

Pitt County Ranks 10th in State for Total Campaign Donations

By Stacy Dail
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The economy is on a downward spiral, people are losing their jobs and money may be coming up short for many, but that didn't stop Pitt County residents or North Carolinians from donating millions of dollars to campaign candidates and organizations in the 2008 elections.

According to opensecrets.org, Pitt County residents donated \$762,277 during the 2008 election cycle, ranking 10th among all counties in North Carolina for total campaign donations. North Carolina ranked 17th in the nation, donating a little over \$40.5 million, twice the amount that was donated during the 2000 election cycle.

According to data from the Federal Election Commission that was released on Jan. 5, retirees are donating more than any other occupational group. In North Carolina, they donated nearly \$7 million, nearly triple that of the 2000 election cycle. Retirees in Pitt County contributed \$27,000 of that total, not including donations under \$200.

Lawyers, real estate agencies and education professionals are among the other top ranked occupational groups who contributed to campaign candidates and organizations during the 2008 election. Overall, about 53 percent of that money was donated to Democratic candidates, while 46 percent went to Republican candidates.

"Professionals tend to give the majority of campaign money, especially during the presidential election cycles. From my research, doctors don't give as much money as lawyers, and most lawyers are democrats," said Steve Bentley, a political science major at East Carolina University who just completed an analytic paper on campaign donations in 2008.

Political candidates are required by law to keep record of contributions to their campaign, and in some cases, if the candidate receives enough money, he or she is required to file with the state or federal election commission.

Joanne Robertson of the Pitt County Board of Elections deals with campaign finances of those running for local offices. In Pitt County, candidates have to file with the state only when their donations total exceeds \$3,000. According to Robertson, most local candidates don't have to file because they do not collect that much money, but are still required to keep detailed records of how much money is coming in and how that money is being spent.

Ephraigm Smith, who successfully ran for Pitt County commissioner, was the only local candidate who raised more than \$3,000, although he hasn't reported to the state yet. Money from donations is usually spent on media, such as television commercials, print advertising and signs, as well as postage and other campaign needs.

For state and national campaigns, individuals can give up to \$2,300 to each candidate per election, and up to \$28,500 to any national party per year. Five thousand is the maximum donation that can be given to each political action committee per year. The Federal Election Committee does not require candidates to log contributions under \$200.

Pitt County resident Edwin Clark, vice-president of Wilco-Hess, as well as Ann Williams, also associated with Wilco-Hess, each donated \$28,500 to the McCain Victory 2008 fund. Another top donor in Pitt County was Thomas Taft, who also donated \$28,500 to the Obama Victory Fund, as well as to other local and state candidates.

Pitt County students also were very involved in the 2008 election. Four students donated a total of \$24,250, all to Democratic presidential candidates. Coincidentally, in two cases, their parents also happened to donate the maximum donations to the same political candidate or party that same day. This is one way that people can get around donation limitations by having each member of their family donate separately. Kim Hendrix, of the Republican Party of Pitt County, insists that this is legal, and happens frequently.

"People do cheat and it is illegal, but it is legal for a husband and wife to give the maximum on the same day. It is also legal for the adult child to give to a candidate out of their own checking account," Hendrix said.

Even though the 2008 election saw groundbreaking donation totals, there were still many people who were involved in the election but couldn't afford to help monetarily.

"The College Democrats didn't donate money, but we set up tables, passed out flyers, and focused on voter registration. We still found a way for people who couldn't afford to donate money to contribute in a way that was just as effective," said Adam Williams, president of the East Carolina University College Democrats.