

## Citizen Koch: Voters, Workers, Filmmakers All Get Screwed by the Kochs

By: Gar Smith  
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It's not for nothing that the "MPAA Rating" on the *Citizen Koch* press packet warns the 86-minute documentary contains some coarse language "and terrifying political maneuvering." Case in point: The reason we will be watching *Citizen Koch* on the Big Screen is because we weren't allowed to see it on PBS.

The film was originally set for broadcast on PBS—until the Independent Television Service (ITVS) pulled its promised \$150,000 in completion funds. Why? Out of concern the film might rile the bile of a particular donor named Koch (who also sits on the boards of two of the largest PBS stations). ITVS had earlier aired Alex Gibney's exposé, *Park Avenue: Money, Power and the American Dream*, which included a scathing critique of David Koch and his brother Charles. *Citizen Koch* arrived just as WNET (the flagship PBS station in Manhattan) was anticipating a seven-figure gift from Koch. Aware of Mr. Koch's displeasure over the Gibney film, WNET's president refused to schedule the film for broadcast. As one senior ITVS exec subsequently explained: "We live in a world where we have to be aware that people with power have power."

Ironically, this was the very message the filmmakers were trying to make.

Directors Carl Deal and Tia Lessin were forced to "go grassroots" to finish their film. A Kickstarter campaign drew more than 3,000 supporters who contributed nearly \$170,000 in 30 days.

The film is arriving in Bay Area movie theaters on June 27. The Kochs will not be pleased.

Co-director Tia Lessin will be at the Landmark Shattuck on Saturday to discuss the film. There will be a Q&A after the 5, 7 and 9:30 screenings. Common Cause CA will host the second Q&A and Tia Lessin will introduce the final screening.

The film begins with some essential background on the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision. While this discussion was essential, it proved cinematically challenging since filming (or even photographing) Supreme Court deliberations is forbidden. The best the filmmakers could manage was to gain admission to film the courtroom when the court was not in session. And so we get to hear the audiotapes of the justices debating the case while the screen displays

an almost laughingly dull "conversation" that shifts back and forth between shots of empty chairs.

The impact of the court's ruling was profound. Until the contentious ruling, 24 of our 50 states had long-established laws that prohibited corporations from spending money on public elections. That protection was swept away by the court's decision. Buying elections was declared a form of "free speech" and corporations were granted the same First Amendment rights as a part-time Wal-Mart clerk to spend \$1 million or more on a political campaign.

To accomplish their dream of state-and-national political re-engineering, the billionaire Kochs turned on the spigots of their oil wealth and channeled millions into front groups like Americans for Prosperity, the Republican Governors Association, the Cato Institute, Citizens for a Sound Economy and, most notably, the Tea Party Movement.

During the 2012 elections, the Koch/Karl Rove attack-ad strategy paid off handsomely at the state level, with the billionaire-minions-of-the-1% seizing control of 26 state legislators, installing 29 anti-union governors and sweeping the presidential swing states of North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

As soon as he stepped into the statehouse in Madison, Koch-backed Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker declared the state was "open for business." Under Walker's reign, Wisconsin instantly became a proving ground for the Koch's über-libertarian philosophy. Or as filmmakers Deal and Lessin put it, Wisconsin was about to become a key "part of a concerted and nationwide strategy... to super-enfranchise the wealthiest people and corporations by allowing unlimited and undisclosed political spending and to undermine the power of working and poor Americans."

*Citizen Koch* is brim-full with passionate interviews ranging from the rabble-rousing of working-class campaigners and the cold analysis of political celebrities to the ruminations of David and Charles Koch themselves. (Intercepted in a parking lot en route to a private meeting, the two Koch brothers are surprisingly relaxed and chatty as they are grilled by the movie's camera crew.) Former US Senator and campaign-spending reformer Russ Feingold is on hand to offer candid and thoughtful analysis. Former half-term Alaska Governor Sarah Palin pops in to offer a few "You betchas" and a pep talk salted with ad hominem attacks. But the film really comes to life with the appearance of Buddy Roemer, a short, feisty and personable Ross-Perot-surrogate.

Roemer, a former Louisiana governor and US Representative is a true "maverick." Originally a "Reagan Democrat," Roemer morphed into a Republican when he became governor only to abandon the GOP. In 2012, he ran an independent campaign for the Republican presidency but (like Perot and Ralph Nader before him) found himself shut out of the debates. (Roemer comes off as such an energetic and straight-forward delight that he probably deserves a film of his own.)

Happily, *Citizen Koch* includes the famous prank call to Gov. Walker in 2011. Pretending to be David Koch, *Daily Beast* contributor Ian Murphy asks the newly minted governor, "What else can we do for you down there?" and Walker gushes his appreciation for the \$1 million in campaign cash that helped Koch-start his campaign.

But overall, the strongest and most hopeful messages in the film comes from the disillusioned supporters who voted Walker into office. Many of these life-long Republicans (many of them state employees) suddenly found their jobs and earnings at risk. For, instead of blaming Wall Street and the banks for the 2008 economic collapse, Walker and his ilk drew a bead on the unions and, by implication, on the health workers, school teachers, and sanitation works that made up their memberships.

"Why are they so mad at the unions?" asks Dee Ives, a registered nurse and lifelong Republican. "The unions gave us 40-hour work weeks."

Republican Scott Fitzgerald provides an answer in an interview on *FOX News*. "This is about the presidential election in 2012," he said. If we can destroy the unions and institute voter-ID laws and other impediments to working-class voters, he explained, "President Obama is going to have ... a much more difficult time getting elected."

A good part of *Citizen Koch* is dedicated to documenting the post-election blowback against Walker and his pro-business, anti-union antics. This comes in the form of a spirited recall movement that involves many of the same disillusioned Republicans who voted for the Koch-backed candidate.

The recall would have succeeded but for the Koch's continued support. The brothers came to bat for Walker once again and used their out-of-state wealth to help defeat the hard-fought grassroots recall campaign. According to the *Washington Post*, the Kochs invested at least \$407 million on political campaigns in the 2012 election year. The exact amount was likely much larger but, owing to the Citizens United decision, the source and size of much of the spending was protected from disclosure.