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New Mexico's Oil and Gas Industry-Backed Candidates Fall Short With Voters

The most common observation concerning the 2022 election among political pundits of all stripes is that the "Red Wave" Republicans touted and Democrats feared failed to materialize.

That was true in New Mexico, where Republicans hoped — in vain, it turned out — to defeat the incumbent Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, a Democrat, and to put a serious dent in the Democrats' control of the state Legislature.

In the two weeks leading up to the 2022 general election, the oil and gas industry made more than \$630,000 in contributions to New Mexico politicians and political committees. The total amount of oil and gas contributions in the general election cycle — so far — tops \$2 million.

However, much of that money went to candidates who lost their bids. The most obvious example was Republican gubernatorial candidate Mark Ronchetti, who received \$356,000-plus from the oil and gas industry. That's better than three and a half times the \$86,000-plus that Lujan Grisham, has taken from industry-related sources.

This is according to an analysis by New Mexico Ethics Watch of campaign finance reports filed with the Secretary of State's Office. The latest reports were due on November 3. The next batch of reports, covering last-minute and post-election contributions and expenditures, is due on January 9, 2023.

In elections for state House of Representatives, four of the top five oil and gas contribution recipients in the general election cycle lost their races. Those four (Kurstin Johnson, Jane Powdrell-Culbert, Gregory Cunningham and Nicole Chavez) are Republicans. Of the top 20 state House recipients of oil and gas money reported so far, 15 are Republicans.

Altogether, GOP House candidates have received in excess of \$500,000, or about 71 percent of the money contributed by the oil and gas industry to state House candidates in the 2022 general election cycle, and more than a quarter of overall industry general election contributions.

Meanwhile, two of the largest legislative recipients of oil and gas contributions on the Democratic side — Reps. Patty Lundstrom of Gallup and Doreen Gallegos of Las Cruces — were re-elected but lost their bids for leadership positions when House Democrats met in caucus a few days after Election Day. Gallegos lost her bid for House majority leader to Rep. Gail Chasey of Albuquerque. Lundstrom tried to get the Democrats' nomination for speaker of the House, but lost to Rep. Javier Martinez of Albuquerque. Martinez is the Democrat who has received the most oil and gas money so far, taking in more than \$30,000 from the industry (compared with Lundstrom's \$22,000).

In addition to political contributions made during the general election, the oil and gas industry also spread around upwards of \$2.5 million among New Mexico candidates and political committees during this year's primary election season, which covered contributions from October 2021 until early July. This \$4.5 million is significantly more than the \$3.3 million the industry spent on New Mexico political causes in the 2020 election, when all state senate seats were up for grabs, but there was no gubernatorial election.

The top oil and gas industry contributors in the general election reported so far this year are familiar names. Chevron once again is the number one source of industry money in this year's campaign, contributing nearly \$264,000 to New Mexico campaigns and committees. This figure is on top of the \$250,000-plus in contributions the California company made during the primary cycle. But that's well below the almost \$1.8 million that Chevron contributed during the 2020 election.

Other big contributors include the Albuquerque-based Jalapeño Corporation, which gave just over \$170,000, and Devon Energy, an Oklahoma company, which reported almost \$84,000 in contributions. Other top oil and gas companies contributing during the general election cycle were Occidental Petroleum of Houston, Texas (\$62,000); X-based Marathon Oil, also of Houston, (\$57,7000); Strata Production, an Ohio company (\$56,200) and the Roswell-based Murphy Oil (\$50,000).

As usual, the list of the largest individual oil-and-gas contributors during the general election reported so far is dominated by members of the Yates family, a well-established New Mexico oil and gas family. At the top of the list is Peyton Yates (\$66,600); followed by Rolla Hinkle, the only non-Yates in the top five (\$51,800); Linda Yates (\$41,600); the Charlotte Yates Trust (\$36,400) and John Yates (\$29,200).

Political action committees were big players during this year's election and some of them received considerable money from the oil companies. These committees include the New Mexico House Republican Campaign Committee, which has reported receiving \$250,600 in oil and gas contributions during the general election period; the Republican Campaign Committee of New Mexico (\$120,000); Our Values PAC, a single-candidate super PAC in support of defeated Republican Congresswoman Yvette Herrell, (\$75,000); and Save New Mexico, an Albuquerque-based committee whose largest contributor by the Jalapeño Corporation (\$55,000).

"While oil and gas industry money continues to be a major source of political contributions, this election showed that all that cash doesn't always determine who's going to win an election," said Kathleen Sabo, executive director of New Mexico Ethics Watch. "Energy and climate change were not major issues in this year's campaign, but overall New Mexico voters were not in tune with the candidates backed by oil and gas interests."

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