



The Wrath of Eric O’Keefe

He’s under investigation in John Doe II but turning the tables on the District Attorney and making him sweat.

*By Bruce Murphy
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In 1999, **Eric O’Keefe** was investigated by the office of Wisconsin Attorney General **Jim Doyle**, at the behest of the state elections board, for allegedly violating campaign finance laws. At the time O’Keefe was president of an independent third party group called Americans for Term Limits, which ran ads attacking then state assemblyman **David Travis** for opposing term limits. “So call Travis today,” the ad declared. “Tell him to change his mind.”

Of course, the ad didn’t provide viewers with Travis’ phone number and it ran during the time Travis was running for reelection. It looked, as do many of these so-called “issue ad,” like a thinly disguised campaign ad, which in theory would be illegal. But all kinds of third party ads use a similar technique.

O’Keefe seemed quite unintimidated by the investigation and purposely didn’t wear a tie as a small protest against it. As [he told the National Journal](#). “We’re not going to be shut up. That doesn’t mean we’re going to break their laws, and we haven’t. But that’s our attitude.” Ultimately, nothing came of the investigation.

O’Keefe is now under investigation in John Doe II, the secret probe instigated by the office of Milwaukee County DA **John Chisholm**. The investigation is assumed to be looking at potential coordination between the campaign of Gov. **Scott Walker** and third party groups like Wisconsin Club for Growth, run by O’Keefe. We know this because O’Keefe leaked information to the Wall Street Journal, which [published a story](#) about the investigation, calling it a “raid” on “free speech.”

Under the law, subjects of a John Doe probe are not supposed to divulge details of the investigation. So O’Keefe would appear to be violating this requirement. But he has done much more than this.

Subjects of John Doe probes normally avoid any criticism of the prosecutors, for fear this will just push them to show no mercy. But Keefe has blasted the investigation as politically motivated, charging the investigation is “intended to stop their (conservatives’) political successes in Wisconsin. The state cannot be allowed to silence political speech it does not like.”

O’Keefe has also hired a high-powered DC lawyer [to sue Chisholm in federal court](#), arguing the Doe probe should be shut down because it violates the rights to free speech, free assembly and equal protection under the law of O’Keefe and other leaders of these conservative third party groups. He is also demanding civil damages.

O’Keefe’s Club for Growth are among a number of these conservative groups that also appear ready to fund a recall effort against Chisholm, [as I’ve reported](#).

O’Keefe’s campaign against Chisholm is being aided and abetted by the conservative funded Wisconsin Reporter, which has run no less than 25 stories criticizing the John Doe probe, often filled with off-the-record comments slamming the prosecutors. The non-profit newspaper’s funding comes from the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity, which in turn [has gotten much of its funding](#) from the Sam Adams Alliance, a group founded and run by O’Keefe.

As one unnamed source in a [Wisconsin Reporter story](#) warned, O’Keefe is not about to lay down and take it. Noting the role of Chisholm’s key assistant DA **Bruce Landgraf**, the source said “he’s in for a very unpleasant time. He’s got a tiger by the tail, and he’s not up to it.”

So who exactly is this tiger stalking John Chisholm and company?

O’Keefe, 59, lives in Spring Green. His [own website](#) tells much of his story.

“Eric was born in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, in the 1950s. He was politically interested from an early age,” his website tells us. As a teenager he was inspired by his membership in the Conservative Book Club, [the Washington Post has reported](#).

He began to follow political developments through magazines and the *Wall Street Journal* and was later very influenced by a 1976 speech given by economist **Milton Friedman**.

Many young men develop fervent political beliefs but this one had a key advantage. “O’Keefe had money,” the Post story notes. “He grew up with some and made a lot more as an investor, allowing him to devote decades to a series of ambitious political crusades.”

In 1979, Eric was elected to the Libertarian National Committee, where **Ed Crane** was a key leader. Crane recruited **David Koch** as the vice-presidential candidate for the 1980 campaign.

In 1980, Eric worked full-time in the Libertarian presidential campaign, as a volunteer finishing the petition drives in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and West Virginia, then as National Field Coordinator from the Washington, D.C. In 1980, Eric was elected National Director of the Libertarian Party.

Blogger and former journalist **Hart Williams** offers [a jaded account](#) of this, writing that Libertarian activist **Howard Rich** “and a rogue’s gallery of wealthy pals got buddy Eric O’Keefe ensconced as national director of the Libertarian Party until O’Keefe’s really ugly ouster at the national convention in 1981 or so, and they were set to get another of their cohorts elected party president until that plot unraveled on the convention floor in 1983.”

Whatever the reason, O’Keefe left the Libertarian Party in 1983. By then he had befriended the Koch brothers, “with whom he has joined in many battles, mainly through independent groups that the courts have empowered to raise unlimited money, often without having to identify their donors,” the Post reports.

O’Keefe joined the board of the Cato Institute, where Crane was president, and went to to join or run a long list of often interconnected political organizations, most of which are listed in the [Wikipedia entry](#) on O’Keefe and many of which are connected to the Koch brothers, bringing to mind the phrase used by liberals, “Kochtupus.”

O’Keefe and Crane founded U.S. Term Limits, which pushed 23 states to put congressional term limit initiatives in front of voters. O’Keefe’s website says he helped raise and spend about \$1.4 million on ads critical of various Democratic incumbents, including \$300,000 attacking House Speaker **Tom Foley** of Spokane, Washington for suing to overturn the term limits law voters in his state had approved in 1992. “Foley lost by less than two percentage points, becoming the first Speaker to lose reelection since the Civil War.”

O’Keefe takes credit for inspiring other groups to join the fun, noting that “1996 saw a wave of issue ads from groups of all kinds, invigorating political discourse in America.”

In 1999 O’Keefe authored a book *Who Rules America*, arguing against the power of entrenched incumbent politicians. In response to the McCain-Feingold law’s campaign finance restrictions, he helped create the Center for Competitive Politics, which opposed these limits and “filed influential briefs,” his website says, in *Citizens United*, the Supreme Court case that opened the door to unlimited campaign spending by corporations and unions.

O’Keefe created the Sam Adams Alliance, which was [a key support group for the Tea Party](#), and helped train citizen activists and bloggers. He launched the Health Care Compact Alliance to push for an alternative plan to Obamacare.

In Wisconsin, “We’ve stepped in pretty big in support of Governor Walker’s reforms,” O’Keefe told the Post. His Club for Growth spent \$1 million on TV ads urging support of Walker’s effort to make state workers “pay their fair share.”

As for concerns about the impact of wealthy people spending unlimited dollars anonymously to influence elections, O’Keefe told the Post “That’s inside baseball. There’s no moral issue involved.”

O’Keefe is close to Walker and, according to the Post, spent part of the time with the governor in Manhattan when Walker was raising campaign cash for the 2012 election. Meanwhile, longtime Republican operative **R.J. Johnson** has worked for the Wisconsin Club for Growth while also serving as an advisor to Walker’s campaign. These connections have raised suspicions that there has been coordination between the campaign and the third party group, which would be illegal.

Critics also question how money for issue ads is raised and distributed by O’Keefe. As the Center for Media and Democracy has written, “O’Keefe’s Wisconsin Club for Growth [took in \\$12 million](#), some of it from dark money conduits like the Koch-connected [Center to Protect Patient Rights](#) (CPPR) and the [Wellspring Committee](#), and in turn [shuffled millions](#) to other organizations that spent money on ads during Wisconsin’s Supreme Court race and recall elections. (CPPR, which is connected to the billionaire Koch brothers, was [recently fined \\$1 million](#) by California’s elections board for its role in what the *Washington Post* called “[a series of money swaps and transfers through a network of politically active nonprofit groups](#)” to avoid donor disclosure. California prosecutors called it ‘campaign money laundering’).”

But O’Keefe has decades of experiencing working with these stealthy third party groups, and emphatically rejects the notion that anything questionable is going on. His Club for Growth’s “activities were conducted by meticulous operatives with many years of experience, with the review of the Club’s approach by skilled counsel familiar with the state of the law,” his website declares, “and with Eric’s oversight and overall responsibility for the operation.”

And now O’Keefe is devoting meticulous attention to a new cause, putting the heat on John Chisholm.

Short Take

-At his website, O’Keefe only claims credit for getting incumbent Democrats thrown out of office, but Wikipedia says his efforts to push term limits against incumbent politicians also resulted in the defeat of some Republicans.

-O’Keefe admitted to the Washington Post that decades of anti-government rhetoric by conservatives has helped sour Americans on the political process. “I spent a significant amount of time in the ’90s encouraging that (anti-government) view, and it did produce a deep cynicism that is an existential threat to democracy,” he confessed. “I’ve come to realize that the most important challenge in our country is disengagement with government.”