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Democrats gear up to match GOP fundraising effort

By Anne E. Kornblut, Friday, April 29, 7:42 AM

After taking a beating from outside Republican groups during the 2010 midterm election cycle, Democrats are now gearing up to match the effort in 2012, with one of the most prominent teams officially launching its drive Friday.

Bill Burton and Sean Sweeney, two recently departed officials from the Obama White House, are forming Priorities USA, an organization that will seek to raise as much as \$100 million in the 2012 cycle. The group will consist of two branches: a 501(c)(4) nonprofit and a 527 political action committee. The structure will allow the organization to keep some of its donors secret, a practice that Democrats previously deplored when it was used by Republicans.

“The mission of these groups is to counter the hundreds of millions of dollars pledged by the Koch brothers and Karl Rove,” Burton and Sweeney said in a memo describing their effort. They referred to the billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch and the former strategist for President George W. Bush, who have led a highly successful outside effort on the Republican side.

Priorities USA has already lined up donations from Hollywood mogul Jeffrey Katzenberg and the service employees union SEIU, people familiar with it said. Veteran Democratic operatives from the Obama and Clinton camps — including strategists Paul Begala and Harold Ickes, pollster Geoff Garin and EMILY’s List founder Ellen Malcolm — are also on board. Teddy Johnston, a prominent Obama fundraiser in Florida in 2008, will lead the fundraising effort.

Although a number of outside Democratic groups have launched in recent weeks with the goals of defeating House Republicans and repelling GOP attacks on Obama’s health-care program, Priorities USA is

expected to be the central counterweight to American Crossroads, Rove's two-pronged group that has taken considerable heat from Democrats for failing to disclose all of its donors.

"In 2010, Republicans spent millions distorting the debate on important issues and running vicious, dishonest attack ads," Burton and Sweeney said in their memo. "This is an effort to level the playing field and not allow right-wing activists to hijack the political system."

Even before Priorities USA was unveiled, a spokesman for American Crossroads accused the former White House officials of preparing to commit hypocrisy, given the Obama administration's attacks on such special interest advocacy groups in prior years. Burton and Sweeney cast their decision as one dictated by the Supreme Court, saying they would not be "boxed in by a double standard" following the Citizens United ruling in 2010 that swept aside limits on corporate donations.

Their announcement comes less than a month after Obama kicked off his reelection campaign, as Democrats scramble to take advantage of a relatively slow start to 2012 on the Republican side. Burton and Sweeney will not be able to coordinate with the official Obama campaign, but will be required to operate independently.

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