

Super PAC hopes to soften ground for association advocacy

But some say deluge of negativity can make it harder for groups to break through; some ads aimed at post-2012 environment.

March 9, 2012

By [Mark Tarallo](#)

Even with the Super Tuesday primaries passed, the campaigns are still being fueled by hand-over-fist spending by super PACs waging proxy battles on behalf of candidates through flurries of negative advertisements.

But one prominent super PAC, the GOP-tilted American Crossroads, is hoping to go beyond attack ads (though it will sponsor plenty of those too). American Crossroads — while not backing an individual primary candidate, but rather broadly supporting Republicans in the general election — aims to influence policymaking through ads that advocate for the Republican party's agenda on a range of issues.

By framing issues in this way, American Crossroads (and its related policy group, Crossroads GPS) hopes it can soften the ground for advocacy efforts by business associations that share a similar agenda, says Steven Law, American Crossroads' president and CEO. Law himself has roots in business trade groups; he was chief legal officer and general counsel for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce before joining American Crossroads.

To reinforce this connection, American Crossroads has been discussing the issues with representatives of business groups, and plans to continue through the year.

"They are very, very interested in what issues we're going to be advancing, and where," Law said in a recent interview with CEO Update. As a super PAC, American Crossroads cannot coordinate activities with candidates, but no such prohibition exists for consulting with trade groups.

One example of this strategy involves President Obama's health care overhaul, which many business trade groups opposed. Instead of a simple repeal message, American Crossroads plans to frame the issue by attacking individual provisions, in order to "attach specifics in people's minds" and better illustrate the group's argument that the overhaul should be rescinded.

"In the high-intensity atmosphere of an election cycle, you can frame issues in the way that gets lawmakers' attention, and the public's attention," Law said.

CEO UPDATE

And the group is also looking past the election. It has released a list of issue priorities, including health care, in the report, “2012-2013 New Majority Agenda.” The aim, Law said, is for American Crossroads to help shape the policy agenda if Republicans do capture a governing majority in the election.

“Every one of those issues [on the list] has a post-2012 time horizon,” Law said.

Of course, whether or not the American Crossroads strategy will be effective is open to debate.

During the health care overhaul action in 2009 and 2010, the Chamber spent millions of dollars in ads positioning the legislation as disastrous for U.S. businesses. The bill still passed. A similar, though less extensive effort by the Chamber and other groups also did not prevent approval of the Dodd-Frank financial overhaul.

Nonetheless, spending by American Crossroads for its 2012 efforts is likely to be sky-high. The group’s goal is to raise \$300 million for the 2012 election, substantially more than the roughly \$70 million the group raised for the 2010 election. The 2010 election was the first after the Supreme Court’s 2009 *Citizens United v. FEC* decision, which set the legal groundwork for super PACs to flourish.

Negativity’s emotional force

Such massive spending means virtually all media channels will be choked with negative advertisements as the election draws closer. That can frustrate associations trying to break through the clutter and advocate for their own industry, says Amy Showalter, head of The Showalter Group consulting firm and author of “The Underdog Edge” (Morgan James Publishing, 2011).

“Associations say, ‘I have a positive message on that [issue], but nobody’s listening to me.’ Well, good luck—it is hard,” Showalter said. (The group’s client list includes the National Restaurant Association, American Chemistry Council and the American Hospital Association.)

According to Showalter, social psychology research has shown that negative statements or episodes are five times more likely to be remembered than positive ones. Super PACs “tend to go for broke” with negative ads, and their power can crowd out more positive messages. “That’s a dynamic that’s out there,” Showalter said.

Still, with attention to GOP primaries hopping the country, current super PAC activity has been focused on ads in individual states, so Capitol Hill has not yet been blanketed with their messages, said former Sen. Wayne Allard (R-Colo.), now vice president for government relations for the American Motorcyclists Association.

“Super PACs later on will probably be entering in,” Allard said.

AMA recently won an award from the Public Affairs Council for a 2011 advocacy campaign Kids Just Want to Ride! which pushed Congress into overturning a federal ban on the sale of kids’ dirt bikes and all-terrain vehicles.