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Title: Candidates are separated little from their 'surrogates'

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The attacks began right after Gov. Matt Blunt and his Democratic rival, Attorney General Jay Nixon, filed their latest campaign finance reports.

The state Republican Party asserted that Nixon displayed "a disgraceful example of hypocrisy" because he accepted 22 contributions of \$10,000 or more, even though Nixon had opposed the elimination of the old state campaign donation limit of \$1,275.

The state GOP also slapped Nixon for \$60,000 he received from lawyers or law firms hired by his office a decade ago for lucrative work representing the state in its suit against the tobacco companies.

The Missouri Democratic Party countered by accusing Blunt - who took 55 contributions of \$10,000 or more - of selling state government to the highest bidder. The party then itemized "\$478,250 in contributions from appointees to state boards and commissions; fee office operators or their families; companies with state government contracts; and even the railroad company to which he gave rights to the Boonville Bridge."

Note that all of the above attacks came from the state political parties - and not from the candidates' campaigns.

It has long been the standard political practice of candidates to use "surrogates" to fire their harshest shots. The apparent aim is to avoid getting splattered with partisan mud.

But thanks to the end of Missouri's campaign donation restrictions, the facade of separation may be pointless.

Blunt and Nixon have made no secret that they control their respective state party operations. Both have placed trusted allies in the parties' top posts, and both wield obvious influence over what their parties say or do.

And unlike the old state restrictions, current state law allows public coordination between political party and candidate campaigns.

For example: The parties now can handle all of a candidate's advertising or travel expenses, and simply report it as an "in-kind contribution."

And then there's the Internet, where even harsher jabs at Nixon and Blunt are delivered daily by such partisan websites as the Democratic-leaning "Firedupmissouri.com" and the Republican-aligned "Missouri Pulse" and "The Source."

At least some of the sites have ties to the candidates. For example: Blunt's campaign spokesman, John Hancock, is the founder and chief author of "Missouri Pulse." Hancock also is a consultant for the state GOP.

Meanwhile, Republicans long have alleged that some of the anonymous posters on "Firedupmissouri.com" are employees of Nixon or other Democratic officeholders.

Dave Robertson, a political science professor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, dismisses any debate over who is really a surrogate and who is really tied to the candidate.

"I don't think the public can tell the difference," he said.

What's important to the candidates and their audience, Robertson added, are which attacks stick and which ones don't.

ASHBY TRIES AGAIN

Heightened Republican-Democratic sniping could make voters more receptive to independent candidates, Robertson says.

University City businessman **Blake Ashby** sure hopes that's the case.

Ashby, 42, is running for president as an independent. It's his second bid for the White House; he briefly ran in 2004 as a Republican.

Ashby has a website, a campaign office and has hired two staffers. Just as he did the first time, **Ashby** plans to campaign in New Hampshire and perhaps some other early-primary states.

He's hoping for publicity, even as he concedes he has no chance of victory. So why run? "I'm reasonably certain I can get people to talk about my issues," he said.

"First and foremost is a balanced budget," **Ashby** said. He's furious with President George W. Bush and Congress for the explosion in federal spending and the national debt.

"It's going to be a quirky little campaign, and I'll run it my own way," **Ashby** said. He also plans to bankroll most of it, and has budgeted roughly \$30,000 of his own money.

TROTTER TO GET \$2,000 A MONTH

Local communications consultant Gentry Trotter will be paid about \$2,000 a month for his new gig with the governor. As noted earlier by our own Deb Peterson, Trotter will offer advice in a number of areas and will report to Blunt chief of staff Ed Martin and Rich Chrismer, Blunt's deputy chief of staff for communications. Trotter will work out of St. Louis.

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