From Charlie Crist to Chuck Norris, Political Endorsements Cut Both Ways

By: Kenric Ward | Posted: April 23, 2012 3:55 AM

Virtually every day between now and Nov. 6, voters will be bombarded with political endorsements in campaigns ranging from county commissions to the White House.

Do they matter?

In some cases, a big-name supporter with a large following can have an impact at pivotal moments. But most political analysts say the electoral effect of endorsements is overblown and fleeting at best.

"Endorsements are really part of a momentum narrative. If you have solid fundraising, important community leaders' endorsements become icing on the cake," says Brian Hughes, a political strategist and former communications director at the Republican Party of Florida.

"In circumstances where endorsements are widely seen as quid pro quo, they become meaningless and may actually do more harm than they do good."

Roger Stone, a Miami Beach-based consultant whose political experience dates back to the Nixon administration, calls endorsements "a mixed bag."

Noting that big names can drive media coverage and fundraising, Stone points to Donald Trump's recent Twitter tweet backing first-time candidate Ron DeSantis in the 6th Congressional District.

"Trump's tweet spurred coverage and opened doors," Stone noted. Shortly thereafter, DeSantis filed a healthy quarter-million-dollar finance report.

But Stone cautions that rank-and-file voters rarely follow endorsements.

"Does anyone think if Ron Paul endorsed Mitt Romney that would mean Paul voters would vote for Mitt? Hell, no."
Returning to Trump, Stone believes that the billionaire’s endorsement of Romney didn’t amount to as much as Trump’s robo calls targeted to blue-collar and working-class districts in the key primary states of Ohio and Michigan.

Conservative consultant Alice Stewart agrees that actions speak louder than words.

"For anyone to put their name on the line is flattering. But what's really beneficial is when the news cycle is done, to use some shoe leather and work the phones to generate support," said Stewart, who most recently worked as spokeswoman for Rick Santorum.

The same goes for special-interest groups.

"Organizations will endorse with a big news conference, and you never hear from them again. That doesn't bring in any votes," said Stewart, who previously served as Michele Bachmann's spokeswoman.

Endorsements and endorsers are most effective when they are deployed strategically, Stewart said from her home in Little Rock, Ark.

For example, if a candidate needs to shore up his or her base with conservatives, tea party endorsements can be targeted at certain times and places -- or several like-minded groups' endorsements can be packaged together for larger impact.

Candidates will often hold endorsements in reserve to announce them at times to counter negative press or to dilute media coverage of rival campaigns.

"But if it's a big-name person, get it out ASAP," Stewart advises.

Another effective way to geographically maximize endorsements is to send candidates onto the campaign trail in one direction and dispatch their endorsers elsewhere.

Stewart said candidates and voters should be leery of individuals and organizations that demand a quid-pro-quo or an ironclad pledge in exchange for support.

"There are situations where endorsers require payment, and those groups rarely do anything," she said.

On the other hand, conservatives say that groups such as the Susan B. Anthony List and the NRA can be useful if a candidate is free to modify pledges and still garner their support.

Hughes added, "Some organizational endorsements are as much a curse as blessing."

"Most Democrats tie themselves into knots in a quest for labor union endorsements. But if they are in conservative areas, big labor's ultra-left agenda can actually make a
One timely endorsement that made a substantial impact was Charlie Crist’s backing of John McCain just prior to Florida’s 2008 presidential primary.

"Crist was at the height of his popularity as governor and when he shifted his support from Rudy Giuliani to Senator McCain, it seemed to shift some voters with him," recounts Sean Foreman, political science professor at Barry University in Miami Lakes.

"Of course, there were other reasons why McCain won the Florida primary, including his support from military veterans and in the Cuban-American community, but Crist’s endorsement helped to put him over the top in Florida and to win the Republican nomination."

Still, Foreman noted that endorsements can cut both ways -- and cites Crist as the knife.

"When Crist ran for U.S. Senate, and ultimately left the Republican Party to run as an independent, it led to some dilemmas for his supporters. State Senator Mike Fasano endorsed Crist and stood by him when Crist turned independent.

"Pasco County Republican Party leaders tried to kick Fasano out of the party. Then Fasano was removed from his position of chair of the Senate Criminal Justice Appropriations Subcommittee, ostensibly for his opposition to privatizing prisons. But it did not help that this was not the first time that he bucked party leaders.

"Meanwhile Democratic state Senator Al Lawson and state House member Luis Garcia supported Crist. They both received backlash from their party for picking Crist over Democratic nominee Kendrick Meek in that race," Foreman noted.

Political tacticians agree that sincerity is crucial in maximizing the credibility of any endorsement -- and Foreman questioned the value of Trump's currency on that basis.

"The Donald Trump endorsement was seemingly passed around to several candidates, and Newt Gingrich thought he had it until Trump appeared with Romney. "While it gathered a lot of media interest -- like most things that Mr. Trump tends to do -- it was not the proper way to handle a serious presidential endorsement," Foreman said.

For well-funded and well-known candidates, endorsements may yield little benefit beyond giving the media something to write about during a slow news cycle, says Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at Florida Atlantic University.

"For candidates like Mitt Romney or Barack Obama, there is little gain from the slew of endorsements they have and will receive."

But Wagner points to a key exception.
"If a candidate gets an endorsement that is contrary to the political fault lines it can create a larger media event. If a well-known conservative would endorse Obama, or a well-known Democrat were to endorse Romney, for example.

"Yet, even then, the coverage would likely dissipate over time," Wagner concluded.

Stewart maintains that big guns can make a difference ... if they're willing to work.

"When Mike Huckabee was running for president in 2008, you could not beat the endorsement of Chuck Norris," said Stewart, then an adviser to the Arkansas governor's campaign.

"While the name Chuck Norris doesn't normally come to mind when you think of political endorsements, he was one of the -- if not the -- most powerful endorsements we had. Chuck had a strong following with the youth vote and evangelicals and he could certainly draw a crowd."

Stewart said that active backing by the movie-TV action hero was especially valuable "because Chuck and his wife Gina energized people who would not normally be interested in politics and got them involved."

Stone, too, acknowledges that big names, strategically employed, can make all the difference.