

## Illinois Primary Election Recap

### Outside Money Flooded the Field, but Local Politics Still Carried the Day

Illinois' 2026 primary made two things clear at once. First, the state has become a major proving ground for national outside spending. Congressional and legislative races drew heavy involvement from groups tied to pro-Israel advocacy, cryptocurrency, artificial intelligence, gaming, labor, and other organized interests. Second, that money still ran into the hard realities of Illinois politics: local organization, endorsements, district fit, and existing party power still mattered a great deal. In race after race, outside spending shaped the battlefield without fully controlling the outcome.

At the federal level, establishment and institutionally aligned candidates generally held their ground despite a flood of national PAC money. In state legislative races, by contrast, several challengers broke through against incumbents or better-funded rivals. The result is a political landscape that remains broadly stable, but clearly energized, heading into November.

### Pritzker's Strength Defined the Night

The biggest statewide takeaway was the continued strength of Gov. JB Pritzker's political operation. Lt. Gov. Juliana Stratton defeated Raja Krishnamoorthi in the Democratic Senate primary by roughly 473,000 votes to 392,000 votes, a margin of 40% to 33%, with Robin Kelly a distant third at about 18%. Stratton dominated in Chicago and downstate, and the result was widely seen as a major demonstration of Pritzker's political power.

That same story played out down-ballot as well. Pritzker's preferred comptroller candidate, Margaret Croke, emerged from election night in front, reinforcing the broader sense that his operation did not just win the marquee Senate race; it also continued to shape the party's statewide bench. As one of the election-night themes, Pritzker's dominance was not just about money, but about the combination of money, institutional support, timing, and message discipline.

On the Republican side, former state Sen. Darren Bailey won the GOP nomination for Governor by about 300,000 votes to 161,000 votes, or 54% to 29%, setting up a rematch with Pritzker.

### Comptroller: A Proxy Fight Within the Democratic Establishment

The Democratic comptroller primary offered another clear example of how power was organized on election night. As of late election-night reporting, Rep. Margaret Croke was leading Sen. Karina Villa by 25,529 votes, or 2.4 percentage points, according to the AP. Croke was widely viewed as Gov. Pritzker's preferred candidate, while Villa had the backing of Senate President Don Harmon's orbit, making the contest a useful window into competing power centers within the Democratic Party.

Croke entered the race with substantial resources. She started the year with about \$833,000 on hand, raised another \$1.1 million, and also benefited from \$1.35 million in outside spending from the Michael Sacks-backed Common Ground Collective. Villa raised enough to remain competitive, but the early result reinforced the broader lesson of the night: Pritzker-backed candidates had a very good evening.

The race also mattered because both candidates represented different lanes inside the party. Croke came out of the House and Chicago political world, while Villa, a midterm state senator from West Chicago, represented another branch of Democratic leadership. That made the contest more than a standard down-ballot primary; it became another measure of who currently has the stronger hand in statewide Democratic politics.

## **Congressional Races: Big Spending, Mixed Results**

### **2nd Congressional District**

Donna Miller won the Democratic primary in the 2nd Congressional District with about 40% of the vote in a crowded ten-person race. She defeated Jesse Jackson Jr., Robert Peters, and Willie Preston. Miller benefited from significant outside support, including AIPAC-aligned spending, but also ran what observers described as a strong campaign of her own.

### **7th Congressional District**

State Rep. La Shawn Ford won the Democratic nomination in the open 7th Congressional District, succeeding retiring Congressman Danny Davis. Ford defeated Melissa Conyears-Ervin by roughly 24% to 20.5% despite being dramatically outspent by crypto-aligned, AIPAC-linked, and other outside groups. He benefited from Davis' endorsement and from the kind of district-level groundwork that independent expenditures cannot easily replicate. Ford also survived negative advertising tied to his past misdemeanor tax plea.

### **8th Congressional District**

Former Rep. Melissa Bean won the Democratic primary in the 8th Congressional District with about 32% of the vote in an eight-person field. Bean benefited from substantial outside support and entered the race with prior federal experience, name recognition, and institutional familiarity. Her main progressive rival, Junaid Ahmed, had support from Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and other progressive officials, but Bean's coalition proved broader and more durable.

### **9th Congressional District**

Evanston Mayor Daniel Biss, a former state senator, won the Democratic primary in the open 9th Congressional District to succeed Jan Schakowsky. He led with roughly 29% to 30% in a 15-candidate field, ahead of Kat Abughazaleh at roughly 25% to 26% and Laura Fine at about 20%.

The race became one of the clearest tests of whether outside spending could reshape a safely Democratic North Side and north suburban district. AIPAC-linked groups spent heavily trying to stop Biss, but he argued the district "understands nuance" on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and explicitly credited J Street after the win. Backed by Schakowsky and

running as an experienced middle-ground candidate, Biss held together enough support to win despite the intensity of the air war.

### **Legislative Races: Early Signs of the Next Springfield Bench**

State legislative primaries were not just side stories. They offered an early look at who may make up the next generation of lawmakers in Springfield — and they showed that outside money, while important, was far from decisive. In several races, incumbents and establishment-backed candidates survived. In others, challengers with sharper local messages and stronger grassroots operations broke through.

### **Rep. Andrade's Defeat Was One of the Night's Biggest Legislative Stories**

One of the most consequential outcomes came in the 40th House District, where longtime incumbent Jaime Andrade lost decisively to Miguel Alvelo-Rivera. With about 90% of the vote counted late Tuesday, Alvelo-Rivera led by around 8,000 votes to around 6,400 votes, a 56% to 44% margin.

The result was striking because Andrade had major institutional backing and more than \$840,000 in outside help. But Alvelo-Rivera had significant resources of his own, Chicago Teachers Union support, and a strong field campaign. Andrade also had real strengths: before joining the House, he served in senior ward and City Council staff roles, giving him an unusually practical understanding of how city services work. He was widely known for hands-on constituent service. Even so, that reputation was not enough to overcome the district's appetite for change.

### **Other Notable Legislative Results**

Shantel Franklin, a former legislative liaison to Attorney General Kwame Raoul, won the open 8th House District with 46% to 26% over her nearest rival. She had Raoul's support, support from South Side and suburban political figures, and more than \$400,000 in combined help from DraftKings and the Illinois Realtors.

Paul Kendrick won the open 12th House District with 48% to 23% over his nearest challenger. He had establishment backing, including Margaret Croke's endorsement, and benefited from Meta spending and opposition spending against a CTU-backed rival.

Demi Palecek won the open 13th House District with 42%, ahead of James O'Brien at 28%. Adam Braun finished fourth out of five candidates despite heavy support from DraftKings and Meta. Braun had previously served as a deputy attorney general and later as DraftKings' Statehouse lobbyist, making his defeat a particularly notable setback for industry-backed spending.

Cleopatra Cowley won the open 34th House District by 59% to 41% over Aja Kearney. Saba Haider won the open 84th House District by 63% to 37% over Jared Ploger. Maria Peterson won the Democratic nomination in the 52nd House District by 65% to 35%, setting up a rematch with Marty McLaughlin. Patrick Hanley won the 9th Senate District Democratic primary by 51.6% to 48.4% over Rachel Ruttenberg. Danielle Penman won the GOP primary in the 33rd Senate District by 59% to 41%.

A number of incumbents and leadership-backed candidates also held on. Sara Feigenholtz, Emil Jones III, Tony McCombie, Charlie Meier, and Dave Severin all survived their primaries. But Norine Hammond's loss to a Freedom Caucus-backed challenger showed that even leadership, money, and institutional support are not always enough.

### **AIPAC, Crypto, AI, and Gaming: The Outside Money Story**

Outside spending in the four major Chicago-area Democratic congressional primaries reached extraordinary levels. By mid-March, super PACs had reported spending more than \$31.4 million across those races, with the biggest money coming from pro-Israel, crypto, and AI interests. At the state level, gaming interests, especially DraftKings-backed spending, also emerged as a major force in targeted legislative primaries.

#### **Pro-Israel Spending**

Groups tied to AIPAC and allied entities spent more than \$20 million in Illinois congressional primaries, including nearly \$5 million for Melissa Conyears-Ervin in the 7th, nearly \$6 million for Laura Fine in the 9th, and about \$4 million for Melissa Bean in the 8th. The results were mixed. Donna Miller and Melissa Bean won, but heavily backed candidates in the 7th and 9th still lost.

#### **Cryptocurrency Spending**

The cryptocurrency industry's main political group, Fairshake, spent more than \$13 million in Illinois primaries. About \$10 million was used to oppose Juliana Stratton in the Senate race, while the rest targeted Robert Peters in the 2nd District and La Shawn Ford in the 7th. The results were poor for crypto's preferred outcomes: Stratton still won statewide, Ford still won the 7th, and Peters lost.

#### **Artificial Intelligence Spending**

Artificial intelligence interests also played a meaningful role. Think Big, an affiliate of Leading the Future, the AI industry's main political group, spent more than \$2.5 million in Illinois races. It focused on two former members of Congress seeking to return to Washington: about \$1.4 million went to Jesse Jackson Jr. in the 2nd Congressional District, while the remainder went to Melissa Bean in the 8th. That produced mixed results. Bean won, while Jackson did not.

#### **Gaming and DraftKings Spending**

For gaming-focused observers, the most notable state-level story was the aggressive role played by DraftKings-backed spending through American Future in legislative primaries. DraftKings spent at least \$250,000 each on five races and lost three of them, while winning two. It spent less than \$100,000 on four additional races, and all four of those candidates won. Total reported spending was about \$2.9 million.

DraftKings notched some real wins. It helped Shantel Franklin in the open 8th House District, helped Saba Haider win the 84th House District, and backed Emil Jones III, who won his race by a 38-point margin after DraftKings spent about \$597,000 for him and against Ahmed Karrar. In the 13th House District, DraftKings failed to elect its preferred candidate, but its opposition spending appears to have helped stop James O'Brien from winning.

But the losses were just as telling. Adam Braun lost badly in the 13th House District despite major support from DraftKings and Meta. Jaime Andrade lost in the 40th House District despite substantial outside help. Aja Kearney lost in the 34th House District despite heavy backing. In short, DraftKings proved it could matter, but not that it could dictate outcomes.

Gaming interests also kept one foot in the traditional political system. The Sports Betting Alliance, which includes DraftKings, gave about \$345,000 directly to legislative candidates and leadership this cycle, including \$250,000 to House Speaker Welch and Senate President Harmon. That matters because it shows the industry was preserving conventional relationships while also testing a more aggressive outside-spending model.

### What It Means

The practical lesson from Illinois' primary is that the state is increasingly functioning as a testing ground for national policy and industry fights. Gaming, crypto, AI, taxation, and business regulation are no longer in the background. They are now directly influencing candidate recruitment, campaign spending, and the makeup of the political bench.

At the same time, the results offered a caution to outside spenders. Illinois remains a state where endorsements, labor support, field operations, ethnic and geographic alliances, and candidate quality still matter. Money can amplify a message and sharpen a contrast, but it still has to align with local political realities to be truly effective.

The overall picture heading into the November general election is one of stability, but also clear political energy. Outside money will remain a major force. Local organizing will remain indispensable. And Pritzker's influence will continue to shape the Democratic side of the map. That combination is likely to define the next phase of Illinois politics.

Race	Winner	Result	Runner-up / Key Note
U.S. Senate (Dem)	Juliana Stratton	40%	Raja Krishnamoorthi 33%; Robin Kelly 18%
Governor (GOP)	Darren Bailey	54%	Ted Dabrowski 29%
Comptroller (Dem)	Margaret Croke*	Led by 25,529 votes	Ahead of Karina Villa by 2.4 points
U.S. House 2nd District (Dem)	Donna Miller	40%	Defeated Jesse Jackson Jr., Robert Peters, Willie Preston, and others in a 10-person field
U.S. House 7th District (Dem)	La Shawn Ford	~24%	Melissa Conyears-Ervin ~20.5%
U.S. House 8th District (Dem)	Melissa Bean	32%	Won 8-person field; Junaid Ahmed was top progressive rival
U.S. House 9th District (Dem)	Daniel Biss	~29%–30%	Kat Abughazaleh ~25%–26%; Laura Fine ~20%. This was a 15-person race
House District 8 (Dem)	Shantel Franklin	46%	Nearest rival 26% in 4-way race

<b>Race</b>	<b>Winner</b>	<b>Result</b>	<b>Runner-up / Key Note</b>
House District 12 (Dem)	Paul Kendrick	48%	Nearest challenger 23%
House District 13 (Dem)	Demi Palecek	42%	James O'Brien 28%; Adam Braun finished fourth
House District 34 (Dem)	Cleopatra Cowley	59%	Aja Kearney 41%
House District 40 (Dem)	Miguel Alvelo-Rivera	56%	Jaime Andrade 44%
House District 52 (Dem)	Maria Peterson	65%	Erin Chan Ding 35%
House District 84 (Dem)	Saba Haider	63%	Jared Ploger 37%
Senate District 9 (Dem)	Patrick Hanley	51.6%	Rachel Ruttenberg 48.4%
Senate District 33 (GOP)	Danielle Penman	59%	Jessica Breugelmans 41%
Norine Hammond primary	Joshua Higgins	Won by ~25 points	Major upset over Hammond
House GOP Leader primary	Tony McCombie	Won	Held seat
Rep. Charlie Meier primary	Charlie Meier	Won by ~24 points	Defeated far-right challenger
Rep. Dave Severin primary	Dave Severin	Won by ~40 points	Defeated far-right challenger
Senate District 59 (GOP)	Paul Jacobs	73%	Stephen Vercellino 27%
House District 118 (GOP)	Scott Doody	Won by ~16 points	Beat Harold Visser in 3-way race
House District 76 (GOP)	Liz Bishop	60%	Crystal Loughran 40%