

Foes criticize Cannon over use of staffers

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PROVO — The axiom is old, tried and truer than ever. Win election to the U.S. House of Representatives and your re-election campaign begins at the same time as your two-year term.

The incumbent pressure created by that short cycle has produced a political system where congressional staffers also work on campaigns. Ethics rules don't allow staff members to work on campaigns while on congressional time or to use congressional resources, so staffers either join the campaign as unpaid volunteers or take a separate paycheck from the campaign, too.

Paying his staff to work for his office and his campaign has Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, under fire from two Republican challengers as the May 10 state GOP convention nears.

Cannon earned a sixth term in Congress in November 2006 but knew less than two months later that he would be challenged in 2008 by Jason Chaffetz, the former campaign manager and chief of staff for Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. Former Juab County Attorney David Leavitt joined the race in May 2007.

Nearly a year later, Chaffetz and Leavitt are criticizing Cannon's long practice of paying several congressional staffers to help with his campaign effort, though a University of Utah political scientist said the practice is common and acceptable if not abused.

Nathan Rathbun, Megan Faulkner Brown and Ryan Frandsen are among those who have doubled as congressional and campaign staffers for Cannon. Rathbun has averaged \$30,000 a year as a regular staffer and \$25,000 a year as a campaign manager for the past three years. Frandsen is a field coordinator for the congressional office but this year has added duties that essentially make him Cannon's new campaign manager.

Chaffetz and Leavitt said they, if elected, would run Utah's 3rd Congressional District office differently.

"I think every taxpayer should be outraged their tax dollars are going to staffers who were working on a congressional campaign," Chaffetz said. "There's an ethical wall and you're not supposed to be on both sides of it. That's why there's a wall. It's a huge conflict of interest. There's supposed to be a distinguishing difference between campaign staff and congressional staff.

"I saw this up close and personal when I worked for the governor. I know how poorly (Cannon's) congressional office is run. This is one of the things they do that is fundamentally wrong. There should be no taxpayer support for a congressional campaign. When you use congressional staffers to work on a campaign, you're stepping over the line."

Leavitt said people in the district often notice Cannon staffers campaigning for Cannon while handing out business cards that say they are part of his office staff.

"I know that it's completely inappropriate to be paying for government and paying for campaigning," Leavitt said. "And I know his staffers speak for him on the campaign stump.

"They have a hand in each till."

Cannon's chief of staff, Joe Hunter, defended the practice, saying he is following the advice of the House Ethics Committee that compensating staffers for campaign work is appropriate.

"We absolutely are doing above and beyond the norm in being transparent and ethical in how we do it," he said. "The way Chris insists we do it is if a person on the congressional staff moves over to the campaign to do work or to a lesser extent is involved significantly in the campaign, the campaign compensates them for that work. We do that in order to make absolutely certain there is no crossing of the wall between the two functions and operations."

Chaffetz criticized Hunter for fielding questions about the issue.

"The mere fact you're talking to the chief of staff about the campaign is in itself wrong," Chaffetz said. The chief of staff shouldn't be talking about the campaign at all."

The criticism has Cannon considering some changes, Hunter said. "The one thing that we are doing is keeping closer track of time (staffers spend on the campaign). I don't think we were failing in that regard. We have always revisited it every month, and I'm clear about it."

Another criticism was the amount of money Hunter, Rathbun and others received from the campaign to reimburse them for phone bills. The House Ethics Committee recommends that campaigns reimburse for travel expenses only.

"We're looking at that right now," Hunter said. "We may do that differently. I'm not saying we were doing it wrong. Our first priority is transparency. This story wouldn't even be possible if we weren't transparent. Everything we do is public record."

Kirk Jowers, director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics, said paying congressional staffers for their campaign work improves transparency.

"In general it's pretty common that senators and representatives have staff who volunteer their time or get paid to work essentially a second job helping with campaigns," Jowers said. "It's especially true in the House where in a two-year election cycle, you're always working on the next campaign. Every representative does it differently, it seems. Some have a lot of volunteer hours and that's very hard for the public and press to see what is going on. Many pay a few of their staff so they can consistently rely on them to get what they need done."

For Jowers, the bigger issue is making sure staffers put in "a legitimate day's work for a legitimate day's pay."

"For example, it would be very difficult for a chief of staff to also work full-time for the campaign," Jowers said. "The numbers in the Cannon office do not make me concerned. The concern is when you see one amount really disproportionate to what someone should be making, because then you wonder if they're compensating for more than the purported reason, giving an illegal bonus."

Battling an established incumbent who can use his staffers to work on his campaign, albeit on their own time or at the campaign's expense, is a clear frustration for challengers, Jowers said.

"The advantages of incumbency are immense," he added. "That's why we have a plus-95 percent re-election rate in the House. As a challenger, every one of those advantages makes you want to pull your hair out. It's easier to raise money if you're the incumbent, and you have other ways to get in front of people. The list goes on and on."

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