

Wisconsin Democracy Campaign: Leading candidates for Governor spread their money around

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The leading GOP candidate for governor who claims to be a political outsider has contributed, with his wife, more than \$200,000 to Republican and conservative candidates over the last 12 years.

Millionaire businessman Tim Michels vowed at the start of his campaign last spring that he would reject lobbyist and political action committee (PAC) contributions and limit individual contributions to \$500 so that he wouldn't feel beholden to special interests.

However, Michels has a long and generous track record as a special interest player who has given lavishly to legislative and statewide candidates.

Michels, who runs the family owned Michels Corp., and his wife, Barb, contributed \$207,650 to Republican and conservative legislative and statewide candidates between January 2010 and December 2021.

Those campaign contributions climbed to \$541,400 over the 12-year period when you include extended family. No Michels family member has contributed to a Democrat since former Gov. Jim Doyle in 2002.

Michels Corp. is one of the state's largest construction companies and has received about \$1.3 billion in state road contracts since 2008.

In addition to his campaign contributions and business contracts with the state, Michels was a member in 2019 of the board of directors for Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce, the state's largest business lobby and a leading source

of pro-Republican electioneering in state elections. Michels was also a past president of the Wisconsin Transportation Builders Association, the state's road construction lobby.

The top recipients of campaign contributions from Tim and Barb Michels were:

Former GOP Gov. Scott Walker, \$58,000;

Former Republican Attorney General Brad Schimel, \$30,000;

Former Wisconsin Supreme Court candidate Michael Screnock, \$20,000;

Former Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Daniel Kelly, \$20,000.

Much the same can be said of Republican candidate for governor Rebecca Kleefisch, who was lieutenant governor for eight years between 2011 and 2018.

Kleefisch's campaign committee, People for Rebecca, and Rebecca PAC, a political action committee she created in 2020, as well as the candidate and her husband, Joel, a former state Assembly representative, have personally contributed about \$130,000 to Republican and conservative nonpartisan legislative and statewide candidates. There were no contributions to Democrats by the couple or her committees between January 2010 and December 2021.

The top recipients of Kleefisch's contributions were:

Deborah Kerr, a 2021 state school superintendent candidate, \$5,000;

Dan Kapanke, a former GOP state Senate candidate from La Crosse, \$4,000;

Republican Sen. John Jagler, of Watertown, \$3,500.

Incumbent Democratic Gov. Tony Evers and his wife, Kathy, and his campaign committee contributed about \$14,000 to other Democrats and liberal nonpartisan candidates between January 2010 and December 2021. Evers's campaign committee made most of those contributions at \$13,460.

The top recipients of Evers's campaign contributions were:

Democratic Attorney General Josh Kaul, \$3,457;

Democratic Sen. Brad Pfaff, of Onalaska, \$2,000;

Patty Schachtner, a former Democratic senator from Somerset, \$2,000.

Rep. Timothy Ramthun, of Campbellsport, made one \$500 contribution from his campaign committee to the Republican Assembly Campaign Committee in 2018.