Illinois Democratic officials use legislative staffers to attack third-party campaigns

Patrick Martin
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In a continuation of a longstanding campaign practice of dubious legality, the Illinois state Democratic Party is using paid legislative staffers to attack the campaigns of the Socialist Equality Party, the Greens, the Libertarians and independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader.

Two Democrats copied or viewed the petitions of Tom Mackaman, the SEP candidate for state representative in Illinois's 103rd legislative district, which includes the twin cities of Champaign and Urbana. Elizabeth Brown and Brendan Hostetler are both employees of the Democratic majority in the state house of representatives.

On Tuesday, June 22, Brown went to the state board of elections office in Springfield and purchased copies of the petitions filed by Nader and Mackaman. A few hours later, Hostetler visited the same office and viewed Mackaman's petitions.

Both actions took place during normal working hours (Brown at 9:09 a.m., Hostetler at 2:40 p.m.), when the two would be expected to be performing legislative duties at the state capitol.

On the same day, Michael Kasper, general counsel for the Illinois Democratic Party, purchased copies of the petitions filed for the Green Party presidential and US Senate candidates. He had previously obtained the petitions of an independent presidential candidate, Melissa Vining of Wheaton, Illinois.

On Monday, June 28, Geraldine Parr, treasurer and former chairman of the Democratic Party in Champaign County, filed an objection to ballot status for Tom Mackaman in the 103rd district. Another Democratic Party representative, John Tully, filed objections to statewide ballot status for Nader, Vining and the Greens.

The overlapping of these actions demonstrates the coordinated nature of the Democratic Party campaign against third-party candidates. Brown collected information for the challenges against both Tom Mackaman and Nader, supplying the information to Parr and Tully respectively. Tully, in turn, received information from both Brown and Kasper, and then filed official objections against Nader and the Greens.

A spokesman for state Democratic Party Chairman Michael Madigan, who is the speaker of the state House of Representatives, said the party was "happy to assist" in the challenges. Madigan's spokesman added, with consummate cynicism, that "everyone should play by the rules and follow the law." This statement is particularly ludicrous given the sordid record of the Illinois state Democratic Party in regard to financial corruption and ballot-rigging, including the notorious Chicago "tombstone vote," in which long-dead citizens were recorded as having cast ballots for favored party candidates.

The second Democrat to check Tom Mackaman's petitions, Brendan Hostetler, claimed to be doing so as a "private citizen" rather than as a state or Democratic Party employee. He is a longtime associate of the incumbent Democratic state representative in the 103rd district, Naomi Jakobsson, serving as her petition checker in December 2001. He reviewed signatures filed on behalf of Jakobsson's opponent in the March 2002 Democratic primary.

This connection strongly suggests that Jakobsson had knowledge of and supported the attempt to remove her socialist opponent from the ballot. The SEP intends to make this assault on democratic rights a major issue in the fall election campaign.

The Republican Party has carried out similar attacks on the democratic rights of parties, such as the Libertarian Party, which they believe will draw support

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from more conservative voters. Two Republican operatives checked the petitions for Tom Mackaman but did not challenge them. One of them, Bryan Hartman, is an aide to state Senate Republican leader Tom Cross, who has been very active in efforts to deny ballot status to the Libertarians.

According to reports published by the Libertarian Party, dozens of state employees were mobilized by Republican legislators and the administration of George Ryan, the Republican governor from 1998 to 2002, to keep Libertarian candidates off of the ballot. Illinois Republican Chair Judy Baar Topinka, the state treasurer, is currently under federal grand jury investigation for using Treasury employees for this purpose.

These exclusionary tactics are employed under conditions of what appears to be an informal agreement between the Democrats and Republicans in Illinois, in which the two parties cede control of large sections of the state legislature to one another. Republicans do not run in Chicago, and Democrats do not contest many downstate seats. All told, in half of all state legislative and state senate elections in 2004, the Republican or Democratic incumbent will have no major-party opposition.

The state's election laws are so restrictive that George W. Bush himself would be denied ballot status if the laws were enforced equally on all parties. This is so because the Republican nominating convention in New York City will take place after the deadline for the Illinois ballot.

On June 30—two days after the Democrats and Republicans filed their challenges against the SEP, the Greens, Nader and the Libertarians—the two parties joined forces to pass legislation to put Bush on the ballot. The Democrats were rewarded for this favor with perks of their own, including, reportedly, the effective dismissal of as much as $1 million in fines for campaign law violations.

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