

EXPLORER

OPINION > EDITORIALS

Their self-interest, our expense

Print Page

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An oil spill is spreading across the country, and Arizona is among the areas that will be hard hit. Tucson has already felt the spill's impact.

No, I'm not talking about the BP disaster in the Gulf. I'm referring to big oil money that's being used to slime Democratic candidates.

Maybe you've seen the recent anti-Giffords TV ad with "ordinary people" talking about how bad Giffords is for Southern Arizona. If you look at the bottom of the screen at the end of the ad, you'll see, "Paid for by Americans for Prosperity."

Americans for Prosperity. That sounds so nice. I mean, what American isn't for prosperity?

Beware of false labels. The "Americans" in the name are two fabulously wealthy oil barons, Charles and David Koch, whose combined worth is \$35 billion. And the "Prosperity" the Koch brothers are interested in is their own.

The brothers created Americans for Prosperity in 2004 and have funded and controlled it ever since. It's one of dozens of front groups they fund, all with names that sound like they represent a popular movement, not just the interests of two billionaire oil men — names like Citizens for a Sound Economy, the Economic Education Trust, and Patients United Now.

They also fund think tanks like the Cato Institute and the Mercatus Center, which produce slanted "scientific studies" supporting the brothers' agenda.

For instance, did you know air pollution is good for you? That's right. According to the Mercatus Center, if we had less smog, we would have more skin cancer. So let's keep those gas-powered cars pumping out exhaust and those smokestacks belching poisonous industrial wastes into the air, to keep us healthy.

It shouldn't surprise you to hear, Koch Industries is listed as one of this country's top 10 air polluters. (The Koch brothers, by the way, have given \$75,000 to Arizona's Goldwater Institute, whose "findings" always seem to reinforce its political agenda.)

No one knows for sure how much the Koch brothers spend to push their political agenda, because many of their donations remain anonymous. But we know that from 1998 to 2008, they spent a minimum of \$200 million to influence political races and legislation.

The anti-Giffords ad buy is part of a \$45 million national assault by Americans for Prosperity to influence the upcoming elections.

The brothers' agenda is clear: Oppose Obama, oppose Democrats, oppose health care, oppose cap and trade, deny the existence of global warming, and on and on. When you see massive demonstrations against legislation favored by Democrats, you can bet the Kochs have a hand in it.

The brothers' hands and money also created the Tea Party and guides its agenda. Tea Partiers may be genuinely angry at the direction the country is heading. Most of them mean it when they scream, "We want our country back!" But the Koch brothers' funding is the glue that holds the group together. Their money buys the gasoline that turns the smoldering discontent into flames of anger. And their financial interests dictate the causes the Tea Partiers end up shouting about.

Think about the Tea Party stand against cap and trade, for instance. The legislation was originally a Republican idea. Few people understand how it works. Most of us wouldn't notice the effects of cap and trade legislation except that our air, water and land would be a little cleaner.

So who stands to lose if cap and trade legislation passes? Big polluters like the Koch brothers. That's why we have Tea Partiers strutting around at demonstrations carrying "No Cap and Tax!" placards.

Efforts to buy our votes and influence our thinking with a flood of ads and cleverly named "citizens' groups" are perfectly legal, and the recent Citizens United Supreme Court decision makes it easier than it's ever been. As citizens in a democracy, we need to be wary of people like the Koch brothers who use their billions to promote their self interest at our expense.

Dave Safier is a regular contributor to Blog for Arizona.

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