Allies of Minn. Democrats outspending GOP groups

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Major independent political groups supporting Minnesota Democrats outspent their GOP-oriented rivals by more than 2 to 1 through the middle of September, with national governors associations on both sides together putting nearly $930,000 into the state's open governor's race.

Campaign finance reports for the outside groups released Wednesday showed that the Alliance for a Better Minnesota, a Democratic-backed group, spent more than $3 million through Sept. 14, mostly on TV ads critical of Republican gubernatorial nominee Tom Emmer. The Democratic Governors Association gave $500,000 to a separate fund bankrolling the Alliance for a Better Minnesota.

On the other side, MN Forward and Minnesota's Future together spent $1.3 million, with about $700,000 devoted to TV ads targeting Democratic gubernatorial candidate Mark Dayton and nearly $350,000 for positive ads introducing Emmer to voters. The Republican Governors Association provided almost all the financing for Minnesota's Future with a $428,000 donation.

Business donations to MN Forward slowed dramatically in August and September after Target Corp. endured a national backlash from liberals and gay rights supporters over the company's $150,000 donation to the group in July. MN Forward's support for Emmer, who opposes gay marriage, seemed to conflict with the Minneapolis-based retailer's gay-friendly image.

After its establishment in June, MN Forward raised $785,000 in its first five weeks and $395,000 more in the three weeks leading up to the primary. In the latest five-week period, the group collected less than $250,000, including a smattering of smaller donations. The group is also backing legislative candidates from both major parties.

MN Forward did collect $100,000 each in the latest period from manufacturer 3M Co. and a Wayzata-based group called the State Fund for Economic Growth. State records show that the group was incorporated in June, and a separate IRS filing shows executives with TCF Financial Corp. as its officers and lists the banking company's address. TCF Chairman and Chief Executive Bill Cooper is a former state GOP chairman.

Chris Tiedeman, who heads Minnesota's Future, said he expects the state's top businesses to make their voices heard in the governor's race among Emmer, Dayton and the Independence Party's Tom Horner. The outside groups have paid scant attention to Horner, although he is pushing to make it a three-way race.

"Minnesota's biggest companies are going to continue to want to have a voice in this election. I don't know if they'll contribute to us or any of the other independent expenditure groups, but I don't think that they will be silenced," Tiedeman said.

The Alliance for a Better Minnesota gets its money from two other Democratic groups, the 2010 Fund and WIN Minnesota, which together have raised $3.3 million. Alida Messinger, a Rockefeller and Dayton's ex-wife, gave $800,000. Vance Opperman, a Democratic donor who sits on TCF's board, gave $125,000.

Even though his side has spent more, Ken Martin, who heads the 2010 Fund and WIN Minnesota, said he expects the other side to win the money race by the Nov. 2 election. Martin said he doesn't expect the chill that followed the Target flap to keep corporations out of the election.

"They're going to find more creative ways to put their money into these types of efforts," Martin said.

As of Sept. 14, the three major Democratic groups combined had nearly $470,000 in the bank, while MN Forward and Minnesota's Future together had more than $530,000.

Some big bucks are bypassing the race for governor and flowing toward races to determine who controls the Minnesota Legislature. That's apparent with political committees connected to Indian tribes in Minnesota.

Tribes that run successful casinos in Red Wing, Shakopee and Mille Lacs have put a combined $900,000 into centralized campaign accounts for party legislative caucuses. Democrats received about 97 percent of that.

The tribes are fiercely protective of their casino monopoly, which all three major candidates for governor say they would consider challenging via state-run gambling parlors.

Education Minnesota donated $218,000 to legislative caucuses, virtually all of it to Democrats. The teachers union's political action committee gave almost $35,000 directly to legislative candidates, with Republicans getting just $1,250.

On the GOP side, a consortium of conservative entrepreneurs aligned under the Freedom Club banner have spent about $460,000 to aid Republican candidates, fuel the state Republican Party or go after legislative Democrats the group finds vulnerable.

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Associated Press Writer Brian Bakst contributed to this report.

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