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Out-of-state money fueling race for governor

By DOUG FINKE (doug.finke@sj-r.com)**THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER**

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State officials may need to review ways to “protect disclosure” in Illinois in the wake of largely untraceable campaign contributions flowing into state campaigns, a leading campaign finance reform group says.

An unprecedented amount of out-of-state money is financing the race for governor, one expert added.

Although much attention has been focused on largely anonymous money flowing into campaigns for federal office, some of the same issues are showing up in races for state offices. It’s raised concerns among groups who want to ensure that the people financing political campaigns are fully disclosed to the public.

“There have been lots and lots of new machinations in terms of reporting or not reporting,” said Cindi Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform. “It’s going to warrant sitting down and reviewing after the election to see if there are ways to protect disclosure.”

Canary did not have suggestions for how that might be carried out.

The ICPR seeks to limit the influence of money in elections. The group played a major role in passage of reforms that place limits on campaign contributions and require greater disclosure. Those reforms don’t go into effect until next year, however.

Several outside groups have been pouring money into congressional campaigns – among them American Crossroads, founded by former Republican White House advisor Karl Rove, and Americans for Prosperity, founded by oil billionaires David and Charles.

Both the National Republican Congressional Committee and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee have paid for ads in the hotly contested congressional race between U.S. Rep. Phil Hare, D-Rock Island and Republican Bobby Schilling.

National groups fund Quinn, Brady

However, outside money also is playing a major role in the Illinois campaign for governor. Newly compiled campaign finance data from Canary’s organization show that since July 1, the two biggest contributors to the major party candidates for governor are the national Democratic and Republican governors’ associations.

Overall, Gov. Pat Quinn and Sen. Bill Brady, R-Bloomington, each raised about \$10.6 million from July 1 to October 23.

For Quinn, the largest part of that, \$1.8 million, came from the Democratic Governors Association, based in Washington, D.C. Brady, meanwhile, got \$4.1 million from the RGA IL 2010 political action committee, which is financed by the Republican Governors’ Association in Washington.

“That’s pretty unprecedented for Illinois to have that huge amount of money coming in from out of state,” said Kent Redfield, political science professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Redfield raised another point.

“The Democratic group discloses (contributors), the Republicans don’t,” he said.

That makes it difficult to determine who is providing the money that ultimately ends up Illinois financing the campaign for governor.

Redfield said the Republican money “reflects an organized effort from the corporate side” to essentially offset the money that labor unions traditionally put into Democratic campaigns.

Steve Brown, spokesman for House Speaker and state Democratic Party chairman Michael Madigan, said outside money in campaigns is usually a reflection of “these artificial limitations that a lot of the reform groups talk about.”

“That ought to be an eye-opener to people who say we should put those artificial limits on,” Brown said. “You just have a lot of candidates exposed to these highly expensive attacks.”

Illinois Republican Party spokesman Wes Bleed said Republicans are merely benefiting from voters upset with Democratic rule.

‘Currency of ideas’

“Campaign donations are important and will always be important, but the real currency in this campaign is the currency of ideas,” Bleed said. “If they (Democrats) want to complain, they’ll find something to complain about, and this is the latest.”

Canary’s group also found that the 2010 election is continuing the pattern of the four legislative leaders providing the bulk of the money used to finance campaigns for the General Assembly.

Of the 20 largest contributors to legislative candidates between July 1 and October 23, five of the top six spots were held by committees under the control of legislative leaders.

The Democratic Party of Illinois led, with \$5.6 million in spending, followed by \$3.4 million from the Senate Democratic Victory Fund, controlled by Senate President John Cullerton, D-Chicago. The Illinois Republican Party held third place with \$1.6 million.

"It certainly contributes to the extreme centralization of the process," Redfield said. "It's clear that the way we finance campaigns and the role of the leaders has increased the centralization of the process."

Accepting donations from leadership committees leaves lawmakers beholden to those leaders, Canary said. In addition, funneling money through leadership committees gives a degree of protection to candidates.

"It's that whole thing of 'I don't take tobacco money' or 'I don't take gambling money,'" Canary said. "But my leader does," Canary said.

Brown disputed that leaders financing campaigns provides insulation for candidates.

"I've ... seen people attacked all of the time because of who their leader is," Brown said.

Doug Finke can be reached at 788-1527.

Major contributors to Illinois campaigns (Read the complete list - pdf)

(July 1-Oct. 23)

RGA IL 2010

\$4.8 million

A political action committee funded by the national Republican Governors Association of Washington, D.C. It is the largest contributor to Sen. Bill Brady's campaign.

STAND FOR CHILDREN IL PAC

\$660,000

Based in Oregon, it describes itself as a grassroots child advocacy organization dedicated to improving public education. It is the eighth-largest contributor to legislative campaigns.

KENNETH AND ANNE DIAS GRIFFIN

\$1.03 million

Both are hedge fund managers. Kenneth Griffin is founder of Citadel Investment Group and Anne Griffin is founder of Aragon Global Management. They are the third-largest contributors to Brady's campaign.

REPUBLICAN RENAISSANCE

\$227,000

Created by conservative activist and one-time Republican candidate for governor Jack Roeser. It is the fifth-largest contributor to Republican legislative candidates from private sources and the 17th-largest among all contributors to legislative candidates in both parties.

TWO PARTY SYSTEM

\$237,308

Describes itself as a non-partisan organization that wants to take back Illinois government from special interests. It is funded largely by Chicago-area businessmen. It is the sixth-largest private contributor to legislative candidates, most of them Republicans.

FRED EYCHANER

\$150,000

Founder of Newsweb Corp., which owns media outlets. Top contributor to Democratic legislative leadership committees.

REPUBLICAN STATE LEADERSHIP COMMITTEE

\$675,000

Based in Virginia, the committee supports the election of Republicans to state legislatures. Top contributor to Republican legislative leadership committees.

Source: Illinois Campaign for Political Reform

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