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August 01, 2005
BELTWAY BLOGROLL

'Blawgmaker' Hatches Bid For Senate Seat

Clear majorities of Utahans have sent GOP songwriter **Orrin Hatch** to the Senate for three decades. But another prominent Republican hopes voters will sing a new political tune in 2006 -- and he is using his blog to help serenade them.

Orrin Hatch will face a primary challenger next spring -- and the details will be blogged.

The blogging lawmaker -- I call his sort "blawgmakers" -- is state House Majority Whip **Steve Urquhart**, and his quest seems a tad quixotic when you look at Hatch's numbers. Hatch has never won less than 54 percent of the vote, and has snared 66 percent to 69 percent over his past three elections. According to the latest campaign finance numbers, he also has more than $1 million in the bank and has raised more than $400,000 in the current cycle.

Those aren't exactly figures that embolden challengers, even those with a few years of experience and an electoral base of their own. The people who read the political tea leaves in Utah predict a tough campaign for Urquhart. While pollster **Dan Jones** called Urquhart "the most formidable candidate to run against Sen. Hatch in some time," he also noted, "Sen. Hatch runs very well in the polls and would be very, very difficult to beat."

Utah Republican Party Chairman **Joe Cannon** said the test of Urquhart's popularity will come at the state GOP convention next May. Candidates who win 60 percent of the vote from the 3,500 delegates get the nomination outright and do not have to compete in a primary.

"Steve's goal has to be to get 60 percent in that convention, something that's very, very hard to do," Cannon said. "It's almost inconceivable to me that Sen. Hatch would lose a primary. His numbers are very strong. His likeability is very strong."

But Urquhart, who said Hatch has lost touch with the needs of his constituents -- and added that Hatch's "song-writing career is interfering with his Senate work" -- is undeterred by such talk.

When people back home need help from Washington these days, Urquhart said, they call Utah's junior senator, **Bob Bennett**. "Effectively, he's been doing the work of two senators" because Hatch, who briefly ran for president in 2000, prefers national recognition, Urquhart said. "It's time for a change. We need a senator who pays attention to the state."

One way Urquhart pays attention is with his blog, which he started last November to stay in touch with constituents during state legislative sessions. "This is the people's government," he said, "and I want to make sure they know what's going on and have the opportunity to provide input.... It invites people into the discussion."

The blog already is a prominent feature in Urquhart's Senate campaign. He announced his candidacy there, he has posted notes from the campaign trail, and he has responded to critics of his campaign theme.

"I've already heard that my campaign's emphasis on RESPONSIVENESS TO UTAH ISSUES is boring," he wrote last week. "So be it. Splash often obscures substance, but that doesn't mean substance is unimportant."

Urquhart also is posting draft position statements on the blog and inviting voters to "poke, massage, critique or otherwise provide input. Together, we'll figure out the best way to phrase and present the conservative message." The first posting is on abortion and stem-cell research, and it had generated 22 comments, including two responses to readers from Urquhart, as of early this morning.

"This is a way to tap into a lot of knowledge, a lot of expertise, at very little cost," he said.

Urquhart also said he would love to be a guest on other blogs, in Utah or elsewhere, and field questions from readers. But he already has eschewed the controversial blogging strategy employed by freshman Sen. **John Thune**, the South Dakota Republican who ousted Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle last year. After the election, Thune's campaign-finance records showed that he

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-- Heritage Foundation
-- Higher Ed Watch Blog
-- Information Policy Action Committee
-- InkWell
-- The Insider
-- Just Democracy Blog
-- The Market Center Blog
-- NCLBlog

had paid two bloggers who covered the campaign and attacked Daschle.

"It's just not something I want to do," Urquhart said. "Let me be clear: I will not pay anyone to blog for me."

Urquhart may not need such help anyway. His blog is generating interest from would-be campaign volunteers, and other blogs -- including Save The GOP, Doc Searls and The State of the Beehive -- are talking up his candidacy.

"He's a party insider with a leadership post in the legislature," said **Phil Windley**, who runs the Utah Politics and Technometria blogs. "He's smart, he's conservative, and, most germane to this conversation, he gets and uses technology. ... This is a guy who can not only say 'Technorati,' but he knows what it is!"

The Hatch campaign is taking the threat from Urquhart seriously -- and it may even have a blog of its own soon. "Our campaign is not going to be out-high-teched by anybody," Hatch campaign manager **Dave Hansen** said.

Taking the campaign high tech is all the more important because another Hatch challenger, Democrat **Pete Ashdown**, has an industry background: He founded the Utah Internet service provider XMission. The home page of Ashdown's campaign site is a quasi-blog, and he hosts weekly online chats as well.

As for Urquhart's blog, Hansen said it will not help as much as Urquhart might want because winning a convention requires face-to-face interaction with the delegates. "The blog has a little less effect when it's more retail politics like that," he said.

But Cannon, who said Urquhart's blog is a good read and will be a positive force in the campaign, noted that Utah has a fairly significant Internet population. "If it could be helpful anyplace," Cannon said, "it could be helpful in Utah."

Posted by | 06:06 AM

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Comments

Danny,

Thanks for the mention and good analysis. No doubt, I have an uphill climb ahead of me. My calculus says it's possible. But, then again, I was B-student in calculus.

One thing is sure, though. Just a few years ago, there would be no way would I have thought about taking on his name i.d. and millions. It would have been a fool's bet. Technology, though, now makes some things possible for the little guy. And by that -- whether I win or not -- I mean it also makes some things possible for the ultimate little guy, the individual citizen.

The attention the campaign has received (from good people like you and volunteers) simply wouldn't have happened this fast just a few years ago. I would have announced and instantly been suffocated by the silence. Now, though, I've gained enough traction that Sen. Hatch is calling all legislators (and just hating the answers he's receiving) and his campaign is even talking about an FEC investigation on my campaign's use of that Internet-thingy.

Steve

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Steve

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