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Effort for Liberal Balance to G.O.P. Groups Begins

By MICHAEL LUO

In what may prove a significant development for the 2012 elections, David Brock, a prominent Democratic political operative, says he has amassed \$4 million in pledges over the last few weeks and is moving quickly to hire a staff to set up what he hopes will become a permanent liberal counterweight over the airwaves to the Republican-leaning outside groups that spent so heavily on this year's midterm elections.

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, a former Maryland lieutenant governor and the eldest of Robert F. Kennedy's 11 children, has agreed to serve as the chairwoman of the group, which will be called American Bridge, lending to the still extremely nascent undertaking the weight of what remains one of the most significant families in Democratic politics.

Leading Democratic donors who have already pledged money to the group include Rob McKay, heir to the Taco Bell fortune and chairman of the Democracy Alliance, a partnership of wealthy liberal donors; Robert Dyson, who heads Dyson-Kissner-Moran, a takeover and acquisitions firm in New York City; and Marcia L. Carsey, a television producer who gave \$1 million to Democratic outside groups in 2004.

Mr. Brock said in an interview that he planned to formally file papers with the Federal Election Commission on Tuesday to set up American Bridge as what is known as an independent-expenditure-only political action committee, meaning it will be able to take in contributions of unlimited size from individuals and corporations but must regularly disclose its donors. Certain to set off debate, however, is that Mr. Brock appears to be positioning his new organization so that fund-raising consultants can raise money for Democratic-oriented media efforts not just through American Bridge but also via one of the nonprofit organizations Mr. Brock currently runs, Media Matters Action Network, which does not disclose its donors. The action network, which tracks conservative politicians and advocacy organizations, is organized as a 501(c)(4) nonprofit group and is set to take on an expanded role in the 2012 elections, including potentially running television ads, according to an internal draft concept paper about American Bridge's and Media Matter Action Network's plans obtained by The New York Times.

Mr. Brock said that "money is money," and that he would actively solicit donors for both entities and, in the end, the media spending would be apportioned accordingly.

The moves by Mr. Brock in recent weeks make his the most concrete effort so far on the part of Democratic activists to establish some kind of centralized structure that they hope will become the left's answer in 2012 to such groups on the right as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, American Crossroads and others, which significantly outspent Democratic-leaning outside groups this year. It is too early to say whether Mr. Brock's group will emerge as the go-to vehicle for giant contributions on the left.

Mr. Brock led a much-heralded independent group in the 2008 presidential election that failed to gain much traction after the Obama campaign indicated that it preferred that donors not give to such groups.

But Mr. Brock, a former conservative journalist who publicly disavowed the right in the late 1990s, is a respected political player, who has drawn plaudits from liberal donors for his running of the array of groups under the Media Matters umbrella.

Mr. Brock pointed out that the various groups associated with Media Matters had raised a combined \$23 million this year. Its backers include major Democratic donors like George Soros, the billionaire who recently announced he had given \$1

million to the group; Peter B. Lewis, the billionaire chairman of Progressive Insurance, who, like Mr. Soros, gave more than \$20 million to Democratic-oriented groups in 2004; and the Hollywood producer Steve Bing.

"My donor base already constitutes the major individual players who have historically given hundreds of millions of dollars to these types of efforts," Mr. Brock said. "They just need to be asked, and I have no doubt they will step up at this critical time."

There also seems to be widespread agreement among Democratic activists and donors on the need for such groups to be more heavily involved in the 2012 elections.

White House officials have signaled in recent weeks that the Obama administration would not object to Democratic-leaning outside groups getting involved in the 2012 elections, a change from the Obama campaign's attitude toward such groups in 2008. But they have also indicated that they would prefer that the names of donors be disclosed.

The lack of disclosure among Republican-leaning outside groups became a central Democratic talking point this year as spending by outside groups on the right exploded before the midterm elections.

But the overriding desire on the part of liberal donors and activists to hold on to the White House and to win back some of what was lost in the House and Senate may trump those principles. Most political operatives agree that it is easier to raise money if the option of offering anonymity is available.

"It would be sort of a funny principle to stand on, to essentially tie one hand behind your back," Mr. McKay said.

Besides Mr. Brock, numerous Democratic activists have been in discussions about setting up similar independent efforts.

On Monday, for instance, Steve Rosenthal, who was the chief executive of America Coming Together, a Democratic fund-raising vehicle that focused on voter mobilization in the 2004 election, convened a group of political operatives, many of whom were active in that election, at a Washington restaurant to discuss what might be done for 2012.

No one, however, has apparently gone as far as Mr. Brock in terms of raising money and formally setting up an organization.

Mr. Brock said the \$4 million in pledges the group has collected so far should be deposited in its bank account by the end of the first quarter of 2011.

By way of comparison, America's Families First Action Fund, one of the major Democratic independent efforts in House races this year, raised just over \$4 million for the entire cycle up until mid-October.

The internal concept paper for American Bridge lays out a series of priorities for the next year, including initially focusing on attacking vulnerable Republicans in the Senate and the House, as a prelude to major spending in 2012.