

Whittemore case leaves political fundraising void

By Martha Bellisle, Reno Gazette-Journal

For decades, Harvey Whittemore was considered one of Nevada's key political fundraisers, thanks to his effective lobbying skills, powerful clients and seemingly endless energy.

But after his former partners accused him of embezzling money and the FBI began investigating his campaign contribution activities – highlighted Wednesday by federal grand jury hearings that could lead to felony charges – Whittemore is all but gone from Nevada's fundraising landscape. Many recipients of his efforts have dumped the money he raised for them in an effort to distance themselves from his troubles.

As the 2012 election cycle heats up, the void left by Whittemore's departure from high-profile fundraising activities will need to be filled by a list of other well-connected supporters, some political watchers said.

"Harvey's departure won't change anything," Las Vegas political consultant Sig Rogich said. "There are a handful of guys around the state who are significant fundraisers – we've raised a lot of money throughout the years. There still will be contributors out there. They'll just deal with a different individual."

But Pete Ernaut, president of government and public affairs at R&R Partners, a high-powered political consulting firm, said Nevada's fundraising environment has changed during the past decade. Candidates no longer rely on a few key people for their fundraising needs, he said. Instead, they look to professional companies to handle those tasks, he said.

"The era of the prominent fundraiser is over," said Ernaut,

who has managed campaigns over the years for a variety of candidates, including governors, members of Congress and judges. “The modern campaign is more sophisticated, more scientific and more organized, and these companies can provide call lists, fundraising events and distribute direct mail.

“They can do everything, not just bringing in big donations, but also reaching small donors.”

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