Florida’s West has the money, needs votes

Tea party favorite seeks re-election

By Sean Lengell

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Rep. Allen B. West, the acerbic Florida Republican who emerged two years ago as a leading face of the national tea party movement, is rarely short of words. And as the freshman amps up his re-election bid, neither is he short of money.

Despite holding office less than 18 months, Mr. West has built one of the most powerful fundraising machines in national politics, as his campaign has raised $7.6 million through the first quarter of this year - more than any rank-and-file House member.

Mr. West's campaign war chest ranks only behind Rep. Michele Bachmann's $12.8 million and Speaker John A. Boehner's $14.7 million through April, the latest available campaign-finance numbers from the Federal Election Commission.

But Mrs. Bachmann's failed bid for the 2012 presidential nomination gives the Minnesotan's House campaign a unique advantage. And Mr. Boehner, as the top House Republican, is more concerned with raising money for his party than with fending off challengers in his Ohio district.

"He is not your average freshman ... he has successfully elevated his profile since he came to Washington," said William A. Galston, a senior fellow and politics scholar with the Brookings Institution, a liberal-leaning Washington think tank. "He's a populist hero."

While outside groups such as political action committees and so-called super PACs have flooded money into congressional races this year, the vast majority of Mr. West's contributions have come from individual donors, as he has received only $47,050 from outside groups, according to OpenSecrets.org, a nonpartisan website that tracks money in politics.

But much of the Florida Republican's campaign money has come from donors outside the state drawn to his image as an outspoken conservative and fiscal hawk.

"The reason he's drawing money is people want him to stay in the Congress - they see his value," said Pam Wohlschlegel, co-founder of the Palm Beach County Tea Party and Florida coordinator for the national group, the Tea Party Patriots.
Democrats "are afraid of him, and they have a right to be afraid of him, because he's strong, and he's going to get stronger."

But Mr. West the lawmaker isn't as ideologically strong as Mr. West the candidate, a situation not lost on some conservative groups and tea party activists who aren't thrilled with his voting record.

The influential fiscal conservative advocacy group Club for Growth, on its 2011 congressional voting scorecard, gave Mr. West an "anemic" score of 64 percent for voting to raise the debt ceiling and for "repeatedly" voting against spending cuts.

And the conservative Heritage Action for America's legislative scorecard, which is updated regularly, pegs the Floridian with an overall legislative grade of 70 percent - just slightly above the House Republican average of 66 percent.

Erin Kanoy Siefring, Heritage Action's director of House relations, called Mr. West a "true patriot" with a sincere desire to uphold limited government values. But she said it's a challenge for conservatives from districts with significant Democratic populations, like Mr. West, to balance their convictions with the wishes of their constituents.

"That's very hard to do, because you're a contradiction in and of yourself, and I think that's a struggle that Congressman West has been trying to tackle," she said.

But if Mr. West honestly explains his votes to his constituents, and they still re-elect him, then he is "doing the right thing, no matter what anybody scores them."

A West victory in November is far from a guarantee. He first must fend off a well-known primary opponent in Martin County Sheriff Bob Crowder, who has raised less than $27,000 through April.

And Democratic front-runner Patrick Murphy has raised about $1.8 million - a huge amount for an upstart challenge this early in the race.

Redistricting also will pose a re-election challenge for Mr. West. The GOP-controlled state Legislature redrew his district to include more Democrats, which led him to relocate and run for re-election in a different nearby district with fewer Democratic voters.

The new map caused many - including Mr. West - to wonder if the Florida Republican establishment was trying to squeeze him out.

Kevin Wagner, a political science professor at Florida Atlantic University, said Mr. West's "pragmatic" voting tendencies likely will help, not hurt, his re-election odds in a district not winnable by a pure tea-party candidate.

"You have to appeal to other kinds of voters here, and I think he's capable of doing it," Mr. Wagner said.