Donor

By CORAL DAVENPORT NOV. 6, 2014

WASHINGTON — In the last days before the midterm elections, Tom Steyer, the billionaire environmentalist who spent at least \$57 million of his own money to influence Tuesday's outcome — more than any other single donor — set off on a frenetic get-out-the-vote tour to Colorado, Iowa and finally New Hampshire. There, he told business owners in Portsmouth that climate change is an economic issue, thanked college students in Durham for knocking on doors, and gave a pep talk to canvassers in Dover before they fanned out to collect voter data on their smartphones.

After all that, Mr. Steyer appears to have largely wasted his time and money.

Most of his candidates lost, even though Mr. Steyer, his advocacy organization NextGen Climate, and other environmental groups spent a total of about \$85 million — a magnitude greater than they had ever spent in any election year.

“It was a comedy disaster,” said Mike Murphy, a longtime Republican political strategist. “The worst thing that happened to the environment this cycle is the bonfire from Tom Steyer burning \$80 million on a wasted campaign.”

Of the seven Senate and governors' races in which NextGen Climate spent to elect Democrats, only three Democrats won: For the Senate in New Hampshire and Michigan, and in Pennsylvania for governor. The money the group poured into influencing Senate races in Colorado and Iowa and governors' races in Florida and Maine did nothing to stave off the wave of

Republican victories in those states.

The campaign also invested in handful of state-level races in Washington and Oregon, where Mr. Steyer hoped to deliver Democratic-majority legislatures packed with pro-environment liberals. Although votes are still being counted in both places, it appears that the effort in Washington has probably failed.

But Mr. Steyer insists he is undaunted. In a telephone interview on Thursday, he said that his efforts in 2014 were the first plays in a long game, which he hopes will come to fruition in the next election cycle and beyond.

“There was a big Republican wave, and in some places that wave washed over us,” Mr. Steyer said. “We wish that weren’t true. But we put climate on the ballot. We set up an infrastructure. We set ourselves up to go toward 2016 with a lot of assets.”

In short, he said, “I think this was money incredibly well spent.”

Mr. Steyer and his strategists said that their campaigns succeeded in injecting the issue of climate change into the heart of the political debate when it had long been sidelined. In the meantime Mr. Steyer emerged from the 2014 midterms with a much larger national profile, with indications that he himself may be eyeing a future race for governor or senator in California.

Christopher Lehane, Mr. Steyer’s chief political strategist, said that Mr. Steyer’s spending was a down payment on a multiyear strategy aimed at ensuring that climate change stays at the center of the political debate, while creating a new generation of voters who would prioritize climate change.

Mr. Lehane said that his group has created a first-of-its-kind database of 350,000 “climate voters” in vital presidential swing states, and that NextGen strategists plan to maintain constant contact with those voters while expanding their numbers before the 2016 presidential election.

The idea, Mr. Lehane said, is to ensure that those voters elevate the issue of climate change — by asking questions of candidates in town halls, holding demonstrations and ensuring that the issue stays on the radar.

“These are our climate warriors,” Mr. Lehane said. Mr. Steyer said that while his campaign did not elect climate-friendly candidates in Colorado,

Iowa and Florida, he asserted that it increased the visibility of climate change as a topic of political debate. Climate change was never mentioned once in the 2012 presidential debates between President Obama and Mitt Romney, but the issue came up in at least 10 midterm debates.

Environmentalists also point to at least one policy victory emerging from this week. Mr. Steyer's group spent heavily to support the new governor-elect of Pennsylvania, Tom Wolf, who has pledged to link his state with a Northeastern cap-and-trade program, aimed at cutting planet-warming carbon pollution from coal-fired power plants.

"With the change in governor, Pennsylvania is a state where the way is open to curb emissions," said David Doniger, a lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council, an advocacy group. "In this state, someone who was against this was replaced by someone who wants to move forward."

Mr. Steyer also appears to have used his national climate change campaign as a testing ground for his own political aspirations. Throughout the campaign, he has been featured in national magazines and newspapers, including this one, and frequently interviewed on television, nearly always in his signature red plaid tie. Like a political candidate, he has an advance team of staff members who work with him on the campaign trail — mostly in presidential swing states — as he holds living room chats, rallies young supporters and speaks to crowds. Over haddock chowder at Harvey's cafe in Dover last week, Mr. Steyer did not dismiss the idea that he is planning a run for elective office.

"If it would help the movement, I'd consider it," he said.

But critics say his own high profile may have hurt the efforts of his campaign.

"It looked like a vanity project," said John Feehery, another Republican strategist. "Instead of moving the needle, it was about getting his own name recognition. It ended up being all about him."

Just as liberal groups run ads linking candidates to Charles G. and David H. Koch, the billionaire brothers, and their opposition to climate change policy, conservative groups have now started to run ads targeting candidates'

ties to Mr. Steyer and his money. By politicizing the issue of climate change, some strategists say, Mr. Steyer may have raised his own profile and also made it more difficult for lawmakers to reach bipartisan consensus on the issue.

“The most important thing is to normalize this issue with Republicans,” said Mark Mellman, a Democratic strategist. “Anything that makes it more partisan makes it less likely that there will be legislation, until such time as Democrats take over the world. Which according to my watch, will not be happening anytime soon.”

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