



The Hard-Right Swerve of the Super Rich

An astonishing Times article serves to remind: The rich have always had more influence. But they haven't always been this right wing.

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Well, the same *New York Times* that's been dishing out sloppy Hillary-Benghazi scoops that it later has to walk back and weirdly sourced columns about Beau Biden's alleged deathbed wish is still, it reassures me to report, capable of greatness. I say this because the article in Sunday's paper by Nicholas Confessore, Sarah Cohen, and Karen Yourish on the 158 super-rich families paying half the freight of the 2016 presidential campaign was the kind of political journalism that for a couple days makes all other political journalism seem unimportant.

In case you didn't read it: The *Times* found that just 158 families and the companies they own or control have donated \$176 million so far to the various presidential campaigns, an amount that is almost half of the entire total of money donated. Of these 158, fully 138 have donated to Republicans, and just 20 to Democrats. The donors are overwhelmingly white, male, and older, and they live with people just like them in a few ZIP codes. They tend to be in finance and energy. "Not since before Watergate have so few people and businesses provided so much early money in a campaign, most of it through channels legalized by the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision five years ago," the article notes.

One hundred fifty-eight families. It's just staggering. Here's why this is important. If you've ever looked at all those polls showing that 68 percent of people support a higher minimum wage and 70 percent support paid family leave and probably even higher numbers would like to raise taxes on the rich and wondered in exasperation why our government can't pass these programs that have such broad popular support—well, this is why.

The people who pay for our campaigns are not part of those broad majorities. They're the vanguard of the furious minority, and they count a lot more than you and I do, to say nothing, obviously, of truly poor people, who don't count at all. From the article: "(The families investing the most in presidential politics overwhelmingly lean right, contributing tens of millions of

dollars to support Republican candidates who have pledged to pare regulations; cut taxes on income, capital gains and inheritances; and shrink entitlement programs.”

It’s true that this sample undoubtedly skews more Republican than it might because of the nature of the presidential field; that is, there are seven or eight Republican candidates to whom these people are giving money (Bush, Rubio, Cruz, Kasich, Fiorina, etc.), and functionally only one Democrat (Clinton). So that’s your “to be sure” here.

Even so, here’s what we need to take away from this. It’s not that the super-rich have that much more sway than they once did. They’ve always had disproportionate influence. But I fear most readers of the *Times* piece will walk away from it blaming *Citizens United* and other such cases. That matters, but it isn’t the key thing here. The key thing that’s different today from 40 or 50 years ago, I would submit to you, is not that the super rich have all that much more influence. Rather, it’s how much more right wing today’s super rich are than they used to be.

The Princeton political scientist Martin Gilens is the great authority on all this. For his [2013 book *Affluence and Influence*](#), he collected mountains of research on the policy views of poor people, middle-class people, and the rich going back to Lyndon Johnson’s day. He matched those views against policy outcomes. He found that about half the time—notably on foreign-policy issues, for example—policy views aren’t that different as you jump from class to class. On cultural questions, interestingly, the super rich are often a couple ticks to the left of the middle class—the 1 percent aren’t especially against abortion rights or same-sex marriage. But the differences tend to be about the economic issues that form the skeleton of the state: tax rates, regulations, the size of the social safety net (put more plainly, the amount of their tax dollars that go to the working class and poor). And in the 50 percent or so of cases where there are differences, policy outcomes almost always reflect the preferences of the well-off. (Read [this *Boston Review* piece](#) that Gilens wrote, which summarizes the book’s arguments.)

Now, Gilens defined “affluent” far, far more broadly than 158 families (he meant the top 10 percent), so his research is of limited use here. It could be that 158 similar families in 1965 were as severely conservative as this group. But somehow I doubt it. The business world just wasn’t nearly as right wing then. There was this prominent business lobbying group in those days, the [Committee for Economic Development](#), that was pointedly centrist (it still exists but alas has a fraction of its old influence). And of course unions were much stronger then, so business understood that it had to deal with labor. Also back then, CEOs were making 20 or 30 times the average worker’s pay, not 350 times. That would have been considered uncouth. Eastern establishment types—the super rich back then—skewed left. They went for Rockefeller, not Goldwater.

And I would say most of all, there was no huge conservative infrastructure in those days. That infrastructure—the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, which was funded from the onset by the Koch brothers—wasn’t built until the 1970s and didn’t become powerful until the 1980s. The conservative media as we understand it today didn’t hit until the 1990s.

All this activity revved up the hard right in a way that [Bill Buckley](#) and Phyllis Schlafly would never have dreamed would be possible back in 1965. And the importance of the prominence on the *Times*’s list of oilmen can’t be overstated. The oilmen were always a hard-shell crowd, but they had no juice in the old days (see the famous [Dwight Eisenhower quote](#) about “Texas oil millionaires”). But as the South’s dominance of the GOP has grown—and Texas’s in particular—the oil interests have gained even more power than they once had.

What is to be done, as the man said? Nothing immediate. It's all long, hard work. There are super rich people out there (beyond the few we know about) with liberal views. Somebody needs to find them and engage them and tell them they're going to lose their country if they don't match these people dollar for dollar. And there's the Supreme Court. The Court is going to be one of the major issues in this election, and the prospect of replacing an aging/retiring Antonin Scalia and Anthony Kennedy with two liberals is going to drive a lot of voters to the polls who swear they have no love for Hillary. A Court that overturns *Citizens United* and even someday (and much more importantly) *Buckley v. Valeo* is a Court worth fighting, and voting, for.