



New “Sportsmen’s” Groups Mask Partisan Political Agenda

Botanists use the term “biennial” to describe plants that bloom on a two year cycle. They are dormant or undeveloped in the off-year, then sprout and bloom with vigor the next. But the phenomenon is not limited to flora. The past several election cycles have seen the emergence of biennial, self-designated “sportsmen’s groups,” which sprout virtually overnight in election cycles, then disappear once the election is over. And the peak season for bloom is now upon us.

These groups insist they are not conceived to influence elections. And under tax and campaign finance law, they generally can’t engage in overt electioneering, so this claim is at least partly true, if only of legal necessity. But it’s no coincidence that they emerge when they do, and it’s certainly not an accident that their “educational” campaigns specifically target candidates in close elections.

The latest such example comes to us from Montana, where “Montana Hunters and Anglers Action” sprouted mere weeks ago. One might expect that a new state sportsmen’s group would focus on developing support, building membership, and recruiting volunteers. But the Montana group did none of these. Instead, it immediately spent nearly a quarter million dollars to air TV commercials critical of Montana’s Congressman, Rep. Dennis Rehberg. We won’t know where the money came from until the group files its IRS Form 990 for the year, but it’s a safe bet that not one penny of it came from Montana sportsmen. The group simply hasn’t existed long enough to even ask Montana sportsmen for support.

Let’s stipulate here that ours is not a partisan cause. Hunters have friends and opponents in both major parties. Political break lines on our issues conform more closely to geographical contours, and the shifting demographics that accompany them. And there are often elections where two strong hunting supporters will square off against each other.

The trend of political sportsmen’s groups that bloom overnight with no visible means of local support, however, is indeed partisan in nature. Virtually all of these biennials favor Democratic candidates in tight races. The reasons for this certainly include the fact that many of the same people are usually involved.

Such is the case in Montana, which is hosting a marquee Senate race in 2012. Incumbent Senator Jon Tester is a Democrat, and he is being challenged by Congressman Rehberg, who is a Republican. The leadership of the Montana group includes a prominent state Democratic politician as well as a former aide to the state’s other Democratic Senator, Max Baucus. Two of the group’s leaders have donated thousands of dollars to Senator Tester’s re-election campaign. Two others were leaders in “Montana Sportsmen for Obama” in 2008. And yet another has left his fingerprints in such groups going all the way back to “Sportsmen for Kerry.” This is not an impartial group.

See a pattern here? We have the same people, every two years, forming “Sportsmen for (Democratic candidate)” groups that spring up overnight, with mysterious sources of funding. The local leaders of the groups always have deep ties to the Democrats in the race, and they are

always mated with operatives from D.C. who have a long track record of establishing similar groups in other elections over the years.

There will be many more to come before Election Day next November, and we can expect that "Sportsmen for Obama" will sit at the top of the pyramid. After all, in 2008 the Obama campaign conscripted the group "Americans Hunters and Shooters" as a surrogate, deploying its chairman at public appearances in key states. This group too has fallen upon the ash heap of history, incidentally, after once admitting in a deposition that it had at most "a couple hundred" members at its peak.

Reasonable people can disagree about who is the best candidate for any given office, and hunters are no different. Politically, we are not monolithic, we are not partisans, and we certainly don't all agree on everything. But it is the lowest point of crass and cynical politics to hatch a new roster of "sportsmen's" groups every cycle, founded by the same partisan operatives from D.C., funded by heaven knows who, conspicuous in supporting candidates from only one party, and disguised under the mantle of state sportsmen. All hunters should be wary of new "sportsmen's" groups sprouting up before next year's election that purport to represent our interests.

SCI members have a key advantage in the political sphere -- SCI-PAC, our political action committee. SCI-PAC has been in continual existence since its founding decades ago, and expressly supports pro-hunting candidates from both major political parties. It is led by SCI members who volunteer their time, and its mission is both simple and consistent: to support candidates who support hunters, and defeat candidates who oppose our hunting heritage.

The PAC is positioned to make a major breakthrough this election cycle by raising more than one million dollars to support its mission, but it needs the support of all SCI members to reach this goal. Please support SCI-PAC with your own generous donation, so we can focus our resources together on making a major political impact in the 2012 election cycle.