

Democrats Plan to Pound Trump Before He's Nominated

Super PAC will air \$20 million in negative ads before Donald Trump can counter with general-election money, a strategy that defined Mitt Romney in 2012.



S.V. Dáté

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Donald Trump loves to brag about how he always counter-punches when attacked, but he could soon be taking an unanswered, \$20 million pummeling in those few states that will decide the November election.

A series of ads painting him as an unserious, unready, and unscrupulous businessman who also happens to disparage women and minorities is to start airing June 8, the day after the final primaries in which Trump is likely to clinch the Republican presidential nomination.

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“That’s a good day to start,” said Justin Barasky with Priorities USA Ac-

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tion, a super PAC backing Democrat Hillary Clinton. “We’re not going to the make the same mistake Republicans did in waiting too long [to go on the offensive].”

For five full weeks, in a lull between the primary season and the GOP convention, these messages may have the airwaves to themselves in seven swing states, with the notoriously tight-fisted Trump loath to spend tens of millions of his own money to counter the attack and the Republican Party unable to defend him until he officially becomes the nominee.

If Republicans find this strategy familiar, they should. It’s exactly what Priorities did to 2012 GOP nominee Mitt Romney in those months after he had secured the nomination, following a long and expensive primary battle—but before he was officially nominated and allowed to use millions in general-election money he had already collected.

“Mitt Romney was a fundamentally likable guy. Look what they did to Mitt Romney. They turned him into history’s greatest monster,” said Rick Wilson, a Republican strategist and leading “Never Trump” voice who has been warning for months that Democrats would start blistering Trump the moment he secured the nomination.

In 2012, Priorities spent \$21.5 million attacking Romney between May and the end of August, when the former Massachusetts governor formally accepted the nomination at the GOP convention in Tampa. The ads focused on five swing states, most notably Rust Belt Ohio, and portrayed Romney as a heartless plutocrat who enriched himself by shutting down factories and shipping jobs overseas. The ads were credited with turning Romney’s business experience from an asset into a liability among many general-election voters. In Ohio, President Obama received 2 percent more support from white voters and non-college graduates than he did nationally—a big factor in his 3-point victory there that November that sealed his reelection.

Wilson predicted that Priorities would have a much easier challenge with Trump than it did with Romney, given Trump’s already high disapproval ratings and the host of controversies in his past, from the defunct Trump University to his multiple bankruptcies in Atlantic City.

Priorities will also find its Republican opposition in a far more precarious financial condition. While both Romney’s campaign and his super PAC were depleted by the drawn-out primary, he was nonetheless a prodigious fundraiser, ultimately collecting \$820 million for himself and the Republican Party and another \$153 million for his technically independent super PAC.

Trump has no fundraising operation, has insulted the traditional GOP donor community, and as of yet has not begun raising money for the

party. At a recent meeting, Republican National Committee members publicly expressed confidence they could raise all the money needed. But privately, some members worried that Trump as nominee won't be able to raise a fraction of the \$1 billion that Clinton and Democrats are likely to spend.

Trump has avoided spending money on his campaign whenever possible, largely relying on free cable TV coverage to spread his message. And it's unclear how easily he can write himself eight-figure checks, even if he wanted to.

While Trump claims he is worth \$10 billion, independent reviews by two banks a decade ago—prior to the financial crisis that slashed the value of most portfolios—appraised his net worth at \$788 million and \$1.2 billion. In any event, the majority of his wealth is tied up in buildings and golf courses, according to his financial disclosure filing last year. A *National Journal* review of that document shows he had no more than \$232 million in cash and relatively liquid assets a year ago—of which he has already lent himself at least \$36 million over the past 15 months.

Trump's campaign did not respond to *National Journal* queries about its possible response to Priorities, which said the \$20 million in pre-convention television ads is just part of a \$125 million budget to keep pounding Trump on TV as well as the Internet through Election Day.

Barasky said Priorities's job will also be easier than it has been for ad makers blasting Trump in the primaries because some of Trump's views that are acceptable to many Republicans are nevertheless poisonous to a general-election audience. "Democrats are not going to be worried about offending the GOP base," he said.

Barasky would not provide details on specific ads in the works, and he said a similar campaign would be launched against Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas should he appear to be the likely Republican nominee. But he said some ads against Trump will explore his business deals through the years, while others will cite his remarks about torture and nuclear weapons, suggesting he lacks the temperament to be commander in chief. Still others will question whether he has the character to be president, based on his statements about Muslims, Mexicans, and women. Women by themselves make up a majority of the electorate.

Trump and his advisers, meanwhile, believe they can effectively counter any gender-based attacks on Trump by accusing Hillary Clinton of having "enabled" her husband Bill Clinton's extramarital affairs over the years by sticking up for him. Trump, in fact, has boasted that he was able to stop Hillary Clinton from calling him sexist using precisely that threat.

Democrats seem genuinely mystified by that strategy. “People don’t hold that against her. She wasn’t the villain in that story,” said one White House adviser privately. “I can’t believe any of this is thought through or tested.”

GOP consultant Wilson said he actually tested that exact line of attack against then-first lady Hillary Clinton in 1999, when he was working for Rudy Giuliani’s U.S. Senate campaign before the New York City mayor dropped out. Wilson said Republican women found it so offensive that they wanted to walk out of the focus group.

He said Trump is deluding himself if he believes that approach will work —or, more generally, that he will have any hope of winning the general election after the Democrats are done hammering him. “This is not going to end the way he thinks it’s going to.”

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