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Conservative Ties Muddy Rob McKenna's Appeal to Moderates

A political action committee is running attack ads saying 'he's not who he says he is'

By Mike Baker
The Associated Press

OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — Before casting himself as a moderate in the campaign for governor, Rob McKenna met last year with members of a conservative group that has been targeted by activists as being too extreme.

The invitation-only dinner allowed McKenna to speak with a small gathering of corporate and political leaders, and he focused his remarks on efforts to combat President Barack Obama's health care law. After the event at an Olympia restaurant, the Republican sent a note to an organizer for the American

Legislative Exchange Council.

"Thanks again for the opportunity," McKenna wrote to Dann Mead Smith, according to records obtained by The Associated Press under public records laws. "Congratulations on the success you're seeing with ALEC in Washington."

Over the past decade, McKenna has portrayed himself as a centrist fit to lead this Democratic-leaning state. At the same time, he has worked closely with conservatives who might give some independents pause: He raised money for President George W. Bush, touted his work for ALEC members and has attended tea party events to talk about the Constitution.

Now, part of McKenna's quest for governor has been a public relations battle over whether his views are too conservative for Washington State.

A political action committee funded by unions has been running attack ads with the message that McKenna is "not who he says he is." A recent ad from the group tries to tie McKenna — in misleading or incorrect ways — to Republican positions on abortion, the national budget and health care.

McKenna, meanwhile,

has worked to tout the support he has from some Democrats, a union of public school employees and an independent education group.

He has also staked out positions that don't align with typical Republicans. He supports the state's current laws on abortion. He believes illegal immigrants should qualify for in-state tuition. He believes women should have access to emergency contraception at all pharmacies. He says more revenue will be needed to fund future transportation projects. He supports the state's domestic partnership law — though he opposes gay marriage.

McKenna's campaign declined to comment on his work with conservative groups, but his work for Bush is detailed in archived records from his stint at the King County Council. At the time, he touted his work as a fundraiser for Bush on his resume, saying he raised \$15,000 at three fundraisers before the 2000 election and volunteered at a phone bank, according to documents reviewed by the AP. Other records indicate McKenna later raised money in 2002 to support Bush's agenda as president.

ALEC has been the target of liberal activists in recent months for its support of

voter ID laws and so-called "Stand Your Ground" self-defense laws, coordinating a campaign against the group in the wake of the shooting of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin. The organization brings together companies and lawmakers to jointly develop model legislation that the lawmakers then bring back to their states to pass — and that closed-door coordination irks open government advocates.

Several companies have dropped participation in ALEC in recent months amid public pressure.

McKenna spoke to ALEC in March at the Waterstreet Cafe in Olympia, according to documents. ALEC organizers touted that members in attendance included Walmart, AT&T and Koch Industries — the latter being another flashpoint in politics because the Koch brothers are major funders for conservative causes.

Records suggest McKenna focused his remarks on his involvement in a lawsuit challenging Obama's health care law.

McKenna's appearances at tea party events also focused on the health care issue and whether it was constitutional. Still, McKenna was never really a tea party favorite — and another Republican, Shahram Hadian, ran in the primary with support from the far right side of the party.

Unlike his Democratic counterpart Jay Inslee, who spent more than a decade in

Congress, McKenna lacks a long track record of votes that can help people discern his political leanings, said Matt Barreto.

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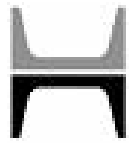
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