

Trojan Horses: Dems say 'sham' Green candidates could siphon votes in key races

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A slate of Green Party write-in candidates, whom the Arizona Democratic Party accuses of being Republican plants, could siphon off Democratic votes and resources in some of the state's most competitive legislative races.

It's happened before: Just ask former Democratic lawmaker Jackie Thrasher, who lost her 2008 House race by fewer than 600 votes after a Green Party candidate with close Republican ties tapped votes from her base and cleared the path for a GOP victory.

The Democratic Party filed complaints with the Maricopa County Attorney's Office, Arizona Attorney General's Office and U.S. Attorney's Office on Aug. 30, alleging that Republicans violated election laws by recruiting Trojan horse, or "sham," candidates.

In Legislative Districts 10, 17 and 20, Republicans hope to take away Democratic seats or fend off serious challengers, and if Green Party candidates take more than a few hundred votes from the Democratic candidates, it could help the GOP increase its majority in the House and Senate.

Democrats are optimistic that Justin Johnson can wrest the District 10 Senate seat from Republican incumbent Linda Gray. In District 17, they hope to maintain control of the entire legislative delegation with Rep. Ed Ableser and Tempe institution Ben Arredondo in the House race and Rep. David Schapira in the Senate.

And in District 20, Democratic Rep. Rae Waters must convince a predominantly Republican electorate to send her back to the House.

But in each of those races, write-in Green Party candidates threaten to peel away votes from Democrats.

Christopher Campbell won the Green Party's nomination for the District 10 Senate race with just one write-in vote, as did Drew Blischak in the District 20 House race. In District 17, Anthony "Grandpa" Goshorn — who tried to get on the ballot in May as a Green Party candidate but withdrew after his signatures were challenged — won the party's nomination for the Senate race with just four write-in votes, and Clint Clement will run for a House seat in the district after getting two write-in votes.

Goshorn said he re-registered under the Green Party in May because he read the party's platform and saw that it mirrored his own political views. He said he was not recruited by anyone and is not running to take votes away from Democrats.

"I think they're reaching at straws," Goshorn said of the Democrats' complaint.

Other Green Party write-in candidates who were named in the complaint did not return calls or e-mails seeking comment.

The Arizona Green Party said the 13 candidates included in the Democrats' complaint are not officially endorsed by the party. In fact, the party said it is opposing the candidates and urged people not to vote for them.

Mario Diaz, a Democratic consultant, said he believes left-leaning voters will shy away from the write-in candidates, but only if the Arizona Democratic Party and the individual candidates spend the time and resources to educate them about the situation.

"So, unfortunately, resources will have to be spent in educating voters about the lack of qualifications of third party candidates in that district," Diaz said. "History must not repeat

itself.”

District 10

Diaz said he isn’t convinced that Green Party candidates will have the same impact in those three districts that Margarite Dale had in 2008 in House District 10. But Dale, whom Democrats alleged was recruited by Republican Rep. Jim Weiers, garnered 2,358 votes as a Green Party candidate, while Thrasher lost by a mere 553, paving the way for a victory by Republican Doug Quelland.

The history of that race provides enough of a cautionary example to worry Democrats this election cycle.

Campbell, the Green Party candidate in the district, could help Republicans.

“There are two Senate seats that observers believe are in play in the Senate Republican caucus. One is District 10,” said GOP lobbyist Stan Barnes. “I don’t think it’s a stretch to say every vote is going to matter, and any votes that splinter to third parties are going to do damage to the major party candidates.”

Johnson, the son of former Phoenix Mayor Paul Johnson, has raised \$105,000 against the publicly funded Gray, who is limited to \$21,479 in Clean Elections money, and the GOP has a relatively small voter registration advantage.

Johnson said he expects a competitive race, but is aware that Campbell could have the same impact this year that Dale had on Thrasher.

“As we’ve seen in 2008 ... it absolutely can do damage to any campaign,” Johnson said.

Gray, however, said there’s an important difference between Dale and Campbell, and that applies to most of the other Green Party write-in candidates as well. Dale qualified for Clean Elections funding, whereas nearly all of the Green Party write-in candidates this year are limited to spending \$500 on their campaigns.

“Margarite Dale had money,” Gray said.

District 17

Greens could take enough votes in District 17 to help throw one of the House seats to Republicans, lobbyist Barnes said. He said he believes incumbent Rep. Ed Ableser is the more vulnerable of the Democrats’ two House candidates in the district.

“It could be a factor because there is a small but important percentage of the voting electorate in District 17 that is aggressively liberal in philosophy. When that voter shows up at the polls, that voter is going to vote with his heart and not his head,” Barnes said.

Schapira, who is running to replace retiring Democratic Sen. Meg Burton Cahill in the district, said he isn’t worried about Goshorn’s impact on his race. District 17 is significantly more favorable for Democrats than District 10, he said.

Still, he called the alleged Green scheme a dirty tactic.

“I hope District 17 voters ... know it’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing,” Schapira said.

District 20

With Republicans holding a voter-registration advantage of more than 9,000 in District 20, Waters might have more to worry about than most of her colleagues.

The first-term Democrat won by fewer than 1,000 votes in 2008, and if Blischak has the kind of success that other Greens had in the last election, it could make Waters’ legislative career a short one.

“Representative Waters needs all the votes she can muster to overcome her registration disadvantage. And anything that cuts counter to that is not helpful for her re-election,” Barnes said.

The Complaint

The Arizona Democratic Party alleges that Weiers, former Republican Rep. Steve May — a write-in candidate for District 17 House — and others violated state and federal election laws by recruiting candidates to change their voter registration and run as Greens.

Attorney Rhonda Barnes, who filed the complaint on behalf of the Democratic Party, alleged that the Republicans who recruited the write-in candidates may have violated laws barring people from fixing elections or defrauding voters.

Most of the 13 write-in candidates changed their voter registration to Green Party shortly before filing to run for office, and within a few days of each other. Attorney Barnes wrote that Campbell is a roommate of Weiers’ daughter, and the complaint included a recording in which she claims Campbell acknowledged that his chances of winning were “one in a million,” but that just having his name on the ballot would help Gray by taking votes away from Johnson.

Weiers said Campbell lives in the same home as his son and daughter, and that he knows Gail Ginger — another of the Green write-in candidates named in the complaint — because she is a constituent. Weiers said he spoke with Campbell about his campaign, but that he did not recruit Campbell or anyone else to run as a Green candidate.

“This is a red herring,” the former House speaker said. “I don’t know where (the Democrats) get these crazy ideas.”

Mark Bolton, an attorney with the firm Fennemore Craig who has significant experience in election law, said Democrats’ claims are speculative, at best. Legally, he said, it doesn’t matter what motivates someone to run for office as long as they meet the criteria for getting on the ballot.

“There has to be some sort of indication that there was a fraud committed,” Bolton said.

May acknowledged that he helped four of the write-ins — Goshorn, treasurer candidate Thomas Meadows, and Corporation Commission candidates Theodore Gomez and Benjamin Percy — get on the ballot, but said he was only trying to help out his friends and denies that he was trying to take votes away from Democrats.

“Their claims are false, absolutely false, and I know it,” May said. “It’s not about working with Green Party candidates. It’s about working with my friends.”

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