

Can Trump Control “Scam PACS”?

The GOP candidate needs money from big donors, but it's hard to find honest super PACS.



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Now that Donald Trump has relaxed his opposition to super PACs, all he needs is one that can be trusted with the big checks collected from wealthy donors.

Trouble is, it's unclear that one exists.

The main group helping the presumptive GOP nominee to date employed as its chief strategist a consultant who was just convicted of paying for an endorsement in the 2012 Iowa primary. And the group being created to supplant it is led by a veteran of the most profligate outfit of this election: the Ben Carson presidential campaign, which paid nearly half of the \$64 million it brought in to the consultants who raised it.

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Consultant Rick Wilson, who has railed for years against what he calls

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“grifters” taking advantage of gullible donors and is now a leading voice among anti-Trump Republicans, could only laugh. “When I think financial probity and effectiveness, I think ‘Carson staffers,’” he said.

Democrats interested in supporting Hillary Clinton via an outside group, meanwhile, are donating to Priorities USA Action, a super PAC created by former aides to President Obama in 2011. In the 2012 election, it spent \$65 million of the \$78 million it raised on advertising. While some GOP super PACs, like the pro-Mitt Romney Restore Our Future and the Karl Rove-founded American Crossroads, were able to maintain similarly low overhead rates, dozens of other Republican or anti-Obama super PACs have not.

Groups such as Tea Party Express and Tea Party Leadership Fund, well known to conservative activists from their frequent email solicitations, have spent much of their money on consultants, and comparatively little to affect elections.

Ironically, one of the biggest critics of super PACs this past year has been Trump himself, who has aggressively gone after groups for using his name to raise money and who has lashed out at the organizations generally.

“You know, these super PACs are a disaster, by the way, folks. Very corrupt,” Trump said in a debate. “There is total control of the candidates; I know it better than anybody that probably ever lived.”

A Trump campaign lawyer in March sent a letter to Great America PAC demanding that it stop using Trump’s name.

But as it became clear he would win the nomination, Trump has toned down his remarks about the unlimited-donation groups that might support him. He even called veteran GOP strategist Ed Rollins, who was hired this month by Great America PAC, “so tremendous” in an MSNBC interview.

The Trump campaign this week said his views had not changed at all: “Mr. Trump has disavowed all Super PACs and continues to do so,” spokeswoman Hope Hicks said in an email.

Candidates and their campaigns, of course, by law cannot coordinate with super PACs supporting them, but Trump’s mixed messages on the topic leave potential donors to fend for themselves when choosing a big-dollar vehicle for their cash.

Great America PAC, notwithstanding Trump’s recent compliment for Rollins, entered April nearly \$700,000 in the red, according to its last

Federal Election Commission filing. A top adviser, former aide to Sen. Rand Paul Jesse Benton, was convicted in federal court earlier this month for paying an Iowa legislator in 2012 to endorse the presidential campaign of former U.S. Rep. Ron Paul, Rand's father.

"We call it 'scam-PAC.' It's a scam," said Roger Stone, a former Trump aide who now is working independently to help his campaign. He added that of the \$1 million the group reported to the FEC that it spent on ads in March, only about a tenth of that amount wound up airing. "Where did that 900 grand go?"

Stone instead endorses the Committee for American Sovereignty, which won headlines last week for a plan to raise and spend as much as \$100 million by election day. That group, however, is being led by Doug Watts, who was among the top aides of Ben Carson's presidential campaign – which raised more than \$65 million, mainly from small donors, but spent well over \$30 million of that on the consultants it contracted with to raise it. Top staff members, meanwhile, were paid hefty sums: Campaign manager Barry Bennett's firm received \$436,156 in the nine months he was with the campaign; Ed Brookover's firm was paid \$175,487; and Watts's Urban Media Group received \$174,507, according to the campaign's FEC filings.

In contrast, Robby Mook, Democrat Hillary Clinton's campaign manager, made \$98,500 in a full year. Republican Jeb Bush's top aide, Sally Bradshaw, was paid \$100,000.

Watts said Bennett's actual salary accounted for about half of what he received, and that other payments were reimbursements for expenses he incurred. And he said the Carson campaign had to spend so much on fundraising because the retired neurosurgeon started with no donor base at all.

In any case, Watts said he is committed to making sure that at least 85 percent of every dollar his new group receives will be spent on identifying and persuading voters to support Trump. "I abhor the practices of 'scam-PACs,'" Watts said.



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