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Dems hope voters won't soon forget vouchers

Utah County GOP's split with constituents over the education issue could cost it some seats

By Donald W. Meyers
The Salt Lake Tribune
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Posted: 6:58 PM- November's vote may have been a stunning defeat for school-voucher supporters, but Democrat Richard Davis sees it as a sign of hope.

Davis, chairman of the Utah County Democratic Party, said the election could spur voters there to break the GOP's monopoly on local politics.

"We think it is going to happen because of the actions of the Republican Legislature - and people have long memories about what's important to them," Davis said.

But some Utah County politicians believe the Dem is whistling Dixie.

"Voting for someone over one issue is not a wise vote," said Orem Rep. Lorie D. Fowlke, one of the pro-voucher Republicans targeted by Democrats.

Utah County is considered one of the state's great GOP bastions - the reddest in a red state. The most-recent

Democrats in the Utah County legislative delegation - Sen. Eldon Money and Rep. Tim Moran - left office in 1996.

And while Senate Minority Leader Mike Dmitrich represents a tiny part of the county, he is a Democrat from the Carbon County city of Price.

And until now, Utah County Democrats have found it tough to run a full slate.

"The voters have said again and again in polls that they were not in favor of vouchers, yet the Legislature passed it anyway," said Davis, who teaches political science at Brigham Young University.

Ultimately, 62 percent of statewide voters rejected vouchers. In Utah County, the margin was slightly narrower with some 53 percent rejecting them.

"We're finding [Democrats who] people want to vote for," Davis said.

So far, three have filed to challenge Utah County Republicans. Former Highland City Councilwoman Gwyn Franson, who once considered herself an independent Republican, is challenging Rep. John Dougall. Former Alpine School Superintendent Steve Baugh is opposing Rep. Stephen Sandstrom.

And on Thursday, former Weber State University President Paul Thompson announced he will go against Fowlke.

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"My district voted against vouchers, but our representative supported it," said Thompson, a Democrat for more than 30

Up for re-election

Among Utah County lawmakers Sen. Mike Dmitrich is the lone Democrat up for re-election this year:

- + Senate President John Valentine, Orem
- + Senate Majority Leader Curtis Bramble, Provo
- + Senate Minority Leader Mike Dmitrich, Price (includes part of Utah County)
- + Sen. Mark Madsen, Eagle Mountain
- + Rep. John Dougall, Highland
- + Rep. Kenneth W. Sumsion, American Fork

- + Rep. Craig Frank, Pleasant Grove
- + Rep. Stephen Sandstrom, Orem
- + Rep. Lorie Fowlke, Orem
- + Rep. Bradley Daw, Orem
- + Rep. Keith Grover, Provo
- + Rep. Christopher Herrod, Provo
- + Rep. Stephen Clark, Provo
- + Rep. Rebecca Lockhart, Provo
- + Rep. Aaron Tilton, Springville
- + Rep. Michael Morley, Spanish Fork
- + Rep. Patrick Painter, Nephi

years. While vouchers were a factor in deciding to run, Thompson said he wants to improve public education overall.

But Fowlke said she's not worried.

"I don't think this bill has made me

vulnerable," Fowlke said. "I made my reasons why I supported this bill known to my district."

Vouchers, Fowlke said, did not appear to harm public school systems.

Sandstrom, who represents a district where vouchers passed, said he isn't worried.

"[For Democrats to] say I am not representing my constituents is wrong."

Two years ago, he campaigned as an anti-voucher candidate. He received \$4,700 from the Utah Education Association, which mobilized volunteers to campaign on his behalf. But Sandstrom said he never flip-flopped from that position, saying he would only oppose vouchers that appeared to harm public education.

Baugh, his challenger, said he campaigned for Sandstrom two years ago because Sandstrom opposed vouchers. He considers Sandstrom's reversal an about-face.

Franson, the former Republican, said vouchers played a small role in her deciding to run for office. But mostly, she doesn't like where Utah County Republicans are heading.

"We are straying very far to the right, and the people who are more mainstream are not being represented," Franson said.

Then, she was approached by Utah

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County Democrats. She found that she agreed with the party's platform and the need to give voters a choice.

Her House district was almost evenly divided on the voucher issue, so she anticipates some people will vote for her because of her opponent's support for vouchers.

But whether vouchers become a litmus test for many incumbents, the University of Utah's Kirk Jowers said that issue might only affect races where moderate and independent voters hold sway.

"It will be one of many factors," said the director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics at the U.

"A huge part is how gerrymandered the district is," Jowers said, pointing out that a district designed to protect a Republican may not be influenced as much.

And, he believes, the presidential race will have a greater effect on local races than the voucher referendum.

A presidential candidate's coattails can sweep local candidates into - or out of - office.

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