

Kochsoros-Rex

by E.D. Kain

Ever since Jane Mayer's infamous Koch-brothers article last year, one of the quickest ways for progressives to write off libertarians is to say "the Koch-funded Cato institute" or "Koch lackeys at Reason" or some similar dismissal. And while DougJ did indeed include non-libertarian think-tanks in his indictment of Big Money yesterday, the focus has still been on the libertarian think-tanks in particular, using their ties to the Koch brothers as a reason to cast doubt on anyone affiliated with them. This is silly. This is like dismissing a reporter at The New York Times because it is a "liberal rag". Or dismissing Matt Yglesias out of hand because George Soros indirectly signs his paycheck.

Actually, if you follow this line of reasoning you'll discover that you can pretty much no longer trust anyone who is writing and getting paid to write in any capacity by anyone with a political bias. All the writers at The American Prospect are suspect now because they are on the payroll of liberal publishers, ditto National Review and so forth. Yes, the money does matter – especially when heads roll at a think tank for no stated reason or you see some concerted effort to toe a party line, but for the most part these institutions operate with stated bias and are funded by people who share this bias. There is nothing nefarious about that. A healthy distrust of media is a good thing; using the Koch brothers or George Soros as a way to write off your opponents is just lazy.

There was some disbelief expressed in the comments to DougJ's post when I mentioned that all mainstream political coalitions have think tanks. Commenter J Michael Neal wrote:

The point is that the funders of libertarianism bring a lot of money to the table. The funders of liberalism, on the other hand, fall into one of two categories:

- 1) They aren't very liberal, or
- 2) They don't have a lot of money.

This means that the political discourse is constrained, because it's only going to go where the money is.

Well, according to The American Prospect this isn't entirely true:

Some of the biggest fortunes in America now tilt left, and that can be seen in the vast sums of cash pouring into Democratic coffers and progressive organizations. Billionaires like George Soros and Peter Lewis have given tens of millions of dollars each to liberal 527s and have also helped to bankroll a greatly enlarged progressive infrastructure that includes groups like the Center for American Progress and Media Matters. David Gelbaum, a successful investor, has given remarkable sums to two flagship liberal organizations—\$94 million to the American Civil Liberties Union and more than \$200 million to the Sierra Club. The Democracy Alliance, a funding umbrella formed in 2005,

now has approximately 100 partners who collectively give millions of dollars a year to progressive groups. Nearly half of the groups it funds did not exist a decade ago.

I find this entirely plausible, especially given the fact that a progressive sits in the White House, and Democrats recently passed a shit ton (pardon the technical expression) of progressive legislation over the past two years (not every last piece of progressive legislation, but healthcare reform, financial reform, and the repeal of DADT are nothing to sniff at).

Commenter Xenos wrote, “Surely you can’t be serious” in response to my assertion, and commenter maus pointed out that “Conservative “Libertarianism” is centralized. “Liberalism” is not, unless you actually believe George Soros/MoveOn run modern Democrats, which I’d love to hear.”

I don’t believe they do, any more than I believe the Koch brothers run modern libertarians. But then again, Democrats represent a huge demographic and are one of the major parties in our political system. Libertarians represent a small minority of voters and have never even seated a president. If libertarianism is truly centralized – and I question that assertion – it is because it is a much smaller political movement in comparison to liberalism. Neither libertarians or progressives have the lockstep achieved by the conservative movement.

And finally commenter PIGL challenged:
name me three “liberal” think tanks that have any influence on bobble-head chatter or policy direction.

Almost all the major think tanks are libertarian or neo-conservative, and they push agendas that have distinctions without differences. And guess what: there is a reason for this. They are all funded by the same interests.

I’m not sure how we can properly gauge policy direction or at least the amount of influence various think tanks actually exert over it. As I mentioned above, the progressive cause has progressed at a nice clip under President Obama, and I suppose some progressive think tanks and media groups had something to do with it, such as:

The Economic Policy Institute

The Center for Public Integrity

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities

The Justice Policy Institute

Citizens for Tax Justice

The Center for Defense Information

The Brookings Institute

The Center for American Progress

Other well-organized and well-funded progressive groups include MoveOn.org, Media Matters and a host of magazines and newspapers including The American Prospect and The New York Times (others like the Washington Post and The New Republic are admittedly more hawkish and play host to a variety of neoconservatives); and if you look at the list of top federal donors or “heavy hitters” at OpenSecrets.org you’ll notice quickly that the third largest donor since 1989 is the American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees.

Here’s the top ten list of the biggest federal-level givers since 1989:

ActBlue	\$47,896,163
AT&T Inc	\$46,024,320
American Fedn of State,County & Municipal Employees	\$43,295,361
National Assn of Realtors	\$38,628,241
Goldman Sachs	\$33,264,702
American Assn for Justice	\$32,939,279
Intl Brotherhood of Electrical Workers	\$32,927,766
National Education Assn	\$31,832,740
Laborers Union	\$30,061,550
Service Employees International Union	\$29,114,982

ActBlue is an organization dedicated to advancing the agenda of the Democratic party. The American Association for Justice is comprised of trial lawyers. Then you have, in the top ten list alone, five big labor organizations, mixed in there with Goldman Sachs,

AT&T, and the realtors. Check out the full list – number eleven is the Teamsters, followed by a bunch more big labor outfits and financial institutions.

With all this money finding its way to progressive causes and the Democratic party, I have a hard time believing that the Koch brothers and the Cato Institute (and the various other libertarian think tanks) pose such an enormous threat or are by comparison somehow more in the pockets of special interest groups. If you look at this OpenSecrets report on Soros and the Koch brothers you'll find that both have donated ridiculous amounts of money to political causes. And both have donated ridiculous amounts of money to other causes as well, such as cancer research.

Now, this doesn't mean I'm walking back on my previous critique of libertarians and their major political operations: I do think priorities should shift, and I think that a lot of the corporate money and revanchist philosophy that's worked its way into libertarian thought over the years has had a profoundly negative impact on libertarianism writ large. But this whole notion that progressives are getting out-funded by libertarians, or that the simple fact that wealthy people contribute to libertarian think-tanks should somehow invalidate libertarianism or prove, once and for all, that libertarians are merely puppets of big business is lazy argumentation. It is assertion masquerading as argument. Nor is it some exercise in High Broderism to point out that libertarians, conservatives and progressives alike have a great deal of money pumped into their various political and policy pursuits.