

What is ALEC, and Why You Should Care - BlueOregon

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While such laws as making it illegal for welfare recipients in Minnesota to carry cash- in effect criminalizing poor people- or a Missouri Republican's proposal to repeal child labor laws may not necessarily be based on ALEC's "model legislation" it's really difficult to assert as such without the ability to access such model legislation on ALEC's website. How do we know similar bizarre pieces of legislation aren't currently in the hands of Oregon lawmakers, chomping at the bit to arrest poor people for having the nerve to be carrying twenty dollars on them?

Those following the national blogosphere might be aware of the [attacks on University of Wisconsin professor William Cronon](#) by the increasingly Gestapo-like Wisconsin State Republican Party. The Wisconsin Republicans have filed a freedom of information request for Professor Cronon's emails, with the ostensible rationale given that they are concerned about Cronon- a public employee- communicating with organizers of the weeks-long protest in Madison opposing Governor Scott Walker's union-busting bill. I use the word "ostensibly" as the Wisconsin Republicans have resorted to such [Spanish Inquisition](#)-type tactics against Cronon shortly after he published the initial post "[Who's Really Behind the Recent Republican Legislation in Wisconsin and Elsewhere? \(Hint: It Didn't Start Here\)](#)" on his new blog [Scholar as Citizen](#). (This blog post shortly followed a [New York Times op-ed](#) that touched on similar subject matter.)

There ends the summary of recent events. Most Blue Oregon readers are keenly aware of what has occurred in Madison these recent months, and perhaps wonder of the relevance does Governor Walker's complete- and [possibly illegal](#)- executive overreach and the Wisconsin Republicans picking on an obscure (and, presumably, an elite latte-sipping liberal) university professor have on the legislative goings-on in Salem? Well, perhaps you have wondered why [near-identical legislation](#) that strips collective bargaining for public employees has been introduced in statehouses ranging from Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Idaho, etc....? The Republican-controlled Michigan legislature passed the state's "[financial martial law](#)" bill, effectively making representative democracy in that state a quaint thing of the past. Be prepared to see similar pieces of legislation rolled out by other GOP state lawmakers, along with similar legislature to Michigan's newly passed legislation to [reduce unemployment benefits](#) in 2012. How do such draconian pieces of legislation get so speedily introduced and passed scant weeks after new lawmakers have been sworn into office? Professor Cronon provides the answer in his blog post where he makes the case that while the Koch Brothers' billions and the Astro-turfin' Tea Partiers definitely help win elections, it is through the efforts of the more insidious [American Legislative Exchange Council](#) (ALEC) that allows the passage of such horrible pieces of legislation even remotely possible. And it is for this reason of exposing the men behind the Republicans' legislative curtain that Professor Cronon has been targeted for attacks by the Wisconsin GOP.

Professor Cronon's blog post is an eye-opening read, and is essential to understand the legislative wars that are currently being waged in statehouses throughout the country. Cronon makes it very clear what ALEC is and why this organization poses such an extraordinary threat to democracy. At the risk of paraphrasing his words, I'll just quote them directly:

"...[formed in 1973, ALEC's] goal for the past forty years has been to draft "model bills" that conservative legislators can introduce in the 50 states. Its website claims that in each legislative cycle, its members introduce 1000 pieces of legislation based on its work, and claims that roughly 18% of these bills are enacted into law. (Among them was the controversial 2010 anti-immigrant law in Arizona.)"

In other words, while the typical follower of progressive politics may be aware of such conservative think-tanks as the Heritage Institute, Charles Koch's Cato Institute, and the libertarian-leaning Reason Foundation, here is a policy-based conservative think-tank whose sole purpose is to draft legislation and have it introduced on the floor of statehouses at a moment's notice. As such, when there is a "wave" election resulting in formerly blue state legislatures switching to red, a similar "wave" of "model" legislation previously written by ALEC is ready to be introduced in the state House chambers, irrespective of the facts that the state is currently facing. (Is it any wonder that the so-called "budget repair" bill was passed in Wisconsin only after everything having to do with the budget was stripped out, leaving the bill reduced to its ideological union-busting components?)

Interested in just what sort of services ALEC offers, Professor Cronon explores the organization's website:

But the meat of the site is the "model legislation" page, which is the gateway to the hundreds of bills that ALEC has drafted for the benefit of its conservative members.

Cool! So what is listed there?

You'll of course be eager to look these over...but you won't be able to, because you're not a member.

Okay then, so how does one "become" a member- solely by being an elected conservative state official? Sadly, as Professor Cronon finds out, becoming a member of ALEC is not "an easy thing to do":

How do you become a member? Simple. Two ways. You can be an elected Republican legislator who, after being individually vetted, pays a token fee of roughly \$100 per biennium to join... What if you're not a Republican elected official? Not to worry. You can apply to join ALEC as a "private sector" member by paying at least a few thousand dollars depending on which legislative domains most interest you... Then again, even if most of us had this kind of money to contribute to ALEC, I have a feeling that membership might not necessarily be open to just anyone who is willing to pay the fee. But maybe I'm being cynical here.

Curious to find out which Wisconsin Republican legislators were members of ALEC, Professor Cronon finds out that ALEC's membership can only be accessed... by logging in to the site as a member. Huh. How about that. Not only does this organization exist whose sole purpose is to write and distribute cookie-cutter conservative legislation to be passed by state legislatures once elections have a favorable result, it is practically impossible to find out which of the conservative representatives in our statehouse belong to this organization, representing a constituency thousands of miles away opposed to constituents in their home district. Looking through ALEC's website myself, I noticed that the organization appropriates "Jeffersonian ideals" of free markets, limited government, and federalism but ignores the protection of the commons and the general welfare, or other such similar concepts Jefferson wrote about in the Constitution. The expected players are to be found: Koch Industries is duly represented on ALEC's [Private Enterprise Board](#), while the [Board of "Scholars"](#) includes of Dr. Arthur Laffer (of "[the Laffer Curve](#)" fame) and *The Wall Street Journal's* Stephen Moore. (Regular watchers of Real Time with Bill Maher might recognize these two so-called scholars through Maher's incredible evisceration of their recitation of tired and disproven conservative talking points.)

ALEC also has a list of state chairmen, with Oregon being represented by Rep. C. Gene Whisnant of Sunriver. Besides Rep. Whisnant, the question should be asked: How many other members of the Oregon Republican caucus are ALEC members? What "model legislation" approved by ALEC's nine task forces currently sit on the desk of a conservative Oregon lawmaker, ready to be introduced at the proper time? A recent commentary offered from David Sirota examined the "[Mad](#)

[Scientists in the Laboratories of Democracy.](#)” While such laws as making it illegal for [welfare recipients in Minnesota to carry cash](#)- in effect criminalizing poor people- or a Missouri Republican’s proposal to [repeal child labor laws](#) may not necessarily be based on ALEC’s “model legislation” it’s really difficult to assert as such without the ability to access the model legislation listed on ALEC’s website. How do we know similar bizarre pieces of legislation aren’t currently in the hands of Oregon lawmakers, chomping at the bit to arrest poor people for having the nerve to be carrying twenty dollars on them? ALEC boasts of introducing nearly 1,000 bills at the state level, of which nearly 17% are signed into law. These are astonishing numbers- and it needs to be clear to Oregon voters which pieces of state legislation are being modeled and written at a national level to be introduced in Salem.

In fact, it could be argued that Oregonians dodged a bullet this past November. If the election results had been any different, if a seemingly moderate Chris Dudley were to come into office with an emboldened Republican leadership, we would be seeing similar such “mad” legislation introduced in Salem on a regular basis. After all, Rick Snyder campaigned in Michigan as a self-styled moderate as well.

An effort needs to be made to find out just which Oregon conservative lawmakers (from either party) are proud members of ALEC, and what pieces of ALEC’s “model legislation” are being brought to the floor of Oregon’s state house. It needs to be guaranteed that Oregon’s representatives- especially its conservatives- are ably representing the priorities and interests of the constituents living in zip codes that start with a 9 and a 7, and not a constituency from a 20005 zip code.