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Trump Properties Pull in \$2.3 Million From GOP Groups in 2019

By Megan R. Wilson

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Companies owned by President Donald Trump raked in more than \$2.3 million from campaigns and political committees last year, according to recently released Federal Election Commission data.

The Donald J. Trump for President campaign, the Republican National Committee and Trump Victory — a joint fundraising vehicle for the re-election campaign and RNC — collectively spent nearly \$1.9 million of the 2019 total, making them the top patrons of his businesses. Other types of political action committees, including super PACs, party committees, leadership PACs and congressional campaigns also reported expenditures at Trump's business empire.

It was a continuation of the millions earned by the same businesses since Trump took office in 2017, totaling \$6.7 million in political cash over the past three years.

The one-year total was less than the \$3.1 million spent in 2018, an election year, but it puts the 2020 election cycle on track to top the \$4.4 million spent in 2017 and 2018 combined.

Political committees' fundraising and expenditure disclosures for all of 2019 were due at the end of January, although a complete tally of the expenditures wasn't immediately available because the FEC takes time to process the filings.

The totals are a fraction of the overall amount of money campaigns and committees raise and spend each year, but the president's critics have raised questions about self-dealing. Trump has refused to divest from his business interests, which prompted multiple lawsuits. Congressional Democrats are continuing their probes into the connection between the commander-in-chief and his empire.

Where It Went

The president has properties, hotels and golf courses around the world. Campaign cash flowed to them in New York; Washington, D.C.; Las Vegas; Charlotte, N.C.; Miami; West Palm Beach, Fla.; Bedminster, N.J.; Chicago; and a Virginia golf course that sits just outside the nation's capital.

Trump has a private golf course in Charlotte, where the Republican National Convention is being held in August. But convention-related spending at Trump businesses began last spring, when the Committee on Arrangements spent \$1,900 on one instance of travel to Mar-a-Lago.

The Trump International Hotel & Tower New York and its D.C. counterpart were the most lucrative venues among political spenders. In addition, Trump's campaign paid nearly \$338,000 to rent space at Trump Tower in New York last year.

Public Citizen released a report in November analyzing the breadth of spending at Trump's properties, a large portion of which flies under the radar. The report showed that at least 51 business groups; 16 charities; 41 conservative advocacy organizations; and 28 foreign governments, officials, or political groups spent money or held events at Trump properties since the 2016 election, based on media reporting. This money doesn't need to be disclosed.

Party On

Campaign finance disclosures can be vague when describing how money was spent, but costs affiliated with hosting events at Trump properties appear to be the No. 1 type of expense, with 11 single transactions in that category ringing up at \$50,000 or more.

For example, Trump Victory spent almost \$215,000 in one March 2019 transaction at Mar-a-Lago, the private club in West Palm Beach, for “facility rental/catering services.” The RNC threw a nearly \$170,000 event at Trump National Doral Miami in November.

The RNC didn’t respond to a request for comment.

The Great America Committee, a leadership PAC founded by Vice President Mike Pence, spent almost \$51,000 to rent space and cater an event at Trump’s D.C. hotel in February 2019.

Super PACs spent some \$158,000 at various Trump properties in 2019, led by Senate Leadership Fund, which is run by a former chief of staff to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), and America First Action, a Trump-aligned group. Brian O. Walsh, the president of America First Action, didn’t respond to a request for comment.

In December, the Senate Leadership Fund reported a \$52,000 event at the Trump International Hotel Washington, D.C., its third event there last year. Officials with the fund didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Facility rental and catering at Trump businesses totaled more than \$1.7 million. Expenses labeled “meals” and “food/beverage” with no other explanation tacked on \$15,500. Line items listed as “travel” and “lodging” amounted to some \$84,000.

While such spending at the president’s properties is not illegal “on its face,” it sets a troubling precedent, said Robert Maguire, the research director at the Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW).

Maguire said congressional Republicans embracing the president’s businesses and spending money there, rather than investigate the conflicts of interest within that arrangement, “sends a signal to the president that it’s OK, nothing is going to happen. And it leaves the public out in the cold, because, when he does make a decision, it leaves the public asking — does he have the national interest at heart, or his personal interests at heart?”

CREW is currently suing the president, alleging he violated the Constitution’s Emoluments clauses: one that prohibits public officials from receiving gifts from foreign governments, and another that says a president may not receive an “emolument” from U.S. federal or state governments beyond his salary.

Top Spenders

The top five spenders at Trump properties in 2019 all had ties to the president; a total of \$263,000 was spent by other candidates and committees.

By comparison, political committees spent \$263,633 at Trump properties between 2007 and 2014, the year before Trump launched his presidential bid, FEC records show.

Roughly four dozen members or candidates used political money for visits to Trump properties.

The top individual spender, Wisconsin Republican Sean Duffy, left Congress in September. He billed a \$17,179 stay at Trump's D.C. hotel to his campaign two months before that, listing it in disclosure reports as "travel." In May, he spent \$3,600 at the hotel for the same purpose.

Duffy, who now works at the lobbying firm BGR Group, did not respond to an emailed request for comment.

Between March and mid-June, Cotton Victory — a joint fundraising vehicle of Sen. Tom Cotton's (R- Ark.) campaign and Sen. Thom Tillis' (R-N.C.) leadership PAC, the Republican Majority Fund — spent \$15,670 at Trump's D.C. hotel for room rental, catering and audio-visual services.

One Republican fundraiser, who asked not to be named, said that an average-sized fundraiser of about 25 people can cost anywhere from \$5,000 to \$10,000, depending on the venue, menu choices and alcohol selection.

The campaign of John James, a Republican who ran for the Senate in 2018 and is now challenging Sen. Gary Peters (D-Mich.), spent nearly \$4,000 for stays at Trump's D.C. hotel, including \$2,391 in charges in January, five months before formally announcing his second statewide bid. At the end of October, his campaign billed a \$1,595 stay.

A spokeswoman for the James campaign didn't respond to a request for comment.

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