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(Neb)-Sasse Kicks Off Re-Election Campaign

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By GRANT SCHULTE

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) - U.S. Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska kicked off his re-election campaign Monday surrounded by top Republicans who vouched for the first-term lawmaker, despite a primary challenge from an activist who is attacking Sasse's frequent criticism of President Donald Trump.

Sasse promised in his 2020 campaign announcement to work to minimize the role of Washington in Nebraska residents' lives and support Trump's "really great judicial nominees." He made no other mention of the president.

"The most important things that happen in life aren't about government, but when we're talking about government, there's no one more conservative than I am," Sasse said to a crowd of about 300 in a sweltering airport hangar.

Sasse scored endorsements Monday from Gov. Pete Ricketts, former Govs. Dave Heineman and Kay Orr, U.S. Reps. Jeff Fortenberry and Don Bacon, and Omaha Mayor Jean Stothert. Several of them praised Sasse as a hardworking, intelligent public servant known for his integrity.

"We need his conservative voice in Washington," Heineman said, pointing to Sasse's support of conservative U.S. Supreme Court nominees Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh.

The event follows news last week that Sasse will face a primary challenge from Matt Innis, a Lincoln-based GOP activist and former chairman of the Lancaster County Republican Party. Innis, a Trump supporter, announced his candidacy last week and blasted Sasse for making statements critical of the president.

Sasse, 47, gained national attention earlier in his term as a leading Trump opponent within his party, although he has been more subdued recently. During the 2016 presidential race, Sasse said then-candidate Trump lacked core principles and described him as a "megalomaniac strongman." He skipped the party's nominating convention and described the race between Trump and Democrat Hillary Clinton as a "dumpster fire." He also floated the idea of leaving the Republican Party. Last year, he criticized Trump's proposed steel tariffs as "dumb."

His remarks didn't go over well with some Nebraska Republican activists, who confronted him in local meetings in the GOP-dominated state. Trump won Nebraska with nearly 59% of the vote in 2016. Sasse responded that he was voicing his opinion and wasn't trying to pressure others over which candidate to support.

Sasse has pushed back against the criticism, with a spokesman noting that he's regarded as one of the most conservative Republicans in the Senate, has supported Trump's nominees to the court and has fought against tougher federal environmental regulations that were opposed by Nebraska farmers. Sasse champions himself as an outspoken opponent of abortion.

Innis, a 48-year-old business owner, praised Trump's policies and court appointments during his announcement and sought to contrast himself with Sasse.

"We need a senator who will support President Trump's re-election in 2020," Innis said.

Sasse, a former college president who holds degrees from Harvard and Yale, has argued that Trump isn't a

true conservative. In a book published last year, Sasse called for a return to civility in public discourse and argued that politics shouldn't be a central part of life.

Some of Sasse's supporters argue that many of the state's Republicans agree with Sasse and support his credentials as a reliable conservative. In a state like Nebraska, the danger in a primary is to be portrayed as not conservative enough, and that's a tough argument to make against Sasse who was elected with 64% of the vote in 2014.