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Money makes the incumbent

Hatch is in no real race. But 'you can never have enough money in the D.C. power game,' U. political scientist says

By Matt Canham
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They leave the politicking to Sen. Orrin Hatch, but a small group of businessmen manages just about everything else, from his budget to his public relations.

Welcome to Hatch Inc. - where the lawmaker's bid for a sixth term in the U.S. Senate resembles a corporation as much as a campaign.

And a multimillion-dollar corporation at that.

Since the beginning of 2005, Hatch has spent \$1.7 million in his re-election bid, a great deal of it going to his closest friends, legal consultants and fundraisers.

These advisers make up the backbone of his expansive campaign machinery geared almost exclusively to raising more money, according to a *Salt Lake Tribune* review of campaign disclosure forms.

In a race that few, if any, consider competitive, winning the election seems almost like a sideline.

A poll commissioned by *The Tribune* shows that 61 percent of respondents would vote for Hatch, with only 27 percent favoring Democratic challenger Pete Ashdown, if the election were held today.

Last week, Washington, D.C.-based Mason-Dixon Polling interviewed 625 probable voters. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Ashdown has gained some ground since the last *Tribune* poll. In June, Hatch led Ashdown, 67 percent to 23 percent.

Still, the gap is formidable with just more than two months to Election Day. And for every \$1 Ashdown can spend to persuade voters, Hatch has \$195.

So does Hatch need all that cash? And why does he continue to aggressively raise funds?

Kirk Jowers, the director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics, said the answer is simple: "You can never have enough money in the D.C. power game."

That money is easily obtained as lobbyists and corporations look for incumbents to donate to. And stockpiling that money allows Hatch to scare away serious challengers.

Ashdown understands the senator's motivations, but the ever-growing war chest still infuriates him.

"Somebody told me American politics runs on two things: money, and they couldn't remember the second thing," he said. "That is a bad situation."

The Tribune broke Hatch's spending into broad categories. The biggest chunk of campaign cash went to people he calls "campaign consultants," a wide-ranging group that includes campaign manager Dave Hansen;

"Mr. Mac" suit seller, Mormon Tabernacle Choir president and confidant Mac Christensen; and seven full-time campaign workers.

In the first 18 months of the campaign season, Hatch paid these consultants \$460,000. Hansen, a veteran of state and federal races, earns \$10,000 a month, far more than any other consultant.

But he is just one of four key advisers who work primarily on fund-raising and public appearances, because the Senate staff handles most of the policy work.

Hansen, Christensen, former Hatch chief of staff Stan Parrish and former state Republican Chairman Larry Lunt - all Hatch friends - are the four who manage the business aspects of the campaign.

They work with Salt Lake City-based R & R Partners, spending \$140,000 for everything from campaign T-shirts to prepaid media advertising. They are the ones who work with fundraisers here and in D.C., paying \$175,000 for their contacts and expertise. They are the ones who hired Sen. Bob Bennett's son, Jim Bennett, to manage the Web site for \$2,500 a month.

They plan to spend even more as November gets closer.

State Republican Executive Director Jeff Hartley said a hotly contested senatorial campaign would normally cost about \$2 million in Utah. Hatch will easily surpass that figure in a race that so far lacks intrigue.

Hartley believes Hatch's re-election team raised and spent so much so early as part of a concerted campaign tactic. "You scare everybody out of the race and then you coast down the stretch," said Hartley, who has run campaigns in the past.

The strategy is common among incumbents who enjoy a re-election rate of about 98 percent in Congress. Their staying power has a lot to do with their financial advantages, and Jowers says that is not good for democracy.

"This ability of incumbents to raise and hold so much money just makes the barriers of entry too difficult for anyone to break through," he said. "If you are a challenger, you sweat bullets over every penny."

Ashdown knows all about that. If Hatch's campaign is a major corporation, Ashdown's is a struggling startup. So far, his fundraising efforts have fallen flat. He has spent \$79,000 and only had about \$13,000 left as of the June campaign disclosure filing.

Hartley said Hatch's strength has probably scared off potential donors who don't want to give money to a campaign with little hope.

To keep his bid afloat, Ashdown has begun to use his own money. He spent \$15,000 to expand his staff from two to six and he pledges to spend \$10,000 a month until the end of the campaign.

Ashdown, who owns XMission, an Internet service provider, said he could potentially scrape together \$1 million, if he were willing to tax his business and threaten his family's financial security. No way, he says.

But there is also a third reason he won't plop down a huge chunk of his own money.

"I don't want to buy this race, and I don't think politics should be a game for the rich," he said. "It would be a bad example."

Hatch hasn't put in any of his own money, and he won't. With \$2.5 million in the bank, he doesn't have to.

Still, Hatch says the money he raised is not to buy the race. Rather it is to "answer scurrilous criticism and answer dishonest smears."

Hatch worries that either his opponent or some outside group will attack him in the weeks ahead and he wants some ammunition to fire back.

"You are sometimes unfairly attacked on all sides," he said. "You have to be able to make your positions more clear and that does take money. It is just much more expensive for the incumbent."

Ashdown is in favor of publicly financed campaigns, which would limit incumbents' financial advantages and give each candidate the same ability to reach the people. He said this would spur voters to select the

candidate based on the issues, not the war chest.

It also would limit the number of companies that hound candidates. Ashdown said right after he declared his candidacy he saw the "sharks circling in the water: consultants and firms offering help for \$50,000," he said. "That kind of business riding on the back of American democracy is a little bit distasteful to me."

Those are precisely the types of firms that Hatch has scooped up in his campaign. The senator scoffs at Ashdown's call for publicly financed elections.

"Oh, give me a break," said Hatch, who believes donations show the level of public support for a candidate. "When I ran in 1976, I didn't have any money other than my own."

A winning U.S. Senate race in 1976 cost on average \$609,000. By 2002, that amount had risen to \$4.9 million, according to the Congressional Research Service.

Hatch still downplays the importance of his campaign wealth. "I don't think money necessarily makes the difference," he said. "If the person has the right issues, if the person stands for the right things and is not trying to cover up their real beliefs, they have as good a chance as anyone else."

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