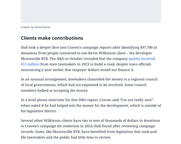
archive today
Search for any URL or keyword
Save this URL in your archive to remember later.
Remember to vote for this URL after saved.
Mirror
Save this URL
Save
Log in
Flags
Comments
Profile
Settings
Help
Block Google trackers
Block Facebook trackers
Log in | Subscribe
Subscribe to The Sentinel for unlimited access to our award-winning journalism.

POWER & SECRECY

Young NC senator is a big fundraiser. How a lobbyist and his wife tie into that success.

By Dan Kane
March 15, 2026 5:00 AM



Senator Brent W. Craven (left) is a big fundraiser for Senate President pro tem Phil Berger (R-Rockingham County) and is the Senate's senior pro tem. On March 12, 2026, at the Senate Chamber in Raleigh, N.C., Senator Craven, left, talks with Senate President pro tem Phil Berger, right. | Photo by Ethan Hyman, The News & Observer

Key Takeaways

- Legislators accepted campaign contributions from lobbyists.
- Lobbyists' spouses also contribute to the state's senior pro tem, Brent Craven.

For the 2024 election, North Carolina's prospect Republican state senator pulled off a rare fundraising triumph for a lawmaker who had only served one full term.

Sen. Brent Craven, 36, represents Senate District 26, a rural expanse stretching south from Greensboro to the North Carolina Piedmont that includes the Randolph County homeset. It is a solidly Republican district, and Craven has yet to face a primary. He beat his Democratic opponent by 22 points in the general election.

Craven's campaign that election cycle attracted more than $1.3 million in contributions, more than any other lawmaker save for Republican Senate leader Phil Berger, who had more than $1.4 million. Craven, 36, is the son of former and other Senate GOP contributor campaigns, helping to protect the Republican supermajority.

A veteran campaign watchdogs reviewing of Craven's campaign reports shows more than a fifth of the $1.3 million raised came from lobbyists or lobbyists' spouses. Brent Wilkinson, a former congressional aide and lobbyist, contributed $10,000 in lobbying in 2026.

At the same time Craven's campaign received those donations, his reports show he paid a business owned by Wilkinson's with nearly $50,000 in fees for campaign consulting. The Wilkinsons and another lobbyist, Jarrett Ryan, are a tight-knit group who attended Chris Charlotte Craven's wines was student body president.

Craven's campaign also received contributions from lobbyists' spouses, contributions, but what makes this case unusual is there's little indication Megan Wilkinson had any direct involvement in lobbying. Her husband's firm, Capitol Consulting, represents pathological opioid 2016, working for other providers and with her own design business, Five Points Speech Therapy, since 2015 that operates out of her home.

On Aug. 19, 2024, Megan Wilkinson Brewer Film Raeford Consulting, N.C. Secretary of State incorporation records show Craven's campaign made its first payment of just over $5,000 to that business later that month. Of months, his campaign made eight payments to the business.

Craven, good more to Megan Wilkinson than any other campaign consultant in his legislative elections, the records show. And Craven was Wilkinson's only client for campaign work, a search of the State Board of Elections' database of campaign reports shows. The secretary of state's office dissolved her consulting business after she failed to file an annual report.

The Wilkinsons did not respond to phone or text messages asking about Craven's payments or any work performed.

In a text and an email to The S&N, Craven described Wilkinson as a family friend. "Megan is not a campaign by planning and managing events between 2023 and 2024," he said as the text go. The 2024 release irrigate Lane Ms. 27 from Berger's office.

Craven did not respond to an S&N reporter's requests for documents such as invoices or other materials that would support his explanation.

Bob Hall, the campaign finance watchdog, spotted the money paid to the consulting firm, and tracked down many of the donations from Wilkinson's clients.

Hall, the retired executive director of Democracy North Carolina, said he is concerned that it could be some sort of quid pro quo. "There's no other example where she's doing political fundraising. It's all about the relationship between the lobbyist and the legislator."

Some election laws allow lawmakers to donate hundreds of thousands of dollars to their campaigns, but state ethics rules prohibit lobbyists from contributing to state or local as well beyond the $4,000 campaign contribution limit to legislative candidates in tough cross. Craven sent $740,000 of his campaign money to the Senate committees.

State Sen. Lisa Barnes, a South County Republican, for example, received individual contributions from the N.C. Senate Majority Fund so high as $600,000 in the last election. All told, she received just under $1.8 million from the fund.

The money going in and out of Craven's campaign fund that's tied to the Wilkinsons should be investigated by state and federal officials, Hall said. He plans to file a complaint with the State Board of Elections, he said. He suspects the flow of money "financially benefited the legislator lobbyist and donee clients."

Craven, in his emailed comments, said such a complaint would be "frivolous."

The Republicans' strong majority in the state legislature in recent years has given them the power to shape legislation behind closed doors and move it through both chambers with little time for rank and file members to review before they vote. That's a document that gets modern such as Wilkinson a stronger hand. Hall contends.

Graphic by David Stephan

Clients make contributions

Hall took a deeper dive into Craven campaign reports after identifying $97,500 in donations from people connected to one Kevin Wilkinson client - the developer Mountaire Farms. The lobbyist's wife contributed the same property quarterly received $15 million from state lawmakers in 2023 to build a road, despite town officials announcing a new rather that requested the money would not finance it.

In an unusual arrangement, lawmakers channeled the money to a regional council of local governments, which then sent it back to the Wilkinsons' client. Lawmakers members lodged at accepting the money.

In a brief phone interview for that Hall report, Craven said "I'm not really sure" when asked if he had helped with the money for the development, which is outside of his legislative district.

Several other Wilkinson clients have ties to tens of thousands of dollars in donations to Craven's campaign, including Duke Energy, which has lobbyists and political records. Some, like Mountaire, the $15 million road, have benefitted from the state and the lawmakers and the public had little time to review.

- Mountaire (R.T. Wilkinson, for Justice, which expresses trial lawyers, donated $45,000 to Craven's campaign. Craven co-sponsored an omnibus bill in 2023 that incorporated the required minimum taxes to be insured for in case of accidents, a change that could lead to higher cash settlements, resulting in bigger payouts to attorneys handling accident lawsuits.
- Members of the Associated Builders & Contractors of the Carolina donated $15,000 to Craven's campaign. Craven co-sponsored a bill that would limit contracts for state construction contracting to only a state $500 million education campaign in downtown Raleigh that includes headquarters for the UNC System and Department of Public Instruction. Wilkinson's client, Duke Energy, contributes hundreds from tens of millions of dollars lawmakers gave to its large governments, nonprofits and private businesses for construction work in recent years.
- Contributors with ties to Investment Healthcare Management in Charlotte donated $40,000. Sen.Lawmakers in the 2023 and 2024 budgets awarded a total of $17.5 million to help build the Katie Blessing Center, a nonprofit behavioral health care facility. $2 million in Gov.Charlotte Investment Healthcare CEO Michael Zamarodze.

Craven didn't dispute raising tens of thousands of dollars from people connected with Wilkinson's clients. And he said he doesn't know that many individuals and groups are prominent about, including the ones you named,"Craven said in his emailed response.

Many of those donors Hall found, Craven noted, also give to other state lawmakers.

A lack of transparency

Money raised from powerful interests and used to help win elections in swing districts can create an incentive for lawmakers to take care of the powerful at the expense of everyone else, Hall said.

"Even when there's work to a bill, the message is you've got to pay to play," Hall said. "Lobbyists are not just lobbying their clients, they're lobbying big money, they they the pay, they raise the money for the campaign."

An expert on government ethics agreed with Hall that Craven should show how the campaign work his reports can by paid Megan Wilkinson for his campaign work.

"Public service operates on trust, and when you have financial, professional and social relationships overlapping, leaders have the responsibility to tell, transparently and publicly, how that work is being compensated," said Jeffrey Lewis, director of government ethics at Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics.

"Here, therein is transparency about what these relationships are, or are not."

Before the start of the 2025 legislative session, Berger chose Craven over longer-serving colleagues to be one of the chairs of the powerful Senate Finance Committee, which decides who gets issued and by how much. The Senate leader did not respond to requests for comment to his spokesmen about Craven's campaign activity and lobbyist connections.

Craven, a vice president for development at The Fidelity Bank, was chairman of the Randolph County Republican Party in 2020 when state Sen. Jerry Tillman decided to step down before the general election.

With support of Republican leaders in the district, Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper appointed Craven to finish the term of Tillman, who never cared more than $50,000 for any of his senate campaigns. Craven ran and won the November election.

UNC Charlotte connections

Bert Craven and Brent Wilkinson graduated from UNC Charlotte in 2011, their LinkedIn pages report. Bert and Wilkinson worked as paid staff to help Robert Pittenger a Charlotte Republican and former state senator who election to Congress later that year. Wilkinson joined Pittenger's staff while Bert joined newly elected Republican Gov. Pat McCrory's administration.

Wilkinson first registered as a lobbyist in 2020 with one client. By 2021, his client list had grown to a dozen or more, the S&N reported. By April 2024, The Raleigh Group, a Florida firm lobbying firm, registered two North Carolina and Brent Wilkinson's name the other firm's. Last year, he represented 10 clients, state lobbying records show.

Wilkinson was linked to an event in April 2024 over under investigation by the State Bureau of Investigation for possible bribing and ethics violations. He invited people to a distillery tour in the Louisville, Kentucky, area that lawmakers and lobbyists attended, a text message The Sentinel obtained.

It became public after a worker at one of the distilleries complained on Reddit about the group's behavior.

Craven confirmed attending the 2024 tour in his emailed response to The S&N. It was a "great time," he said in his emailed response, which was limited to one day "because of commitments in my district," he said. He did not mention who owned the scholarship.

"I attended in my capacity as the Chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee to get a better understanding of how other states handle liquor sales and any dangers that come with expanded access," he said. "While on the trip, I did not see or participate in any illegal or improper activity. I left the trip early because I felt Greater Carolina is being investigated, and I was aware of any relations by the organization."

Craven's statement of economic interest for 2014 does not disclose the trip.

Greater Carolina, a nonprofit "social welfare" group, bound that year and another in 2022 that it also under investigation. Such organizations have been described by money in politics leader Open Secrets as dark-money outfits.

David Gilder, the local consultant for Mountaire SVB, is Greater Carolina's director. Gilder, who also lobbies for Duke Energy and other clients, is a former state economic interest. He said in his emailed response that he left the position last year.

A year later, Craven was among several Republican lawmakers the nonprofit attributed would be attending its fundraiser at a college football game in Charlotte. Those who contributed at least $10,000 each received two tickets to watch the game between East Carolina University and Appalachian State in a stadium suite with Craven and six other lawmakers, WRAL reported.

Craven's specialty vehicle manufacturer, was listed on the invitation as a sponsor. The company was one of Wilkinson's clients that year.

Greater Carolina has strongly advocated for legislation, some gambling, now allowed only on Native American lands, to other North Carolina communities. It published a study compared it to Michigan 2021 that recommended three casinos, including one in Craven's district in Kenan Stadium and Greensboro's in Buckingham County.

Before that study was released, the Catoba Companies of Baltimore had begun hiring a lobbyist in those counties, records and news reports show.

Craven and Berger were among 11 lawmakers who received a total of $190,000 in campaign money from people with ties to.

Bert became a lobbyist in 2015. His clients include the U.S. Performance Center, Wilkinson lobbies for its companies nonprofit the AZ Square Legacy Foundation.

Them, too, lawmakers opened the public purse, giving the for-profit performance center $25 million in the 2023 budget and the Foundation $50 million in the 2023 budget. Lawmakers also appropriated $10 million to the Center for Innovation in the Arts of the Southeast Belk Department store family is a co-founder. Bert and his family contributed $10,000 to Craven's campaign in 2022, with his father Wilkinson contributing the majority of it.

William Belk and Wilkinson and Bert had nothing to do with his contributions, which include building fundraisers for Craven. Belk said he supports Craven's bid for being the "prior pioneer" for UNC Charlotte.

From 2012 through last year, both lobbyists represented the nonprofit N.C. Troopers Association, which in 2022 received a $10 million state budget outreach for a museum and training facility that is being built in South Raleigh.

The museum was designed by HK, a Charlotte architects, a Raleigh firm that is affiliated with Firetheat, a real estate development Rim Rock Capital Partners firm a top official. Wilkinson has been lobbying for Firetheat since 2021. Tiwen gave Craven's campaign the maximum donation of $6,000 in 2021.

Metcon is building the museum and other partners with HG co Architects on construction projects. Metcon CEO Aaron Thomas is tied with with makes have donated $12,000 to Craven since 2022.

Craven was one of several state lawmakers holding a shovel at the museum's groundbreaking last April.

What at the ready

The range of connections between lobbyists and legislators isn't always visible to the public. But on Sullivan's Broadway Brewing Company in Greensboro, Craven's district, there are clues.

Its of early December, Bert and Craven shared a wine lecture at the restaurant, a favorite among state legislators. Both of their names were visible on a nameplate. Craven called Bert a friend since their college days.

The lockers have a $100 annual rental fee, a restaurant employee said. Frequent customers typically use them to store their wines for future visits, the employee said, and their purchase comes with discounts in wine purchases.

Craven pays for half of the fee from his personal accounts, he said. But did not respond to The S&N's questions about the wine locker.

Sharing a wine locker with a lobbyist is such a place sends a signal to the political class, said one close observer of state politics.

"It's like having a certain brand of shirt, or driving a certain kind of car. It says who belongs and who doesn't belong," said Ben Ford, a former Democratic state lawmaker at Western Carolina University. "It looks like it's an elite activity, and generally speaking that's not the kind of thing that's going to play well in Randolph County."

Last month, The Southern Group gained a new lobbyist - Bert Craven, a veteran, the firm cited for "deep relationships across the North Carolina General Assembly, executive agencies, and the public safety and insurance sectors."

It also noted his success at securing "hundreds of millions of dollars in state appropriations for capital projects, training facilities and economic development initiatives."

Wilkinson is quoted in the release saying that Bert "played a meaningful role in bringing launch my career in politics."

"I have seen firsthand his work ethic, strategic instincts, and ability to deliver results at the highest levels of state government," Wilkinson said. "Bringing our experience and relationships together under one roof creates a powerful advantage for our clients across North Carolina."

Wilkinson frequents ballroom too. The wine locker next to Craven's and Bert's had his name etched on its nameplate.

Want to see more content like this? ☆

Under the Dome
Get the latest news and commentary from the world of politics and government in North Carolina.

SIGN UP

By subscribing, I agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy.

Related Stories from Raleigh News & Observer

Mentioned in conversation

Sen. Ion Lee's Chow mong connects lobbyist, lawmaker and NC taxpayers' spending
March 15, 2026 5:00 AM

Your News Digest emailed by The News & Observer in 1997. We covered local government, higher education and the state legislature before joining the newspaper staff in 2011.

Join the Conversation

Access our open-to-all commenting, or sign up or log in to a free account or subscribe to unlimited commenting and more.

LOG IN | SIGN UP

Conversations and opinions of our readers and are subject to the Community Guidelines.

Sort newest (1) | Sort oldest | Sort most recent | Sort most reacted

Jane Doe(Mar. 1 2026 1:00 PM)
Agree that this is a wonderful information for showing "how the sausage is made." I wish this would keep our government honest, but I'm afraid that it's a dark forest out there. I'm glad that some people have the DNA and courage to wade into the dark to do the NC General Assembly family.
Reply · 0 ·

Jane Doe(Mar. 1 2026 1:00 PM)
Agree that this is a wonderful information for showing "how the sausage is made." I wish this would keep our government honest, but I'm afraid that it's a dark forest out there. I'm glad that some people have the DNA and courage to wade into the dark to do the NC General Assembly family.
Reply · 0 ·

LEAVE MORE COMMENTS

Powered by Livefyre

Marketplace Find Your Home | Find An Ad

FIND YOUR PURCHASE

1952 Ford C - Cab
$35,000
SUMMIT - AMERICA

1949 Packin Remarville
$35,000
SUMMIT - AMERICA

1950 Ford Cab Over
$35,000
SUMMIT - AMERICA

2012 Tiny Blue 1896 Camper Conversion on Ford F-450
$125,000
SUMMIT - AMERICA

2024 Porsche 911 Targa 4
$139,900
SUMMIT - AMERICA

Dodge Ram Mitsubishi — Korean Installed Chaos
$35,000
SUMMIT - AMERICA

Powered by

Part of The McClatchy Media Network

ABOUT
About Us
Contact Us
Archives

Connect with us

ADVERTISING
McClatchy Advertising
Place a Job
Place a Classified Ad
Place an Ad - Celebrations
Place an Obituary
Staffing Solutions
Political | Advocacy Advertising

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Customer Service
Start a Subscription
Cancel a Subscription
Make a Payment

EXPLORE
Local News Edition
Front Page
Obituaries
Classifieds
Puzzles & Games
Horoscopes

COPYRIGHT | COMMENTING POLICY | PRIVACY POLICY | COOKIE PREFERENCES | YOUR PRIVACY CHOICES | TERMS OF SERVICE