

Putting allies on the payroll

GOP-controlled State Senate has minor-party help

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ALBANY — At least eight leaders and members of the Independence Party and three members of the state Conservative Party whose voters were crucial to Republicans maintaining control of the Senate two years ago are on the state payroll, working for the Senate majority, state records show.

It's part of a tradition of Republicans and Democrats hiring members of important minor parties.

For example, Richard S. Bellando, an at-large member of the state Independence Party and a former vice chairman, makes \$31,824 in a part-time job as a legislative aide to the Senate's Republican majority. James M. Thomas of Binghamton, the Broome County Conservative Party chairman, works for Senate majority operations at \$79,976 a year.

"Because of this rich tradition of patronage in New York, the taxpayers lose out if you hire someone purely for political benefit and they don't do the job," said Blair Horner of the New York Public Interest Research Group. "Ultimately it's the taxpayers' money and if there is a question as to why an individual was chosen, the person who made the decision should be able to give a public answer."

Shared political vision

The spokesman for the Senate's Republican majority said the hiring of qualified minor party leaders and members reflects a shared political vision.

"Many of the employees you cite have worked in state or local government for many years, and are an asset to the people of this state," Senate majority spokesman Scott Reif said. "It's no secret that we have a strong working relationship with the Independence and Conservative parties based on a shared desire to improve the quality of life in New York State."

Independence Party chairman Frank MacKay declined to comment.

State Conservative Party chair-



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man Mike Long denied that his members are part of any patronage deal with the Senate Republicans. He said the hires are people with extensive expertise in their jobs and their employment doesn't influence the Conservative Party's endorsement.

Long said his party operates on ideology, not patronage, and noted the Conservative Party in 2011 withdrew endorsements from Republican senators after they voted to legalize gay marriage and withdrew the endorsement of former Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno (R-Brunswick) after he made a budget deal that raised taxes.

"The jobs don't get me or the party leaders on the state level to move in any direction," Long said. "I'm very comfortable that we have very clean hands."

Independence and Conservative party members on the Senate payroll declined to comment or didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

The role of the minor parties has been critical for Republicans to keep control of the Senate majority despite a growing 2:1 advantage for Democrats among voters statewide. The source of the power of these minor parties is in fusion voting, which allows a candidate to amass votes on several different ballot lines. New York is one of just seven states that

still allow fusion voting, which was popular in the 19th century.

In New York in the 2016 State Senate elections, Republican Sen. Carl Marcellino lost to Democrat James F. Gaughran by 4,632 votes in a Democrat-Republican matchup in the 6th Senate District. But Marcellino's additional 1,666 Independence Party votes and 7,736 Conservative Party votes helped give him a win by 1,761 votes after Gaughran attracted votes on the Working Families and Women's Equality lines.

In the 7th Senate District, Democrat Adam Haber beat Republican Elaine Phillips by 2,007 votes in the Democrat-Republican matchup. But thanks to 5,961 Conservative votes and 1,497 Independence votes, Phillips won by 3,277 votes after Haber got votes on the Working Families and Women's Equality lines.

Without those Independence and Conservative parties' votes, Democrats would have controlled the Senate the past two years.

Boosting winning margin

But minor party votes also help Republicans who win the Republican-Democratic matchup by substantially boosting the winning margin to make the Republicans appear to be a better bet for cam-

paign contributors and to stave off challengers.

For example, votes from Independence and Conservative parties' ballot lines in 2016 often more than doubled the winning margin for candidates including Sen. Kemp Hannon (R-Garden City) and greatly narrowed the losing margin of Republican Sen. Michael Vendetto from 5,777 votes to just 314 votes to Democratic Sen. John Brooks of Seaford, setting up an intense fight for that Senate seat this election.

Democrats and the Assembly don't have the same close relationship with minor parties, but minor party candidates have still ended up on minor party payrolls.

Sara Couch organized for the Working Families Party in 2008-09 then worked for the Senate in 2010-11 as a regional coordinator around Albany, where she worked on health issues and Democratic campaigns. She was paid \$15,169 in 2010, her only full year.

Lee Kolesnikoff, an Independence Party vice chairman, had worked as a district office manager for former Republican Assemb. Robert Prentiss of Colonie for three years, making about \$18,000 a year and had backed Democrats and Republicans as the Saratoga County party chairman.

OTHERS WHO LANDED JOBS WITH SENATE

In addition to Bellando and Thomas, the Senate payroll has included:

■ **Thomas S. Connolly Jr.**, a vice chairman of the Independence Party and director of operations for Sen. Phil Boyle (R-Bay Shore) at a salary of **\$109,980**.

■ **Daniel Pagano**, counsel to the Westchester County Independence Party, is counsel to Sen. Terrence Murphy (R-Carmel) and makes **\$14,976** a year in that job.

■ **Dhyalma Vazquez**, an at-large member of the state Independence Party, works as the Senate's coordinator of vendor responsibility examiners at a salary of **\$53,040**.

■ **Giulio A. Cavallo**, a vice chairman of the Independence Party, works for the Senate personnel office as a special health adviser and makes **\$60,996**.

■ **Terry Blosser-Bernardo**, wife of Len Bernardo, the Ulster County Independence Party chairman, works for the Senate as a graphic design assistant and is paid **\$28,132**.

■ **Pasquale Lagana** had worked for the Senate as a special assistant, making **\$20,000** a year, and was a leader in the Westchester County Independence Party. Lagana declined to comment.

■ **Kara Stimson**, an Independence Party committee member, works as a secretary for Sen. Catherine Young (R-Olean) at **\$28,512** a year.

■ **Laura A. Schreiner**, Lindenhurst, who has been a state Conservative Party committeewoman, is paid **\$74,972** in Senate majority operations.

■ **Gerard Kassar**, Kings County Conservative Party chairman, is the chief of staff for Sen. Martin Golden (R-Brooklyn) and is paid **\$109,668**. Kassar said he got his first part-time legislative job after volunteering on a campaign in 1979 for a Republican endorsed by the Conservative Party.

AP / HANS PENNING