

Inside The New Effort To Flip The Iowa House

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While the non-stop parade of presidential candidates through Iowa dominates state and national news, a group of prominent Iowa Democrats have launched a PAC to refocus attention on a more local matter: retaking the Iowa House.

The [Better Democracy PAC](#), formed by Fred and Charlotte Hubbell in mid-May, aims to give Democrats a major financial boost in their efforts to break the full-Republican control of state government. [In their first financial filing this Friday](#), they reported raising \$230,000.

“It’s now or never, really, to stop this Republican trifecta,” Fred Hubbell told Starting Line in a recent interview. “If they win in 2020, they’re going to gerrymander it, and Democrats and many Iowans will be in the wilderness for decades.”

Democrats need to flip just four seats in the 2020 election (and hold all their own districts) to capture the House majority. Republicans currently hold a 53 to 46 majority, though Democrats will go back up to 47 after Ross Wilburn wins his unopposed August special election in Ames. The Iowa Senate, meanwhile, has a 32 to 18 Republican majority.

Fred Hubbell called it “unfinished business” of his own, following his defeat to Governor Kim Reynolds in last November’s election.

"We've seen what happens over the past three years when Republicans have absolute control," Charlotte Hubbell said. "They took away funding from Planned Parenthood. They took away funding for sex education. They rolled back energy efficiency funding. They tried to roll back funding for solar energy, not yet though. They continued with attacks on unions. They continued underfunding education."

Citing Republicans' recent efforts to restructure the Iowa Supreme Court nomination process to give their party even more power, Charlotte pointed to why they named their organization Better Democracy.

"This is about in the short term taking back the Iowa House," she said. "But in the long term, this is about putting in some checks and balances, bringing some democracy back to our state government."

The Hubbells have brought on board a number of top Iowa Democrats to aid in the effort.

All four of the most-recent Democratic gubernatorial nominees/governors are involved: Tom Vilsack, Chet Culver and Jack Hatch are all a part of the planning and fundraising.

Hatch explained that he called Fred a few weeks after the election to urge him to stay involved, but found that Fred was already starting his plans for the PAC. The organization would have gotten off the ground even sooner had Fred not suffered a bad biking accident in Arizona last winter that put him in a hospital bed for over a month.

"Fred knew he had to do something," Hatch said. "Nobody could have done this except for Fred and Charlotte ... So, you have the two former governors, the two former gubernatorial candidates – that's a really significant statement to tell Democrats that we are ready to take this challenge of flipping the House."

The 2014 Democratic nominee added that it's important for past candidates to keep active in the effort, even if they lose.

"In this state, we had nobody to lead [after 2014]," Hatch said. "Dave Loebsack didn't want that role after I lost. We kind of wandered."

Fred Hubbell has put in \$100,000 of his own money to the effort, and he and Charlotte plan on doing more. Jack Hatch and his wife Sonja Roberts have contributed a combined \$25,000. Bill Knapp is in for \$50,000 so far, and Fred Weitz has given \$25,000. Several other Hubbell family members have kicked in decent-sized checks as well.

The Hubbells explained that most of those donors have already committed to giving more next year.

The House Truman Fund, a part of the Iowa Democratic Party infrastructure led by Democratic Minority Leader Todd Prichard, is the committee that leads the legislative campaign effort in that chamber. The Hubbells, however, stressed that this PAC was a value-add effort, even though it won't be sending the funds directly to the Truman Fund.

"We're not trying to take over the effort by any means, we're trying to support what the House Truman Fund and the Democratic Party is doing across the state," Fred stated.

Fred and Charlotte both stressed that they're encouraging their donors to continue giving what they normally do to the state party, then go above and beyond to their own PAC to supplement the House.

And there is a lot of extra money that the Hubbells can bring to the table.

Early on in his gubernatorial campaign, some Iowa politics watchers wondered if Fred Hubbell would simply self-fund his entire run. Instead, he turned out to be a rather prolific fundraiser himself, breezing through past fundraising records for an Iowa governor's race. The Hubbells' longtime connections in the business world opened up a lot of extra donor connections that no one else in the party has been able to tap to the same extent.

The Hubbells say they have no upper limit on what they plan to raise.

For how they'll spend it, they're still in the very early stages of that planning. One thing it won't be spent on, they noted, is high overhead. The PAC only has two part-time staffers right now – a compliance person and a fundraising aide. And they hope to save 80% to 90% of the funds for the election year. There's no current plan to have an executive director running it – they want the vast majority of the funds to go straight to helping candidates.

Fred was doubtful there will be TV ads up next year that say "Paid for by Better Democracy PAC," explaining it's more effective for candidates to run those. Much of the money may just go directly to candidates who they decide to target.

"The candidate is going to have to demonstrate to us how hard they're working," Fred said. "We're going to want to know how many doors they're knocking every week, how much money they're raising. We're only going to support those candidates who are working hard enough to win and have the right volunteer support and credibility in their community."

And most of the key districts are obvious right off the bat: defending the new Democratic suburban seats in the Des Moines metro, Cedar Falls and Cedar Rapids (Hatch noted a strong Hubbell campaign helped boost the Des Moines-area candidates). There are a few more suburban seats ripe for a Democratic pick-up in Ankeny, Hiawatha/Marion and Bettendorf. The Fort Dodge and Fairfield seats are ones that Democrats will want to win back after losing them in 2018. And the GOP-held Council Bluffs and Decorah-based districts are other top targets.

"[Our donors] want to make sure they're willing to give us money because we'll make good, solid, business-like decisions to put the money into the right districts," Fred said.

Still, having an outside PAC could allow for some more flexibility and creativity. Fred mentioned they may be able to help in a district or two that the party isn't targeting.

And they hope to help out with candidate events or with other ideas like a bus tour of female legislators or candidates.

"We hope candidates are going to run on something other than a marginal plan," Hatch said of candidates' messaging. "It's going to be significant, it's going to capture the imagination of the electorate. I think we'll choose candidates that do that."

Hatch also noted that Culver is still popular in parts of rural Iowa, and they may try to get him to tour around.

But regardless of how the details play out, the plan boils down to one simple thing: breaking Republicans' grip on all branches of Iowa government.

Though Charlotte suggested Democrats rethink how they message around what is typically referred to as the "Republican trifecta."

"We need to get away from this notion of a trifecta. It's something positive, you want to win it," Charlotte said. "I think we need to talk about monopoly control of the state legislature, of the executive office. A monopoly is a bad thing."

And for the next year and a half, that's exactly what Republicans will continue to have: a monopoly of power in Iowa. If they're able to hold onto that monopoly in the 2020 races, the longterm consequences to Iowans could far exceed what even the presidential candidates are talking about in this state.

"The best chance to stop that now is to take control of the Iowa House," explained Fred.

by Pat Rynard
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