

Deseret News

Donors: Big firms are generous to incumbents

Copyright 2008 Deseret News

By Bob Bernick Jr. and Lee Davidson
Deseret News

Published: April 25, 2008

If you want a good example of how Utah legislators raise their campaign cash from special-interest groups and lobbyists, look no further than a Salt Lake City Democratic Senate race and a number of GOP legislative contests in Utah County.

Sen. Fred Fife, D-Salt Lake, got all his campaign money this year from special interests, while his intra-party challenger, Luz Robles, got little.

The pair face off this Saturday in the Salt Lake County Democratic Convention for the Senate District 1 seat, held by Fife for the past four years.

Other tough intra-party fights will take place Saturday when the Utah County Republican Party meets in its convention.

A computer-aided search of those candidates by the Deseret News shows GOP Utah County incumbents on average got \$4,984 so far this year from special interests, while the GOP candidates challenging those incumbents got, on average, only \$267 from special interests.

"Special interests always want to give to a winner," says Kirk Jowers, head of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics. "And incumbents are proven winners. In Utah, particularly, where corporate giving is allowed, that is the lowest-hanging fruit for incumbents. So they take that easy money instead of working harder to raise money from individuals and constituents. Challengers can't get the special-interest money, so they have to go to individuals."

Fife, a former Utah House member, raised \$1,850 for his convention battle that involves around 90 delegates — all the money from special-interest groups that regularly have dealings with the Legislature. Fife raised no money from constituents and donated \$850 himself to his race.

Robles, on the other hand, raised \$28,900, much of that coming in hundreds of small, individual donations from \$5 to \$20. Many of Robles' donors are Hispanic. There are but a few donations by the corporations and lobbyists that dominate campaign giving to Utah's 104 incumbent part-time legislators. Robles also got several thousand dollars from relatives.

The giving so far in 2008 elections shows lawmakers raising thousands of dollars from special-interest groups while their challengers beat the bushes for small individual donations and/or self-fund their campaigns. As in recent legislative elections, that trend is a hallmark of Utah politics, various studies by the newspaper has shown.

Some incumbents put tens of thousands of their campaign dollars into their own pockets (repaying old campaign loans), or spent big amounts on gifts for others. Some who face challenges that came in part from their support for ill-fated private-school vouchers, defeated last November by voters, are enjoying phone banks and other help from pro-voucher groups now.

And the Utah Republican Party appears to have skirted its own neutrality rules by giving money to some GOP incumbents facing challenges on Saturday. Party leaders gave to three Utah County incumbents in January, prior to the candidate filing deadline. Two of those incumbents ended up with GOP challengers.

Sweets to incumbents

Fife got \$500 from ATK Launch Systems (the old Hercules on the valley's west side); \$500 from Altria, the parent company to tobacco firm Philip Morris; \$350 from EnergySolutions, a Tooele County waste dump; and \$500 from Reagan Outdoor Signs, the state's largest billboard company.

All of those firms routinely help fund incumbent lawmakers' campaigns, giving tens of thousands of dollars over the years. Utah County incumbent Republicans also got money from the same sources.

Fife said he didn't ask those firms for cash.

"I didn't ask anyone for donations — that will come after the convention," he said. "They just sent them. I didn't even send them thank-you notes for those contributions."

Fife said he had enough money left over from his last race, \$3,000, to carry him through the convention. "I wanted to get the confidence of the delegates before I started fundraising."

Legislative action has proven critical to the interests of all of those donors — as has legislative action in the cases of dozens of other firms who have full-time lobbyists at the Utah Legislature. The Legislature is starting on a several-year study of reforming health care in Utah, and a number of incumbent lawmakers are getting significant contributions from drug firms, hospital and doctor groups and others in the health care industry. -->

The newspaper's analysis shows that the 14 Republican legislative incumbents seeking renomination at Saturday's Utah County GOP convention received an average of \$4,984 in early money this year from special-interest groups. In fact, 11 of the 14 received every cent they raised from such special interests (not individuals). All the incumbents received at least 97 percent of their money from special interests.

Meanwhile, the 10 intra-party challengers in races in Utah County received an average of just \$267 each from special interests, which works out to 19 times less. Eight of the 10 challengers received no special-interest money at all. In fact, three challengers reported they weren't able to raise money from any source.

Such special-interest dominance in political giving is not healthy, said Jowers, but it is a fact of life here. Such cash influence in the Utah Legislature limits "perspectives" — both who is being listened to and what issues rise to the top.

"It can have a huge impact on what bills are even available to be heard, much less on what is finally passed," Jowers said.

A look at the race between Senate Majority Leader Curt Bramble, R-Provo, and his two in-party challengers — Jacqueline F. deGaston and James O'Neal — shows an example of the disparity in money and sources.

Bramble reported raising \$23,150 so far this cycle, with \$22,950 coming from special interests (99 percent). O'Neal reported raising \$50 total, all of which he gave to himself. And deGaston reported raising no money.

Among top donors to Bramble were: Utah Soccer, \$2,500 (Bramble gave support to state assistance for a new Real Salt Lake Stadium in Sandy); Tosh, Inc. (parent company of payday lender Check City), \$2,000; the Utah Consumer Lending Association (representing payday lenders), \$1,000; Altria (parent company of tobacco company Philip Morris), \$1,000; and Regence Blue Cross and Blue Shield, \$1,000.

Some of Bramble's spending was interesting. It included paying \$1,000 for cuff links as gifts in the Senate (which may not hurt his chances for re-election to Senate leadership); \$155 on Senate staff gifts; \$3,100 for a trip to Paris in February as part of Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr.'s economic development effort; and \$1,351 to attend a health care convention in Washington in March.

Generous givers

Some special interests gave to virtually all of the incumbents seeking re-election in Utah County. EnergySolutions donated to 13 of the 14 GOP incumbents (all but Rep. John Dougall, R-American Fork). Injury law firm Robert J. Deby & Associates gave to eight; the Utah House Republican Election Committee (a legislative leaders' PAC raising money mostly from special interests) gave to seven;

Siegfried & Jensen gave to six, for example.

The pro-voucher Parents for Choice in Education was offering significant help to four pro-voucher incumbents facing challenges — and was the single-largest donor overall to Utah County incumbents among special interests at \$5,044 total.

Reps. Craig Frank, R-Pleasant Grove; Keith Grover, R-Provo; Christopher Herrod, R-Provo; and Kenneth Sumsion, R-Lehi, reported receiving "in-kind" help from the group, including phone-bank calls.

Expenses reported by incumbents were not always so election oriented.

For example, Sumsion spent \$38 for a High Occupancy Toll lane pass to let him drive in the car-pool lane on the freeway by himself. Frank spent \$239 on "Capitol office furniture." Grover spent \$300 in "dues" to the Legislature's "Third House," which buys special gifts and snacks.

Sometimes special interest donations allowed lawmakers to put money directly into their own pockets. For example, Dougall gave himself \$10,314 to repay an old campaign loan he had made. (He faces no opposition Saturday.) Herrod, who does have opposition, similarly took \$5,000 to repay himself for old loans.

Forms also show that the Utah Republican Party — which by its own rules is supposed to remain neutral in contested elections — donated money to two incumbents who face challenges on Saturday.

The party gave \$200 to Sumsion and \$225 to Rep. Mike Morley, R-Spanish Fork, both made on Jan. 12. That's before the candidate filing deadline, before the men knew for sure that another Republican was seeking their seats. So while the party didn't violate the letter of that rule by giving early, because of the lawmakers' votes on vouchers and other controversial issues, it may have been a good bet that they would have intra-party challengers.

Ever since the 1980s, the Senate GOP PAC has given money to its incumbents before convention and/or primary elections — so in effect that PAC, run by Senate leaders, has given money to incumbents who are challenged by other Republicans.

Earlier this month, House Speaker Greg Curtis, R-Sandy, told his GOP caucus that the House Republican PAC would give money to incumbents who are being challenged within the party — a new policy for House GOP leaders, who used to give money only after the Republican nominees were picked.

House leaders gave Sumsion and Herrod \$1,000 each, while Grover, Frank and Daw each got \$500 — donations that of course GOP legislative leaders did not give to the Republicans who are challenging those incumbents.

E-mail: bbjr@desnews.com; lee@desnews.com

© 2008 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved