



DONALD TRUMP'S BIG BOOST: HIS OWN AIR FLEET

News / Personalities



Donald Trump's presidential campaign has a big advantage hidden in plain sight: Trump Air.

Mr. Trump's fleet of private [aircraft](#), which includes a Boeing 757, a Cessna Citation X and three Sikorsky helicopters, whisks the billionaire executive to Republican primary events in far-flung locales, some of them difficult to reach by commercial planes.

The fleet also allows Mr. Trump to promote his brand. He garnered valuable publicity at the recent Iowa State Fair, for example, by giving children free rides in one of his helicopters with a huge Trump logo on the side.

"It's a massive, unbelievable competitive advantage," said Dave Carney, a GOP campaign consultant who was chief strategist for Rick Perry's 2012 presidential primary campaign. "Having access to a private jet is the single most important asset to any national political campaign. It's hugely expensive, but it gives you the ability to set your own schedule."

The two Trump jets logged at least 71 campaign-related flights between April 1 and Aug. 31, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of Federal Aviation Administration flight records on Flightwise.com and FlightAware.com. The flights included at least 26 stops in airports serving Iowa, New Hampshire or South Carolina, all of them early primary or caucus states. As of Sep. 1, Mr. Trump's jets have been blocked from being tracked by commercial aviation sites, which is permissible.

Air Advantage

Donald Trump's fleet of private aircraft gives him an edge in his drive for the Republican nomination. A look at the recorded campaign-related flights of Mr. Trump's Boeing 757, April 8 to Aug. 29:

In an interview, Mr. Trump said other campaigns might charter planes, but his 757 has amenities such as two bedrooms and a shower. It also features a 57-inch TV, pillows emblazoned with the Trump family crest and gold-plated seat belt buckles and bathroom faucets, according to a 2011 promotional video of the jet provided by his campaign.

"It's like living in a beautiful home," Mr. Trump said. "The advantage is that I'm able to fly nicely, quickly and on time." He said he owns the aircraft outright and has no mortgages on them.

Flyovers with his Trump-branded planes, such as a recent one when his 757 circled over a campaign rally at an Alabama stadium, maximize his impact, Mr. Trump said. "We flew over the center of the stadium and the place went wild. It gave impact to the stadium and it gave impact the following day when everybody carried it" on television, he said.

Many of his GOP rivals, meanwhile, are flying commercial flights for all or much of their travel. Florida Sen. Marco Rubio typically flies commercial; he and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush sat next to each other on an American Airlines flight from Miami to Nashville, Tenn., for a National Rifle Association event in April.

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie has flown commercial of late, although he racked up a hefty private-jet tab last year when flying as chairman of the Republican Governors Association. While former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum reported US\$10,000 in commercial airline expenditures for the second quarter, his campaign emails have asked supporters to "fill up the tank," seeking per-mile donations to fund his visits to all 99 counties in Iowa by car.

In the last week of August alone, Mr. Trump's 757 flew to Dubuque, Iowa; to a Trump rally at a convention center in Greenville, S.C.; and to a gathering of conservative activists at the National Federation of Republican Assemblies in Nashville, where Mr. Trump won a straw poll.

Earlier in the campaign, Mr. Trump's big jet traveled from New York to three small Iowa cities in a single day, then flew to Houston, where Mr. Trump delivered a speech the next day.

None of this comes cheaply. Flying a 757 costs about US\$10,800 an hour for fuel and other variable costs, according to Conklin & deDecker Aviation Information. That suggests Mr. Trump's mid-August visit to the Iowa State Fair cost more than US\$47,000 for the round-trip flight from New York - not including the childre's chopper rides.

Mr. Trump said his campaign pays his jet-management company for the aircraft under an arrangement worked out with the Federal Election Commission. The FEC requires campaigns using aircraft owned by the candidate or their associates to report it as an in-kind gift, and requires campaigns to reimburse plane owners for costs including fuel, crew services and a share of the maintenance.

Because Mr. Trump's campaign is largely self-financed, he is in effect reimbursing himself for use of his planes. His campaign reported spending US\$506,000 on private-aircraft travel in the second quarter. That is about three times the US\$179,000 reported by the leading Democratic contender, Hillary Clinton, and nearly double the US\$281,000 reported by Mr. Bush, the top fundraiser among the Republican candidates.

Still, flying around on private jets isn't the image every candidate wants to convey, even if they could afford it.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker has posted photos of himself via Twitter and Instagram flying in coach at the back of commercial airplanes. During his campaign rollout in mid-July, Mr. Walker's entourage missed a connection in Atlanta after their flight was redirected due to storms. They eventually left Atlanta by rental car in the middle of the night to get to a morning event in Charleston, S.C.

For Mr. Trump, by contrast, his private jets are a not-so-subtle reminder of his message that he is a wealthy man who says he isn't beholden to special interests and big donors.

Mr. Trump said he generally flies with his campaign manager, his staff, his spokeswoman and his security detail. During the flights, Mr. Trump said he catches up with the day's news, which he incorporates in his speeches. Mr. Trump doesn't use notes, so the flight time is essential, he said.

"It gives me privacy. If I was going commercial and signing autographs and taking pictures, it would be tougher for making a great speech."

FAA records show that Mr. Trump typically flies to just one event and then returns to his New York home the same day. That keeps him refreshed, but doesn't take full advantage of the main edge that private jets can provide: travel to four, five or six locations in a single day.

Mr. Trump said the campaign has found that doing one or two events a day has more impact. He said he expects to do more multiday trips as the campaign progresses in the fall.

Will Ritter, who was director of candidate operations and advance logistics for Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign, said having access to a private jet so early in the primaries is a "significant benefit." But Mr. Ritter, whose firm is producing ads for Mr. Rubio's campaign, noted that the playing field soon will level as better-financed rivals ramp up their private-jet travel by chartering or borrowing planes.

Mr. Romney, he said, had plenty of resources, but often liked to fly commercial, where he could mingle with voters on the plane and in airports. "You miss some things by always getting swept away by your own jet," he said.

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