Jonathan Schechter – "Corpus Callosum" Column
***Jackson Hole News&Guide*– November 2, 2011**

Today's column is inspired by two realities.

One is that we're one year out from the 2012 presidential election.

The other is that we're one week beyond the 2011 Old Bill's Fun Run celebration, and a month beyond the filing deadline for federal election campaigns.

Combined, these got me wondering about how much money Teton County residents have been contributing to campaigns for federal office, and organizations which get involved in such races (e.g. political action committees). Today I'll look at community-wide numbers; in my next column, I'll focus on individuals.

Let's start with four facts which shape the data available to the public.

First, the Federal Elections Commission (FEC) views the world in two year cycles, coincident with House of Representatives elections. Because candidates are required to file quarterly financial reports, this means we now have data for the first three quarters of the 2012 election cycle.

Second, while campaigns are required to report all the money they've raised, they are only required to report the names and donation amounts of those who give $250 or more. As a result, the data don't show all the money given by Teton County residents, just the amount given by larger donors.

Third, while donors are limited to giving $2,300 per year to candidates for federal office (President, U.S. Senate, and U.S. House), they can give up to $30,000, and perhaps more, to parties, political action committees, and the like.

Fourth, thanks to last year's "Citizens United" ruling by the Supreme Court, there are not only no limits on what can be donated to organizations adjunct to official campaigns, but no requirement that such donations be made public. As a result, we'll never know how much locals – or anyone else for that matter – is spending to support their favorite candidates and causes. It seems likely, however, that given the lack of limits, lack of transparency, and America's increasing concentration of wealth, in future years the amounts reflected in official spending reports will be an increasingly-less important indicator of how much is being spent to win elections.

Given all this, what do we know?

Let's start with two basic facts.

Over the last four election cycles – all of 2006, 2008, and 2010, plus the first three-eighths of 2012 – Teton County's "big donors" have given a total of $6.4 million to the federal campaigns and organizations required to report to the FEC. To put that in perspective, during those same seven years, Old Bill's Fun Run match donors have given $13.7 million tax-deductible dollars, or roughly twice as much as "big donors" have given in non-deductible contributions to federal campaigns. (Old Bill's non-match donors have given $35.8 million in that same time, for an overall total of $49.5 million).

During the first nine months of the 2012 cycle, Teton County residents made 308 donations totaling $454,521 to 74 different candidates and organizations. Alphabetically, these ranged from the Alzheimers Impact Movement PAC to the Wyoming State Democratic Central Committee.

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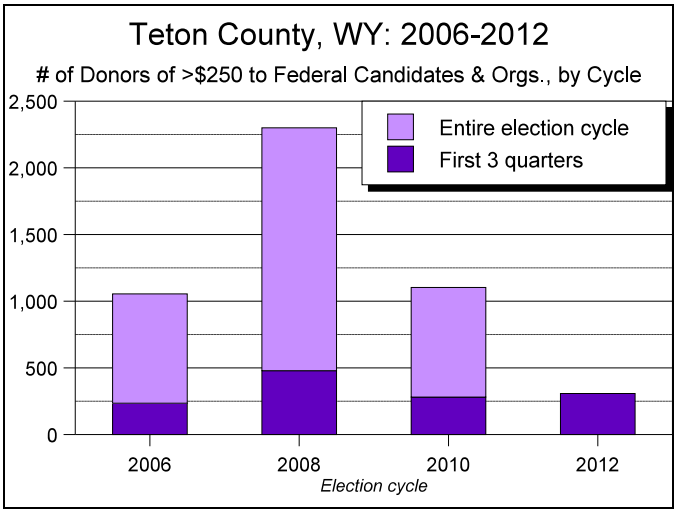
As Graphs 1 and 2 suggest, with the exception of 2008, this year's level of giving is about on par with the last few election cycles, during which the vast majority of giving comes during the final five quarters.

Things become a bit more interesting when looking at how residents direct their money. Breaking donations down by party, Graph 3 suggests local Republicans have a broader fundraising machine in Teton County; Graph 4 suggests that, when they really push it, local Democrats are able to tap into deeper pockets.

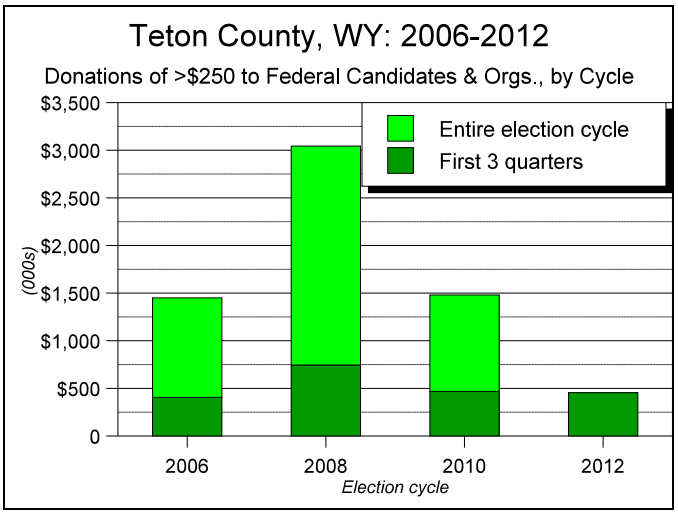
The data make two other points as well. One is that a candidate with clear ties to the Jackson Hole community can greatly influence giving patterns. In particular, during the first three quarters of the 2008 cycle, in his second bid for Congress, Gary Trauner accounted for 20 percent of all local money donated to Democratic candidates and causes. Even more striking, during that same cycle, Mitt Romney accounted for 40 percent of all Republican donors and donations, figures he duplicated this year.

The second point comes when contrasting the data for the two presidential election cycles: 2008 and 2012. In 2008, after eight years of George W. Bush, local Democrats sensed it was their time, and donated prodigious amounts to a wide variety of candidates and causes. In 2012, after four years of Barack Obama, it seems the Republicans are feeling and acting in a similar fashion.

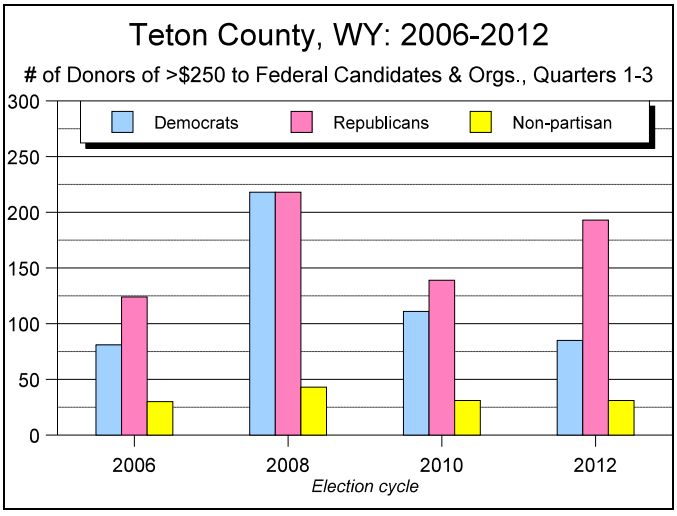
But not, however, at the same levels as in 2008. As Graph 5 shows, if Trauner and Romney are backed out of their respective equations, 2012 donations to date – for both Democrats and Republicans – are actually trailing those in the last three cycles, even the less-popular non-presidential cycles.



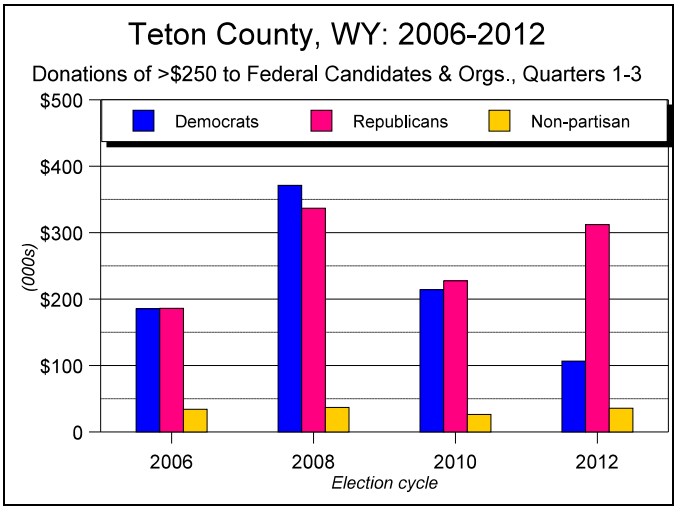
Graph 1



Graph 2



Graph 3



Graph 4

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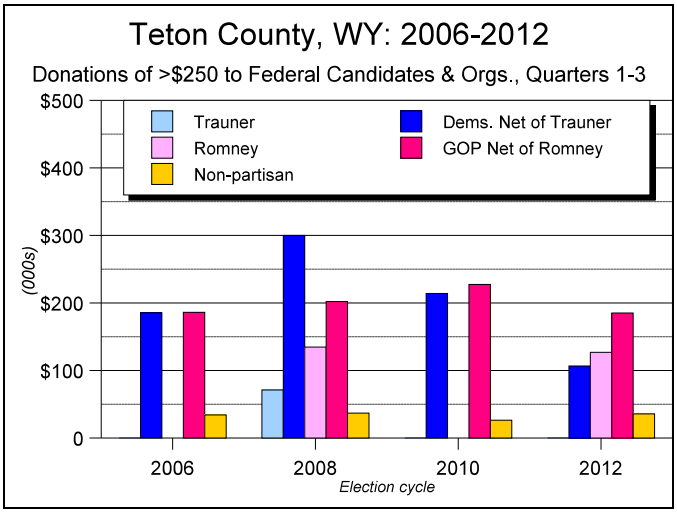
Why is this happening? Two possibilities come to mind.

One is that nothing is exciting donors. Local Democrats aren't wild about the President, but have nowhere else to turn. Similarly, local Republicans aren't wild about their choices either – even Romney has raised less local money to date than he did in 2008, and from fewer donors to boot.

If this analysis is correct, it ties in with the larger national narrative encapsulated by both the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street, namely disgust with the system. From this perspective, local donors are offering a pocketbook-based expression of a sentiment along the lines of "Why bother giving my money to a candidate who won't make a difference, working within a system that's fundamentally broken?"



Graph 5

The other possibility is that, thanks to Citizens United, local donors are channeling their money into non-accountable organizations, figuring they'll have a better chance of affecting election outcomes than the system as we've known it.

These possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Smaller donors could be feeling a malaise, if not disgust; while larger donors could be seeing the campaigns and parties as less-efficient ways of getting a bang for their political buck. Because it's relatively early in the election cycle, I anticipate local giving will crank up as the 2012 election's contours become clearer. Even when it does, though, I don't anticipate the giving will be done with any enthusiasm. Instead, it will be fear-based, along the lines of the robo-call I received last night from the NRA, wanting me to contribute because the United Nations was about to take away my guns. The call was transcendent in its awfulness; it seems likely we have an entire year ahead of such transcendence ...

In my next column, I'll take a closer look at which Teton County residents are giving to whom.

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