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**TEXAS POLITICS**

# Big money, national consultants put governor's race in big leagues

By **David Saleh Rauf and Peggy Fikac** | January 25, 2014 | Updated: January 26, 2014 12:04am

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AUSTIN - As they barrel toward an expected general-election battle for Texas governor, Attorney General Greg Abbott and state Sen. Wendy Davis' campaign machines are armed with an arsenal of nationally known political consultants, digital gurus and fundraisers.

The Lone Star State is set to host one of the most expensive gubernatorial races in the country this year, and the presumptive Republican and Democratic nominees already have spent big to land a web of seasoned operatives tapped into a nexus of prime-time politics.

Some of the marquee figures parachuting into the race include Betsy Hoover, the Obama campaign's former director of digital organizing, who is working with the Davis camp. Meanwhile, Abbott's team has tapped the same firm that led Mitt Romney's digital efforts during his failed 2012 presidential run, a group called Targeted Victory.

For Texas voters, it means both sides are set to wage the most sophisticated digital campaigns ever seen in the state - cutting-edge data analytics to track voter behavior and online fundraising tools battle-tested during the presidential election.

Some of that is already playing out. The more than 70,000 mostly-small-dollar individual contributors who fueled Davis' massive campaign haul in the last six months of the year is unprecedented in Texas and largely due to the online fundraising techniques that did so much for President Barack Obama.

All the money being poured in to big-name consultants is testament to the notion that for the first time in two decades, Texas is expected to host a competitive governor's race, one with political consequences for future fights over the White House if Democrats reach their goal to ease the GOP grip on the state.

And as a state with no limits on the amount individuals can contribute, the Texas race also is ripe for political talent that

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demands top dollar. Abbott is already sitting on \$27 million, Davis has about \$9.5 million in the bank, and each is expected to raise tens of millions of dollars more between now and November.

"Money attracts consultants like honey attracts bees," said Mark McKinnon, an Austin-based GOP consultant, who has advised George W. Bush and U.S. Sen. John McCain's presidential campaigns, along with Ann Richards' 1990 gubernatorial efforts. "Texas has a lot of political talent, but if you have enough money, why not cast a wider net to get the very best and brightest in the country?"

### *The big guns*

Like coaches responsible for calling plays, political operatives at this level are in charge of almost every aspect of campaign strategy, from selling and managing a candidate to tailoring the message.

They raise money, shape strategy and dig dirt to sully an opponent's brand. In short: they're the brain trust behind the curtain that can make or break a campaign.

And while the political players and firms engaged generally stay behind the scenes, details about who's getting paid to pull levers on both sides of the Texas race emerge via campaign finance records.

Spending totals released this month also give a glimpse into the Davis campaign apparatus, an operation using many of the same folks who wrote the Obama campaign playbook. Obama broke campaign financing records in 2008 and again in 2012, raising more than \$1 billion in the most recent race to win toss-up states that put him over the top.

So far, the Davis campaign has spent more than \$564,000 on political operatives, mostly since she announced in October, according to campaign finance reports.

That includes payments to a firm co-founded by one of the most prolific Obama fundraisers, Juliana Smoot; expenditures for a Washington D.C.-based digital consulting team that works with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid; and a six-figure sum doled out to a polling unit founded by a former Bill Clinton campaign adviser.

On the other side, Abbott's campaign tapped Targeted Victory to help ramp up its digital efforts, including growing the campaign's email list and launching new social media initiatives. The firm helped spearhead the most aggressive GOP digital campaign in the party's history during Romney's latest run, but its reputation nationally still is largely associated with the Republican Party's 2012 election-night spanking delivered by Obama's campaign techies.

Zac Moffat, the lead Romney digital strategist largely blamed for failing to match the Obama campaign's digital savvy, is not on Abbott's account, which has paid Targeted Victory almost \$525,000 over the last year.

Along with Romney's digital team, **Abbott also has hired a firm founded by one of California's most prominent Republican opposition research strategists, Mark Bogetich, whose resume includes working with Arnold Schwarzenegger and Meg Whitman. The firm has an Austin office.**

In all, the Abbott campaign spent roughly \$1.9 million on political consultants and operatives during the final months of 2013. That's more than twice as much as the roughly \$750,000 spent on consultants in the first half of the year, state records show.

### *Texas roots*

Despite the nationally recognized firepower, the two campaigns still maintain their consultant base is rooted in Lone Star sophistication.

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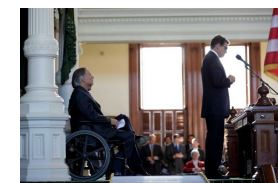
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As an example, the Davis camp points to AMM Political Strategies LLC, a firm run by J.D. Angle, a senior Davis campaign adviser, who has worked with the state senator since her days running for Fort Worth City Council. Davis' campaign paid Angle's consulting company about \$180,000 during the final six months of 2013.

"All the firms we've hired have Texas experience, and the experience of doing numerous high-level races," said Davis campaign spokesman Bo Delp.

The outside influence, however, is undeniable.

While it's not uncommon for high-profile governor's races around the country to attract national consultants, gubernatorial campaigns in Texas over the last decade have been dominated by firms and advisors hailing almost exclusively from the Lone Star State.

The Ann Richards and George W. Bush showdown of 1994 might be the last time a Texas governor's race attracted this much national hype, attention from such a large base of donors and a nationwide network of consultants.

"They've got money here, and it's going to be a marquee race with national and future implications," said Richard Murray, a political scientist at the University of Houston. "There's a lot of talent out there available but outside of a spirited Republican primary there's been no reason for consultants like this to be in demand in Texas. The dynamics are vastly different this time."

All the money being spent by both sides is viewed as a wise investment given how high the stakes are and how nasty the campaigns are expected to get.

"Having some of the best minds in politics sitting around your conference table is only going to help," said Jennifer Duffy, who analyzes statewide races for the nonpartisan Cook Political Report. "If you took all of these firms that have been hired and add up the number of races they've won, it would be a pretty impressive number."



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