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New Wisconsin Prosperity Network group would push GOP causes

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Arguing that Wisconsin's conservatives are being outflanked by liberals, some of the state's most prominent Republicans — including two who have run afoul of campaign finance law — are creating a new statewide political and policy infrastructure designed to produce wins at the ballot box.

Dubbed the Wisconsin Prosperity Network, the effort calls for an annual budget of \$6.4 million and the creation of 14 new organizations, according to a draft outline of the network obtained by the State Journal.

Those groups, which would exist outside of the state Republican Party, would recruit candidates for local and state office, mobilize voters on Election Day, use lawsuits to pursue conservative policies in the courts, research public policy issues and fight perceived media bias, the draft shows.

The MacIver Institute, a free-market, limited-government think tank named after former Republican operative John MacIver, is the first of the new entities to be formed. Network officials plan to survey state residents this summer to identify more GOP supporters.

The project, to be rolled out over the next three years, has the support of some of the state's most prominent conservatives, including James Klauser, a GOP power broker and top aide to former Gov. Tommy Thompson; Bradley Foundation President Michael Grebe; and businessman Fred Luber.

Mark Block, president of the state chapter of Americans for Prosperity, which advocates for lower taxes and less government, said in an interview he is the main organizer of the network and that he is trying to raise money to fund it.

Block said former Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen also is playing a key role, as are others Block wouldn't name. Jensen did not return telephone calls.

Jensen is facing trial for using taxpayer money for campaign purposes. He was convicted on misconduct charges in 2006, but a state appeals panel overturned the decision on grounds the jury received improper instructions.

In 2001, Block paid a \$15,000 fine and agreed not to be involved in campaigns until 2004 after admitting to illegally coordinating Jon Wilcox's Supreme Court campaign with an outside group.

'Shocking and brazen'

Federal and state law allows certain tax-exempt organizations to influence elections by getting voters to the polls, conducting public opinion polling and paying for thinly veiled campaign ads called "issue ads" — so long as they don't coordinate their work with candidates or political parties.

But Jay Heck, executive director of Common Cause in Wisconsin, called the involvement of Jensen and Block "shocking and brazen."

"If the conservative movement is looking for a new start, going back to guys like Jensen and Block doesn't seem to be the right direction," Heck said.

Some Republicans familiar with the network who asked not to be identified because the information was shared with them on condition it not be disclosed, expressed similar concerns, including fears that the network could get too cozy with elected and party officials.

Block said the network is following the law and would steer clear of illegal coordination with campaigns.

Trevor Potter, president of the Campaign Legal Center and general counsel for the John McCain 2008 presidential campaign, said the Internal Revenue Service would require organizations that are part of the network to disclose their board structure. Directors should not be political party officials for the groups to win and keep tax-exempt status, he said.

Other lawyers who reviewed the network's draft outline for the State Journal said it's not improper for such documents to be shared with elected or party officials, although it bears watching how closely the group might work with campaigns.

"It's the conduct that creates legal issues," said Jonathan Becker, a lawyer for the Government Accountability Board, which oversees state campaign finance and ethics law. "The overarching issue seems to me, who's pulling the strings? Who's running the show?"

Matching campaign intensity

Block said election results in 2006 and 2008 — in which Democratic Gov. Jim Doyle was re-elected, Democrats gained control of the Legislature and Barack Obama won a decisive victory for president — show Wisconsin conservatives have failed to match liberals' intensity in marshaling resources and commitment outside the traditional political parties.

"We got complacent," Block said of conservatives. "It's apparent that the left has done a much better job of getting groups to work together and committing resources to build the infrastructure to get their message across. The conservatives have a lot of catching up to do."

Dozens of liberal groups like One Wisconsin Now, the Greater Wisconsin Committee and Advancing Wisconsin have been working together in recent years with the liberal group America Votes to coordinate research, independent political ads and voter turnout that benefits Democrats.

The effort in Wisconsin is part of the Committee on States, a little-known national program to create a political infrastructure in some states to help Democratic candidates at the polls. The committee's co-manager, Rob Stein, said Wisconsin's liberal network is among the most sophisticated in the country.

"Several dozen reasonably strong organizations collaborating on voter education, registration and mobilization constitute a potent electoral force," Stein said. "It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that increased coordination in the field in Wisconsin has contributed to progressive victories in the last three to five years."

Such groups are able to raise more money from donors than the political parties can, and donations to the groups don't need to be publicly reported, unlike those to the parties, said Joe Wineke, chairman of the state Democratic Party.

The emergence of those groups resulted in large part from the decreased influence of the political party caucuses, which raised money and conducted campaign research out of the Capitol until a State Journal investigation showed that taxpayer money was being used for campaign purposes, said Joe Heim, a UW-La Crosse political science professor.

The charges facing Jensen stem from that scandal.

GOPAC not involved

The draft outline of the prosperity network shows a leadership entity would "coordinate efforts by conservative donors to build a political infrastructure that will advance conservative policies."

The 14 new groups would join existing Wisconsin organizations Americans for Prosperity, the First Freedoms Foundation, the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute and the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, according to the document.

But George Lightbourn, president of the policy research institute, and Todd Berry, president of the taxpayers alliance, said their groups are independent and not part of the effort.

Block said those groups have been removed from more recent versions of the organization planning documents.

Also scratched from the network is a Wisconsin version of GOPAC, which trains Republican candidates and helps fund their campaigns, Block said. GOPAC operates its own political action committee in the state, a spokesman for the national group said.

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