

# Bloomberg

---

## Rove Tops President Obama as Drawing Card in Democrat Burton's Fundraising

By Alison Fitzgerald - Jun 29, 2011

One name is often missing from [Bill Burton's](#) pitch for money to help Democrats keep the presidency in 2012: [Barack Obama](#).

Burton, a former White House spokesman, says the specter of political victories orchestrated by Republican strategist [Karl Rove](#) and billionaire industrialists Charles and [David Koch](#) fires up contributors more than Obama's accomplishments do.

"The people who are particularly motivated are really worried about the Koch brothers and Karl Rove, and the fact that they will have hundreds of millions of dollars to basically advance a hard-core, right-wing agenda," said Burton, 33, who leads Priorities USA and Priorities USA Action, two groups modeled after organizations Rove helped organize last year to elect Republicans.

Seeking to raise \$100 million, Burton's fundraising approach appeals to people whose enthusiasm for Obama has waned, such as Wall Street investors annoyed by new financial regulations or progressives favoring immigration overhaul or closing the Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

"Even among donors who are people who wish President Obama was either more or less progressive, they all feel that it is important not to let the money on the right rule the roost," said Geoff Garin, Priorities USA's chief polling expert.

To fight his rivals, Burton has chosen to emulate them. His groups may take unlimited amounts, often from anonymous donors, and will solicit money from political action committees, corporations and lobbyists that Obama's official election committee disavowed in 2008 and still shuns in the name of good government.

### Dancing With Devil

Burton and his allies are "dancing with the devil," said former Wisconsin Democratic Senator [Russ Feingold](#), who fought in Congress to limit campaign spending.

"I understand the impulse to fight fire with fire, but Democrats should never be in the business of taking undisclosed, corporate money," Feingold said in an e-mail. "It's bad politics and bad strategy, because it's a game we can't win."

After the Supreme Court last year voided restrictions on campaign spending by corporations and unions in the Citizens United case, Rove, former President [George W. Bush](#)'s political mastermind, helped start groups called American Crossroads and Crossroads GPS that spent \$70 million on political ads attacking Democrats in the 2010 campaign. Brothers Charles and David Koch, the chairman and president of family owned Koch Industries Inc., have backed the libertarian Cato Institute and groups, including Americans for Prosperity, which have spent millions supporting state and federal candidates.

## Level Playing Field

Facing that Republican fundraising firepower, Democrats who support campaign finance limits and disclosures in theory can't afford to unilaterally disarm, Burton said.

"They can call me a hypocrite all they want, but we have to level the playing field," Burton said, sipping a Bushmill's Irish whiskey in a corner of the Madison Hotel bar in Washington. "We may think that the speed limit ought to be 50, but the [Supreme Court](#) says it's 75, and so we're not going to keep driving 50 while Karl Rove just speeds down the highway."

In the money hunt, people connected with Burton's Priorities USA refer as often as possible to "Karl Rove and the Koch brothers" as if they were a music group, like Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers.

## 'Bottomless and Limitless'

"The pool of money available to Karl Rove and the Koch brothers is bottomless and limitless," said Paul Begala, a Democratic strategist who is advising Burton. Garin said Priorities USA "represents a way to level the playing field against Karl Rove and the Koch brothers."

The Kochs "have dedicated themselves to advancing the principles that help societies prosper and, regardless of the attacks leveled against them, they will continue to advocate for market-based policy solutions that can spur real [job creation](#) and long term prosperity," Melissa Cohlmya, corporate communications director for Koch Companies Public Sector LLC, said in an e-mail. Rove didn't respond to messages seeking comment.

The Democrats' animosity toward Rove and the Koch brothers "at times, borders on absurd," said Matthew Wilson, a political science professor at Southern Methodist University in [Dallas](#). "It's become almost an obsession."

## 'Scary' Right

Still, disenchantment among some liberal Democrats and Obama's slipping poll standing -- his 44 percent approval rating in Gallup Inc.'s daily tracking poll is down 9 points since June 1 -- means "it's probably more effective" for fundraisers "to talk about how scary the right is than to talk about the modest, half-measures that many on the left see from the president," Wilson said.

The strategy may be working. In their first two months of operations, Priorities USA and Priorities USA Action have taken in between \$4 million and \$5 million, according the Washington- based [Center for Public Integrity](#). [Dreamworks Animation SKG Inc. \(DWA\)](#) Chief Executive Officer Jeffrey Katzenberg was the first and largest donor to Priorities USA, and the [Service Employees International Union](#) also jumped aboard early. Burton wouldn't say how much they gave. Katzenberg declined to comment.

Untethered by the Supreme Court, trade groups, labor unions and non-profit political or advocacy organizations such as Crossroads reported spending \$305 million to influence the 2010 congressional elections, more than four times as much as they spent in 2006's midterm balloting, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Tilted toward Republicans, the campaign cash is credited with helping the party take a majority in the U.S. House and narrow the Democrats' edge in the Senate.

## Republican Playbook

After he left the White House in February, Burton said he and another West Wing aide, Sean Sweeney, were thinking about starting a political consulting firm when Democratic activists urged him to take a page from Rove's playbook and start a group to bolster Obama's re-election effort.

To free their donors from federal campaign contribution limits, Burton and Sweeney are forbidden from coordinating with Obama's official campaign organization or the [Democratic National Committee](#).

Priorities USA and Priorities USA Action will focus on pointing to the weaknesses of Obama's opponents, Burton said. The first advertisement criticized former Massachusetts Governor [Mitt Romney](#), the Republican frontrunner in early polling, for supporting a Republican plan to convert Medicare into a system of vouchers to buy health insurance.

## Naming Contributors

Burton's groups mimic the structure of the organizations Rove advises. Priorities USA is organized as a nonprofit issue- advocacy group and doesn't have to identify its donors; Priorities USA Action is set up as an independent political committee and will disclose contributors.

Crossroads GPS, the part of the Republican-leaning Crossroads duo that doesn't name donors, accounted for about \$43 million out of \$71 million the pair raised last year. American Crossroads has raised \$4.8 million so far this year, toward a combined goal of \$120 million for the 2012 campaign. Crossroads GPS, which hasn't released 2012 fundraising figures yet, said on June 24 it plans to spend \$20 million in the next two months on ads criticizing Obama's economic policies.

Burton spent much of 2010 criticizing secret funding of pro-Republican political attack ads as a threat to democracy.

## 'Lack of Transparency'

“Unless a bright light is shined on the shadowy activity of these outside groups, people aren’t going to know the facts - - which is that with their complete lack of transparency, Lord knows who’s participated in these races,” he said on Oct. 15. “The president thinks that if you’re going to participate in politics, you ought to be transparent about it.”

Jonathan Collegio, a spokesman for American Crossroads, chided Burton and his Democratic colleagues for adopting tactics they so vigorously attacked.

“In their previous jobs, these guys publicly declared that money is bad for politics and that nondisclosure is bad for democracy, but their new jobs require raising big checks from non-disclosed sources,” Collegio said. “So the only way to market themselves is to claim these tactics are a necessary evil required to compete with their opponents -- the Crossroads groups.”

The Priorities USA organizations, which will focus on the presidential race, will coordinate with three other newly formed Democratic groups: House Majority PAC will focus on House races, Majority PAC will concentrate on the Senate, and American Bridge 21st Century, will conduct opposition research on Republican candidates that other groups can use in advertising or direct mail literature.

Burton’s campaign experience, his knowledge of issues and his easy-going demeanor make him well-suited to woo wealthy supporters, Begala said.

## ‘Taking a Shower’

“I know a lot of people who think fundraising is distasteful,” Begala said. “Bill’s the kind of guy who can meet with someone and they don’t feel like taking a shower afterward.”

Burton and Sweeney, best friends who live across the street from one another on [Capitol Hill](#), were veterans of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and spent two years together at the White House, where Sweeney was a senior aide to former Chief of Staff [Rahm Emanuel](#).

Burton grew up in Buffalo, [New York](#), and attended the [University of Minnesota](#). He met his future wife, Laura Capps, when Burton was working on former House Majority Leader Dick Gephardt’s 2004 primary race and she was on eventual Democratic nominee [John Kerry](#)’s campaign staff.

Burton’s mother-in-law, California Representative Lois Capps, keeps an apartment in their house where she stays when she’s in [Washington](#).

## Wooring Contributors

While he travels to New York, [Chicago](#), [Los Angeles](#) and other cities to woo potential contributors, Burton said his job with [Priorities USA](#) lets him spend more time at home than the White House did -- a priority with a newborn son, Oscar.

Burton wouldn't say what he'd be getting paid; he acknowledges it's more than the \$113,000 he earned at the White House last year. He says he isn't taking a percentage of money raised for Priorities USA, as is typical.

Dave Levinthal, a spokesman for the Center for Responsive Politics, a Washington nonpartisan group that tracks political giving, said he's skeptical whether Democrats can match Republican fundraising, given Obama's criticism of outside groups and anonymous contributions.

"It remains to be seen how many big-dollar Democratic donors are willing to compete in a game that they may, in principle, find distasteful," Levinthal said.

Burton doesn't expect to raise as much money as Rove. "Democrats don't have that kind of money," he said. While Begala agreed, he said Democrats will still come out ahead of 2010 "when we did nothing."

To contact the reporter on this story: Alison Fitzgerald in Washington at [afitzgerald2@bloomberg.net](mailto:afitzgerald2@bloomberg.net)

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Mark Silva at [msilva34@bloomberg.net](mailto:msilva34@bloomberg.net)

---

©2011 BLOOMBERG L.P. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.