

In District 40 race, GOP goes after Democratic candidate on donations

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The first finance reports for the Alabama House District 40 seat candidates are filed and the sole Democratic candidate has a large fundraising lead over the five Republicans running in the primary.

The state Republican Party has started talking about the Democratic candidate's large contributions, a sign of the changing political dynamics around the country according to one political science professor.

The Republican candidates will face each other in a Jan. 5 primary election; Ricky Whaley of Jacksonville, the Democratic candidate, has raised \$53,300.

His contributions from education interests and political action committees have been the target of an e-mail from the state Republican Party. The party says he's being bought and paid for by education, gambling and trial lawyer interests.

Whaley, an educator at Jacksonville High School, said he is proud to have the support of educators and said he isn't aware of any gambling or trial lawyer interests that support his campaign.

An e-mail from Philip Bryan, communications director for the Alabama Republican Party, said Whaley has received \$18,250 from an Alabama Education Association lobbyist and \$25,000 from Alabama Voice of Teachers for Education (AVOTE), a political action committee.

Whaley said he was flattered by the early attention and said it's a sign the Republican Party has already knows who will win its primary.

"This is a good sign. Their side is coming after me and they've still got a primary for God's sake," Whaley said, adding later, "I'm not ashamed to take money from teachers, and Goodyear workers and depot workers. I'm not ashamed of that at all. If I'm guilty for representing working class people, so be it."

Whaley added that he wants to run a clean campaign and focus on the issues.

Bryan said the state Republican Party does not get involved in its primary campaigns. He said the party is just giving voters information.

The five Republican candidates had either not filed because they had not reached a \$5,000 threshold for spending and raising money, or had primarily self-financed their campaigns until this point.

Tom Shelton, a Jacksonville pawn shop owner and former legislator, has so far self-financed his run, giving himself \$1,510. He called the e-mail about Whaley, "pretty accurate."

"It's a matter of people finding out about it," Shelton said. "If they like having a controlled candidate down there, they'll send them down there."

He added it was important to have a conservative in the house seat because it is a census year and there will be redistricting for Congress and the Alabama House.

K.L. Brown, a funeral home owner from Jacksonville, said he'd forwarded Bryan's e-mail along to other people. Brown had not raised enough money to be required to file.

When asked if he supported the statements in the e-mail, he said that's a decision best left to the voter.

“When somebody gives somebody over \$50,000, that’s strong as far as I’m concerned,” Brown said.

Jay Dill, a Jacksonville resident who works for his family’s office furniture and steel business, donated \$10,000 to his own campaign, records show. He also received \$1,000 from a political action committee called MPAC, which he said came from his brother-in-law, a lobbyist. When asked who his brother-in-law lobbies for, Dill said he had multiple clients.

He said he had not seen the e-mail about Whaley, but said the AEA is a strong union that can “put a stranglehold” on public education.

Debra Jones, an attorney from White Plains, also had not reached the filing threshold. She said she did not know about Whaley’s fundraising.

Bill Lester, a political science professor at Jacksonville State University and resident of Jacksonville running for the seat, also had not seen the e-mail and had no comment. He filed a waiver showing he had not yet raised any money.

Carol Hagan, who plans to run as an independent, said she was still working on getting enough signatures to run. When asked about Whaley’s fundraising, she said she knew he had to have some money.

“I taught school at one time and teachers don’t make enough money to put all those signs up,” Hagan said.

But why go after Whaley when the Republican ticket isn’t decided?

David Lanoue, chair of the political science department at the University of Alabama, said it’s because Republicans feel this is their year to pick up seats. Whaley’s large campaign war chest is a sign Democrats feel vulnerable this year, Lanoue said.

He said Whaley’s sources of funding are not unusual for a Democratic candidate.

“The Republicans think this is going to be a good year for them,” Lanoue said. “They want to soften up the Democratic candidate. There’s never a bad time to do that.”

The runoff election, if necessary, will be Feb. 16 unless there is no need for one, in which case the general election will be held that day. If there is a runoff, the general election will be held March 30.

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