

Political Contributions: Know Your Limits by Spencer Ritchie

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By: Spencer Ritchie

In Mississippi, every year is an election year. This election year, however, is shaping up to be one of the most memorable in the state in decades. Many Mississippians will seek to play an active part in these elections by contributing to campaigns and political parties. Such contributions are subject to federal and state campaign finance laws. Below is a summary of major restrictions.

Federal elections

This year's ballots will include primary and general elections for one U.S. Senate seat (currently held by Sen. Roger Wicker) and all four U.S. House of Representative seats. There will also be a special election (same day as general election for the other seats) for the U.S. Senate seat currently held by Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith, who was appointed by Gov. Phil Bryant to replace retiring Sen. Thad Cochran.

Contributions in federal elections are governed by federal campaign finance laws. Under federal law, an individual may give a maximum of \$2,700 per election to a federal candidate or the candidate's campaign committee. This limit applies separately to each candidate and to each election. Primaries, runoffs and general elections are considered separate elections. A husband and wife each have separate contribution limits.

Individuals may also contribute \$5,000 per calendar year to political action committees (PACs) that support federal candidates. Certain PACs, often referred to as super PACs, that make only independent expenditures (*i.e.*, no coordination with candidates' campaigns) in support of candidates may receive unlimited contributions.

Finally, individuals may contribute \$10,000 per calendar year to state political party committees, and \$33,900 per calendar year to national party committees. The limit for the national party committees applies separately to the parties' national committees, House campaign committees, and Senate campaign committees.

Importantly, under federal law, corporations (for-profit and non-profit) are prohibited from making contributions to federal candidates or committees. A federal campaign may, however, accept contributions from PACs established by corporations, and corporations may contribute unlimited amounts to PACs that make only independent expenditures (*i.e.*, super PACs).

State judicial elections

Not to be overlooked by the federal elections this year are the state judicial elections on the ballot, including for certain seats on the Mississippi Supreme Court and Court of Appeals and for chancery and circuit court judge.

Under Mississippi law, the limit for individuals and PACs contributing to candidates for circuit or chancery court is \$2500 per election cycle, while the limit for Supreme Court or Court of Appeals candidates is \$5000 per election cycle. Unlike federal law, under Mississippi law corporations may contribute to candidates, including those for judicial office, but cannot contribute more than \$1000 per calendar year.

Applicable to both federal and state elections

Most people think of political contributions as donations of money. While this is the most common way of contributing, anything of value given to influence a federal or state election is considered a contribution. For example, the donation of office space, furniture, or supplies is considered an in-kind contribution, and the value of donated items is counted against donors' applicable contribution limits.

Finally, contributions that exceed \$200 are made public via campaign finance reports regularly filed by all candidates and committees. Federal candidates file these reports with the Federal Election Commission while state candidates file them with the Mississippi Secretary of State, and the reports can be accessed on the websites of both agencies.

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