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## Birdwell Pulls Ahead in Special Senate Election Poll that Shows Sibley and Democrat Dueling for Second

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A new poll that was commissioned by one of the state's most influential conservative organizations shows Republican **Brian Birdwell** of Granbury leading the field of contenders who are competing for an open state Senate seat in a special election this weekend.

The telephone survey of 3,279 registered voters in Senate District 22 for the Heritage Alliance political action committee found Birdwell with support from 31 percent while former GOP lawmaker **David Sibley** and Democrat **Gayle Avant** were running neck-and-neck with 23 percent and 22 percent respectively.

But 23 percent of the voters who were contacted for the poll that was conducted Thursday through Sunday indicated that they were still undecided on the special election that wasn't ordered until after Republican **Kip Averitt** resigned from the upper chamber in March due to health concerns. A runoff election will be required in June if no candidate wins at least 50 percent of the vote in the special contest on Saturday.

Burleson insurance agent **Darren Yancy**, who lost to Averitt in the March 2 primary election before the incumbent stepped down a week later, received a show of support in the Heritage Alliance poll from only three percent of the respondents. Yancy had claimed almost 40 percent of the vote of the first round vote when more than 25,000 Republicans in SD 22 checked his name on their ballots in an election that was held less than two months after Averitt had announced that he was calling off his re-election campaign due to health concerns. But the support that Yancy had generated from conservatives as a tea party activist appeared to have shifted to Birdwell based on the results of the survey.

The Heritage Alliance poll findings are encouraging for Birdwell - a political novice who was seriously injured in the 9/11 attack on the Pentagon in 2001 while he was stationed there as a lieutenant colonel in the Army - in the wake of reports this week that have shown Sibley with a massive advantage in funding as a candidate who represented SD 22 for almost a dozen years before stepping down in 2002. Birdwell retired from the Army in 2004 and spent the next couple of years in Virginia while being treated for burns that he suffered in the terrorist attack before moving back to Texas three years ago. Birdwell's eligibility under a state constitutional provision that requires Senate candidates to have been Texas residents for at least five years has been a major issue in the race for the Senate opening in Central Texas.

Sibley, a former Waco mayor who worked as a lobbyist after leaving the Legislature until closing his lobby shop this year when he decided to try to win the Senate seat back, had raised more than six times as much money for the special contest as Birdwell and 76 times more than Avant by the end of April. In addition to the substantial lead that Sibley has in both fundraising and name identification in SD 22, he's garnered an abundance of publicity with endorsements from a marquee list of current and former GOP leaders including former President **George W. Bush** and Averitt.

But Birdwell, who'd rounded up more than \$73,000 in contributions by the first of the week, has focused his efforts on building grassroots support while appealing to voters who've been active in the tea party movement in hopes of overcoming Sibley advantages in other areas. Birdwell had received more cause for optimism this week amid reports that almost as many people had voted early in Hood County where he lives as the number who'd already cast ballots in Sibley's home base of McLennan County where three times more Republican voters are registered.

"The news this week has been about fundraising totals," said **Michael Smith**, the executive vice president of the Dallas-based group that sponsored the poll. "However, on election night, the only number that counts is how many votes each candidate has."

The voters in the Heritage Alliance sample were selected without regard for their partisan affiliation or voting history.

The Heritage Alliance organization is led by veteran conservative activist **Richard Ford** of Dallas.