O’Rourke donors have eyes on other Democrats

Tougher to tap for presidential race

Allan Chrisman was part of Beto O’Rourke’s 2018 campaign juggernaut, sending $500 to help the Texan try to unseat Sen. Ted Cruz.

But Mr. O’Rourke shouldn’t count on Mr. Chrisman’s help in the 2020 presidential battle, said the Duke University emeritus professor, who cast his support last year as more a chance to swing a vulnerable Republican–held seat than backing for the 46-year-old former congressman.

“I wouldn’t automatically line up behind him,” Mr. Chrisman, a registered independent who backed Sen. Bernard Sanders in the 2016 presidential race, told The Washington Times. “My decision to contribute to his campaign was related to that specific situation he was running in.”

Mr. O’Rourke deployed astonishing fundraising skills in his Senate bid and collected $80 million even as he fell short in the race. Of that, some $37 million came from small donors who gave $200 or less. The rest came from larger-dollar donors, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Those donations give Mr. O’Rourke a massive list of supporters to tap, but some of the donors contacted by The Washington Times said they shouldn’t be taken for granted.

One educator from Vermont, who donated $25, said he isn’t sure Mr. O’Rourke is ready to make the leap from congressman to the White House, and a farmer in Iowa, who gave $1,000 to the Senate campaign, said she had reservations about his qualifications at that level.

“The door is open to Beto, but my biggest thing about him would be his lack of experience,” the Iowa woman said. “What he needs to do is some preparation and educating and informing himself on issues to show that he is ready to take his place.”

The donors will apparently have to make their decision, though.

The NBC affiliate in El Paso, Mr. O’Rourke’s hometown and political district when he was a U.S. House member, has reported that Mr. O’Rourke will announce his candidacy Thursday. KTSM, channel 9, said Mr. O’Rourke “confirmed via text to KTSM Wednesday afternoon that he is seeking the Democratic nomination.”

With Mr. O’Rourke apparently deciding to enter the race the day after Vanity Fair wrote a glowing cover story, former Vice President Joseph R. Biden is now the biggest name on the “maybe” list.
Steven Billet, director of the masters in legislative affairs at the Graduate School of Political Management at George Washington University, said that type of attention will help Mr. O’Rourke raise money if he does enter the race.

“He is like the shiny new thing out there, or at least there are a lot of Democrats trying to make him into that, and because of that, I and possibly others think he is going to shake things up enough that people will pay attention and shove money into his [campaign],” Mr. Billet said.

Donors are taking a wait-and-see approach. Liberal activists who steered clear of bashing Mr. O’Rourke in the Senate campaign, when he was their champion against Mr. Cruz, have started questioning his commitment to their issues and are wondering why he deserves their support more than Sen. Elizabeth Warren or Mr. Sanders.

“Did he give them hell in Texas? Absolutely,” Kerri Evelyn Harris, a liberal who ran for the U.S. Senate in Delaware last year, recently told The Times. “Was he the right person in Texas? Absolutely. But the right person for the nation? Absolutely not.”

Mr. O’Rourke came within 3 percentage points of unseating Mr. Cruz. He also outraised him by a more than 2–1 margin while refusing contributions from political action committees, which has been an early rallying cry among several of the 2020 presidential contenders.

Of the itemized contributions Mr. O’Rourke raised, nearly 45 percent came from outside Texas — including $3 million from the New York City area and nearly $2 million from Los Angeles, according to Open Secrets.

“I wonder how many people pushed money into his race that are now aligned with other candidates,” Mr. Billet said. “That is a big question here.”

Mr. O’Rourke ended his campaign with only a couple of hundred thousand dollars in the bank, and he has not actively fundraised in the ensuing months, meaning he would be starting from scratch. Senate Democrats who have entered the race have more money than Mr. O’Rourke to carry over from their campaigns.

Mark P. Jones, a political science professor at Rice University in Houston, said Mr. O’Rourke would have a lot riding on his early fundraising reports if he joins the race.

“Any failure to raise substantial amounts of money over a short period of time is going to be interpreted as a sign of weakness and will raise questions of whether it was lightning in a bottle and whether he can translate his success in Texas onto the national stage,” Mr. Jones said.

He said the dynamic is also different between the general election matchup with Mr. Cruz, where Democrats were unified, and a primary, where party members have other choices.

The people who helped fund Mr. O’Rourke’s campaign say they admired him as a candidate and the unconventional way in which he ran, but they also worry that his fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants style could come off as naive in a presidential campaign, where the electorate has a number of choices and could be more likely to settle on what seems to be a more conventional bet.

Political observers, meanwhile, suggested that his family’s wealth might not sit well with primary voters who are looking for someone who has gone through the school of hard knocks.

Philip Saunders Jr., the head of an economic consulting firm in Massachusetts who donated $500 to Mr. O’Rourke last year, said he wants Democrats to field a nominee from the nation’s heartland and that he is waiting to see who emerges before he opens his wallet.

“If he was the only one running from the heartland, I probably would do something,” Mr. Saunders said. “But as long as there are one or two others from the heartland running, then I don’t know enough to care that much which one of them gets the nomination and I will wait until one of them does.”

Andrew Turf, a luxury retail real estate consultant in Los Angeles, donated $1,300 to Mr. O’Rourke last year. He said Mr. Biden is his top man in 2020, though he would “love to see” Mr. O’Rourke in the vice president’s slot.

“To beat Trump, someone needs to be seasoned and dirty,” Mr. Turf said. “Because Trump is the lowest form of a human, someone needs to carry the Midwest ... and I believe (rightly or wrongly) Biden is that man.”