

# Don't like Otter PAC? Don't contribute

## Idaho Press-Tribune

Liberals are outraged because they see this, as Lewiston Tribune editorial writer Marty Trillhaase put it, a "corporate shakedown" and a "personal vendetta fund."

Tea Party conservatives are also disenchanted because they have clearly split ideologically with Otter and those they would describe as RINOs, and Otterpac would allow the governor to continue undermining the Tea Party insurgency long after he has left office.

Our reaction? Meh.

That's the state of modern politics, and while it's far from a great system - in fact, it's in many ways a deeply flawed system - it's hard to envision it changing any time soon.

PACs are loathed by many because they provide a way to avoid campaign donation limits on people and businesses to individual candidates. Idaho law allows individuals and corporations to give up to \$1,000 per primary or general election for a legislative seat; \$5,000 for general or statewide races. But there are no limits on donations to PACs, and they can spend as much as they want on their own independent ad campaigns for candidates or, in some cases, specific legislation.

This leaves the impression on many, particularly liberals who rued the U.S. Supreme Court's Citizens United ruling, that elections are now bought and paid for by large, faceless entities, and regular, individual people have no voice. And since that court ruling nearly six years ago that declared limits on campaign spending by unions and corporations are a violation of the First Amendment, donations to PACs have flooded in on both the left and the right.

And then there are those 501(c)(3) groups like the Idaho Freedom Foundation, which are legally classified as "charities," yet they are, in effect, little more than political groups using their clout to advocate for political issues and, indirectly, political candidates. No, they aren't allowed to endorse candidates directly, but when they identify legislators by name and rip them publicly for how they vote, well, it has the same impact as a campaign ad.

And even when corporations do make direct donations to candidates themselves, they often do so with the expectation that those donations will influence how the winner will vote on issues that affect them. Let's be honest here - why else would they donate?

Is it a good system? No, not really. But it is reality, and both sides of the political spectrum are taking advantage of it.

Remember those TV commercials supporting Obamacare that featured the menacing black SUVs boxing in the ambulance so it couldn't get away, and the announcer warning that bad forces were trying to stop health care reform? Get used to seeing more ads like those, and ones that either praise or slam a certain candidate for voting "the right way" or "the wrong way" on this or that

issue, because that's the new reality of American politics. Money is the mother's milk of the political system, and it always has been; it has just taken a somewhat different form.

Yes, Otter will seek donations from his corporate and private friends and hold \$500-a-plate dinners to pad the account. And Democrats will do the same thing with Hollywood celebrities and unions. That's how the game is played.

Will Otter make donations aimed at defeating people who have opposed him as governor? Most likely, yes. But again, that's just the nature of politics. It's a rough-and-tumble endeavor in which opponents dig through your garbage looking for dirt and run campaign ads that alert voters to the fact that you sassed your third-grade teacher. They say mean things about you and question your integrity. It has gotten worse and worse over the years - so much so that good, decent people are being discouraged from running for office because of the mud- slinging they know will inevitably come.

Nonetheless, a strong word of caution for Otter: while you are still in office, don't allow donations - or the lack of them - from any individual or group to influence your actions as the state's chief executive. You have the power to determine state contracts, appointments and vetoes, and donations to Otterpac should have no bearing on those important decisions. It's not a concern once you've left office, but until that day, it is.

The governor has been criticized for some questionable decisions that benefited his past campaign donors (the private contract to run the state prison and the school broadband deal, to name a couple), so he should be acutely aware that any donations to Otterpac will be closely scrutinized. Just because a decision would benefit a donor doesn't necessarily mean it was "bought," but he's going to have to make a very strong case that it's the right thing to do for Idaho.

Yes, Otter will use his clout and popularity in an attempt to influence Idaho politics, and yes, he has an advantage most others don't. But he's doing nothing illegal here, and as long as he doesn't allow donations to influence his actions as governor, he really isn't doing anything unethical, either. He's just as free to use campaign finance laws as they exist to his advantage as Democrats and ultra-conservatives are.

Don't like Otter or his PAC? The solution is simple: don't donate to it. Find one you do like, and write' em a check. It's not a great game, but it's the only one in town.