



3 Shady Things the Koch Brothers Have Been Up To That the Media Ignore

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On an October evening in 2011, a tall, older man stood before a floor-to-ceiling glass window on an upper floor in the massive, modernist Washington Convention Center, surveying the scene in the street below. Protesters had [blocked access to the building](#) where David Koch, shielded by the massive panes, was hosting a political gathering of right-wing activists, and were now massed at an intersection, chanting "We are the 99 percent!" It was Koch the protesters had come to castigate -- Koch and all he represents. For if David Koch is nothing else, he is most definitely a member of "the 1 percent" -- the top tier of income-earners in the United States, as is his brother, Charles.

Together, the pair have used their wealth not merely to assure its continuance, but to advance an ideology designed to secure the dominance of American politics and, indeed, the control of global capital, by themselves and a very few similarly endowed individuals. So, as David Koch, [benefactor of both the New York City Opera](#) and a horde of angry Tea Partiers in Congress, gazed upon his scruffy detractors, he did so as a lead figure in the latest installment of the epic drama that began in America's Gilded Age, a drama that might be called the Capitalist Assault on Democracy.

With their WASPy good looks (either sibling approximates Central Casting's idea of what a patrician billionaire should look like), roots in the high-polluting energy sector and virulently anti-labor attitudes, Charles and David Koch constitute a set of almost too-perfect villains for the American left. The mere mention of "the Koch brothers" has become a kind of code for all that's wrong with the hypercapitalist American political system, where money equals speech,

and election to public office all but requires the largesse of capitalist patrons. But because the Kochs have become such potent symbols among progressive activists, the particulars of their vast influence on the lives of Americans -- most of whom have never heard of them -- are in danger of getting lost. With his new film, [Koch Brothers Exposed](#) (trailer at the end of this article), Robert Greenwald and his colleagues at Brave New Foundation hope to keep the deeds of the billionaire brothers front and center as the nation plunges into a national election season like no other. (Full disclosure: I'm interviewed in the film.)

Symbols v. News

Symbols are static things; they represent fixed ideas and attitudes. The ideas and attitudes may be the result of actions, but they are not actions in and of themselves. Movements require symbols as shorthand for what they are for and against. Media, on the other hand, require stories -- new stories. (They don't call it "the news" for nothing.) Stories are things that move, revealing new information. When the influence of the Koch brothers -- as think-tank funders, movement-builders, political patrons and private capitalists -- emerged from the shadows in 2009, it was news. (Who knew that guy endowing new wings for [New York's grandest cultural institutions](#) was also funding the [climate-change denying entities](#) that constitute a sort of modern-day Flat Earth Society?)

Money is sexy, and the Kochs have plenty of it: more than \$50 billion between them. Media love sexy -- especially the money kind of sexy -- and love whatever looks new. The Tea Party movement fulfilled that last requirement; never before had the right wing, given its authoritarian character, taken to the streets in opposition to authority, as the Tea Party did in protest of the newly elected president of the United States, Barack Obama. Even though the Koch brothers had been fueling elements of the American right for decades -- creating organizations such as the now-defunct Citizens for a Sound Economy, endowing professorships and academic entities such as the Mercatus Institute, and spending heavily on think-tanks -- their influence rarely made news before a parade of angry white people bearing yellow flags marched to the U.S. capitol in September 2009.

Americans for Prosperity and the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, both founded by the Koch brothers (and the latter chaired by David Koch himself) marshaled the backlash against the election of the nation's first African-American president, using it as a rallying point for building a movement based upon the Kochs' own anti-regulatory, anti-environmental, anti-labor agenda.

Health-care reform provided the perfect vehicle because of health care's deeply personal nature and its relationship to human mortality. After failing to defeat the Affordable Care Act, the Kochs were apparently determined to get even.

Getting Even

In 2010, Americans for Prosperity and its foundation gave more than a little help to Tea Party-identified candidates for Congress, resulting in a takeover of the House by Republicans, and a further distillation of the right-wing bent of Republicans in the Senate. So gratifying was the victory that David Koch came to the U.S. capitol to see the 2011 freshman class of the House of Representatives sworn in. In his company was Americans for Prosperity president Tim Phillips. Nowhere were the Kochs' efforts more successful than in Wisconsin, cradle of the labor movement, where two new congressmen, Reid Ribble and Sean Duffy, were hatched by the Koch machine, and where a lackluster candidate named Ron Johnson defeated the long-serving Sen. Russell Feingold. The Kochs remained in the news.

But it didn't end there. Scott Walker, long affiliated with Americans for Prosperity, won the governor's mansion. Then came the Wisconsin uprising, an 18-day occupation of the state capitol building after the governor, as an agent of the Koch brothers, rammed through the legislature an anti-labor bill that all but ended the union rights of the state's public employees -- a bill, it was later revealed, that derived from model legislation drafted by the Koch-funded American Legislative Exchange Council. The uprising of everyday people against their elected officials -- well, that something new under the American sun. Then the [punking of the governor by Ian Murphy](#), a progressive blogger who, pretending to be David Koch, got Walker on the phone, crystalizing the sycophantic relationship between Wisconsin's Republicans and the billionaire oil barons. The famously publicity-shy Koch brothers continued to see their names in headlines.

Meanwhile, Herman Cain, a longtime Koch ally (he called David Koch his "brother from another mother") embarked on an entertaining presidential run. Five months after [AlterNet began reporting](#) on Cain's deep ties to the Kochs, the corporate media finally deigned to [explore the topic](#), and once again, the Koch name hit the news. But with Cain's exit from the presidential race and the national media's boredom with the ongoing story in Wisconsin (where Walker will face a recall election, probably in June), the Koch brothers' profile is fading from view -- unless you're a beltway politico enthralled with an internecine battle for [control of the Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think-tank, or

delighting in an [exchange of letters](#) between Obama's campaign manager and a spokesperson for Koch Industries, the second-largest privately held corporation in America and one of the nation's biggest polluters.

As shown in *Koch Brothers Exposed*, the Kochs aim to shape and shrink government to their liking at every level: national, state and local. (If you don't believe me on that last one, you'll find enlightenment in the film's segment on Americans for Prosperity's involvement in a local [school board election in North Carolina](#) that turned on the question of school segregation.) They aim to [destroy public sector unions](#), not simply because government is labor's last bastion of an organized workforce, but also because the Democratic Party relies on unions to turn out the vote in state and national elections. They're focused on eliminating environmental regulations and forestalling efforts to control carbon emissions because Koch industries is a carbon-based business. They hope to [phase out Social Security](#) in order to eliminate the employer contribution to our national safety net for the elderly.

As the Koch brothers continue to do more of the same, the corporate media will likely turn its gaze to brighter, shinier objects. More of the same, after all, does not a news story make. But should the Kochs succeed in winning control of all branches of government, the resulting devastation to the lives of everyday people will be news to them -- very big news indeed.

Three Reasons to Pay Attention

The broad and detrimental reach of the Koch brothers' influence on American life offers an array of areas that demand scrutiny, but there are three that set the stage for all the others: the corrupting influence of Koch money on elections, legislation and the scholarly research that shapes legislation.

1) Buying elections: According to news reports, the Koch brothers plan to spend, as *The Hill* [describes it](#), "upwards of \$200 million on various conservative activist groups... in an attempt to oust Obama from the White House."

Recently, a war of words erupted between Obama campaign manager Jim Messina and Koch Industries spokesperson Phillip Ellender after Messina sent out a fundraising letter in February accusing the Kochs of bankrolling the Tea Party movement and pushing up prices at the gas pump, via their Koch Industries oil business. After Ellender took offense, Messina responded with a letter ([PDF](#)) that called on Americans for Prosperity to release its donor list,

which, as a non-profit in the 501(c)(3) category of the U.S. tax code, it is not required to do. As [The Hill reported](#):

AFP has already spent millions on commercials in key swing states challenging the administration's support for failed green energy firm Solyndra. The group spent \$6 million in battleground states in January, on top of an additional \$2.4 million campaign last November.

In Wisconsin, meanwhile, Americans for Prosperity is the major player behind efforts to stave off the recall of the Kochs' man in Madison, Gov. Scott Walker.

From the [Wall Street Journal](#):

Through January, Americans for Prosperity, has spent \$1.5 million on ads opposing the recall, and recently launched a new, \$700,000 TV campaign [targeting public-sector unions.] Its director, Tim Philips, said AFP isn't an outside interest group. AFP set up offices in Wisconsin in 2005 and has been running a grassroots campaign of its own to stop the recalls, he said.

Americans for Prosperity is but one of many right-wing groups supported by the Kochs.

The Republican Governors Association threw [\\$5.5 million](#) into the campaign to elect Scott Walker in 2010 -- the same year that [David Koch donated \\$1 million](#) to RGA.

2) Corrupting the legislative process: The American Legislative Exchange Council is a corporate-funded body that crafts model legislation, such as Wisconsin's anti-worker law, designed to be customized by legislators in state houses across the country. The Koch brothers are [enthusiastic backers of ALEC](#), which is not only behind the raft of anti-labor bills roiling legislatures, but also the widespread legislative attempts to disenfranchise voters, as well as anti-immigrant legislation. ALEC was also [behind the Florida law, called Stand Your Ground](#), that is being used as the justification for not arresting George Zimmerman, the killer of Trayvon Martin.

The voter ID laws that have been introduced in the legislatures of 33 states are [based on an ALEC model bill](#).

In Arizona, an [anti-labor bill crafted](#) by ALEC is currently before the state legislature. The state's draconian anti-immigrant law and voter suppression laws are also products of the great minds at ALEC.

Find more [here](#), at ALEC Exposed.

3) Corrupting scholarly research: As noted in *Koch Brothers Exposed*, Charles and David Koch are generous funders of think-tanks, and donors of endowed chairs at colleges and universities nationwide. They even have their very own academic entity, the Mercatus Institute, at Virginia's George Mason University, a public institution. The brothers would have you believe that it's all about their love of learning, but in truth, these entities exist expressly to churn out reams of pages that deny the science of climate change, and that advance economic arguments for the implementation of the Koch agenda, whether it be the roll-back of environmental regulation, or the scaling back of Social Security. (Think Progress offers an overview [here](#).)

Lately, Washington's wonk community has been riveted by an uncharacteristically public battle for control of the Cato Institute, which the Kochs helped to found, but which has a strong reputation for intellectual independence in its libertarian research. Apparently, Cato wasn't marching in lockstep with the other Koch-funded think-tanks, leading the brothers to try to gobble up the shares of a recently deceased board member in order to seize complete control of the think-tank. In an [interview](#) with Slate's David Weigel, longtime Cato president Ed Crane put it this way:

I want to save Cato. I'll step down if it ends this thing. It can't be a wholly owned subsidiary of Koch Industries. Who the hell is going to take a think-tank seriously that's controlled by billionaire oil guys? It's just nuts!

But the Koch brothers don't care about being taken seriously by the smart set in Washington. They care only about one thing: winning. And left to maneuver behind the scenes, they just might do it. Now, is everybody paying attention?

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