

Lobbyists Reach Deep Into Their Pockets

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Roll Call Staff

Correction Appended

Democrats not only control Capitol Hill and the White House, but they also rule the ranks of K Street's top campaign donors.

Of the 20 contract lobbyists who have given the most in campaign contributions so far this election cycle, just one is a Republican, according to a recent survey by the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics. It's a marked change in just three years. In July 2006, only three of the top donors on K Street were Democrats.

Lobbyists, of course, tend to give money to incumbent Members, and fundraising among Democratic donors has been generally robust.

"Politics so often is about personal relationships," said Dave Levinthal, communications director for the center. "And if a lobbyist is very interested in forming a close personal relationship with a lawmaker, a potentially advantageous way for them to do that is to open up the checkbook or pull out their credit card."

Even so, many lobbyists attend fundraisers on their clients' dime. Lobbyists who give their own personal money say they do it because they believe in the candidates, their party and the political process.

"People like to be with the winners, and individuals give more to incumbents than to challengers and open seats," said lobbyist Daniel Mattoon of Mattoon & Associates, a Republican who has given the vast majority of his more than \$35,000 in contributions to the GOP.

Still, even Mattoon, a former deputy chairman for the National Republican Congressional Committee, will write checks to Democrats including Rep. John Dingell (Mich.) and others on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, a key panel for his lobbying clients. He said he also plans to support his own Congressman, Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-Va.).

"My view is, I've got some great friends on both sides of the aisle," Mattoon said. "As I look at myself as a Congressional Republican, working to help clients get things done, you have to reach across party lines, and I think that you can disagree without being disagreeable."

Democrat Fred Graefe, who runs his own law firm, donates mainly to his own party but has also given money to GOP Sens. Chuck Grassley (Iowa) and Orrin Hatch (Utah). "I give to my friends because I want to see my friends re-elected," said Graefe, an Iowan who has known Grassley for decades.

Most top donor lobbyists, though, take a much more partisan tack when it comes to their own after-tax cash.

Steve Elmendorf, a Democratic lobbyist with his own firm, said, "As a Democrat, it's important to support Democrats." Elmendorf, who comes in at No. 3 on the list, said that it's important to give money early.

"Having worked out there in politics, you show strength early in terms of party committees and incumbents," said Elmendorf, who has given money to Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.), Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Rep. Paul Hodes (D-N.H.), who is running for an open Senate seat. "I only give money to people I actually like and know."

Many lobbyists say the reasons that they give money are hugely misunderstood by the general public.

Andrew Manatos of Manatos & Manatos said he worked as a staffer to Sens. Tom Eagleton (D-Mo.) and Gale McGee (D-Wyo.) in the 1970s, when Congress passed campaign finance reform legislation in response to the Watergate scandal.

"I was one of the Senate staffers that contributed in writing that law," Manatos said. "Everyone is so limited that political contributions no longer buy public policy as they did in the bad old days."

Before those reforms, donors could give virtually unlimited sums to candidates and Members. The maximum amount any individual can donate for the 2010 cycle is \$115,500.

Democratic lobbyist Lawrence O'Brien, who runs the OB-C Group, said he is getting very close to that max-out number already. Though the public disclosures have him as giving nearly \$75,000, O'Brien said his own records show he has actually given more than \$92,000. "There was a flurry of activity in June," he said. "It was insatiable. I'm further along at the end of the second quarter than I thought I'd be."

Though O'Brien has long been a top donor, some lobbyists are relative newcomers to the list.

Take Moses Boyd, who says he has stepped up his giving each cycle. "This is probably the most I've given," said Boyd, a lobbyist with Integrated Solutions Group, who has donated more than \$30,000 to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, according to Federal Election Commission records.

While some firms such as Mehlman Vogel Castagnetti, Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld and the Duberstein Group have more than one lobbyist on the list, only one married couple lands in the top 20. Lobbyists Heather Podesta, who runs Heather Podesta + Partners, and Tony Podesta, founder of the Podesta Group, are both in the top 11.

After finding out that his wife was two slots ahead of him, Tony Podesta quipped, "I'm going to give some more money right now."

Correction: July 10, 2009

A chart accompanying the article, which used information from the Center for Responsive Politics, mistakenly omitted lobbyist Julie Domenick. She contributed \$77,800, all to Democrats, which would have placed her No. 1 on the list.