

Sites reveal donor data for political campaigns

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SANTA FE - It didn't take long for the state Republican Party to snap to the fact that the securities broker implicated in the Robert Vigil corruption trial gave Gov. Bill Richardson thousands in campaign contributions.

And folks at the campaign for Democrat Patricia Madrid didn't have to slog through reams of reports to figure out how much her opponent for Congress got from oil and gas companies.

Thanks to campaign-finance Web sites like that of the Center for Responsive Politics (opensecrets.org) and Political Money Line (politicalmoneyline.com), candidates, voters and reporters in New Mexico and across the country can now discern in moments what once took hours.

"Prior to the Internet, opposition research was often a slow and monotonous effort in the library," said Jonah Cohen, spokesman for the New Mexico Republican Party.

Not anymore.

GOP researchers use sites such as that of the Institute on State Money in Politics (followthemoney.org) and YouTube.com, Cohen said.

The party used such sites to quickly figure out that Guy Riordan gave money to the governor.

According to testimony by former state Treasurer Michael Montoya, Riordan gave thousands to Montoya over several years in exchange for steering him work with the state. Riordan has denied those claims and has never been charged with any wrongdoing.

Richardson and other politicians who received money from Riordan later donated it to charity.

The Republican party also learned within minutes that Wal-Mart was a campaign contributor to Richardson - something it pointed out when Richardson last week visited Iowa and spoke at a town hall organized by anti-Wal-Mart activists.

Over at Madrid for Congress, information from opensecrets.org came in handy in the race against incumbent Heather Wilson, an Albuquerque Republican.

One of Madrid's TV ads mentions that Wilson took almost \$400,000 from the oil and gas industry. The ad cites opensecrets.org.

The same site also lists Madrid as having received \$18,550 from oil and gas.

While the site made it easy for the Madrid campaign to find Wilson's contributions, Madrid campaign spokeswoman Heather Brewer said she hears from from ballot-casters wanting to gather their own information.

"I think what's more important is that we're hearing a lot more from voters who are using the Internet for independent research," she said.

For local and statewide races, New Mexico's Secretary of State Web site isn't searchable by donor. But candidates for the first time this year are required to file online. The office has said it hopes to make the reports searchable in the future.

While campaign-finance sites are gaining popularity, they aren't new.

The Washington, D.C.-based Center for Responsive Politics launched opensecrets.org ten years ago.

"There's been a huge leap forward to put the data out there into the hands of voters," said Sheila Krumholz, the center's acting executive director.

On that site and others, including followthemoney.org, users can search by donor, get industry contribution totals or see an incumbent's career totals. Calculations are crunched and posted by good-government staffers.

Krumholz said the information collected and published on the site isn't just important during election season.

"Every indicator to us is that this is important information to include on stories not just on politics, but on policy," Krumholz said.