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## [The insider](#)

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By *Michael Horne*

One of the more curious aspects of Wisconsin's "Tea Party" is that the state director of its organizational group, the Americans for Prosperity is Mark Block. AFP declares itself to be a nonpartisan, nonprofit, grassroots group and some Republicans have insisted it is not connected to the GOP. Yet Block, the man who runs the group, is the consummate Republican insider, a kingmaker and a political operative of the first rank.

Block makes no bones about his politico background. His biographical sketch at the chapter's website says he's "been involved in the political arena for over 30 years," serving as a campaign manager for former Gov. Tommy Thompson, former President George H.W. Bush and Wisconsin Supreme Court justices Janine Geske and Jon Wilcox.

And Block's aggressive style of campaigning has gotten him into trouble. Under a 2001 settlement with the State Elections Board (now part of the Government Accountability Board), Block agreed to pay \$15,000 and submit to a three-year ban from politics in the state for his actions while serving as Wilcox's campaign manager.

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mark block (photo courtesy of americans for prosperity)

The Elections Board alleged that Block had overseen the creation of a supposedly non-partisan, non-profit organization to encourage voter participation – a description not unlike that of AFP. In fact, the Board’s investigation found, the non-profit was an illegal arm of the Wilcox campaign used to skirt campaign finance law and rake in large donations from school choice supporters used to help reelect Wilcox. (Wilcox himself agreed to a \$10,000 fine.)

With the force of law, the settlement kicked Block out of politics. It wasn’t the first time in his career, according to a 2001 *Milwaukee Magazine* story. Block’s career was dealt an early blow in 1978 when he was caught stealing Jim Sensenbrenner signs. Block was working for Sensenbrenner’s primary opponent at the time and didn’t find his way back into politics until 1988, when he was state campaign director for George H.W. Bush’s Republican primary campaign for president.

But after years of being the consummate GOP insider, Block has been touted as the leader of an “organization of grassroots leaders who engage citizens in the name of limited government and free markets on the local, state and federal levels,” as the AFP website says.

Block himself seems to dispute even the idea that what he runs is an organization. “It’s not organized,” he said of the Tea Party in April. “The day the Tea Party movement has a leader is the day the Tea Party movement dies.”

### **The billionaire brothers who like tea**

An August [story](#) in *The New Yorker* credits brothers David and Charles Koch, who own virtually all of Koch Industries, a Kansas-based energy and chemical company, with founding the national Americans for Prosperity in 2004. Koch Industries is one of the largest-privately held companies in the nation and takes in, some estimate, \$100 billion a year in revenue.

The brothers have created several conservative nonprofit institutions with political implications. They also founded the Cato Institute in 1977 and the Mercatus Center at George Mason University in the 1980s. (David Koch is on the boards of both, as well as of the Americans for Prosperity Foundation.)

These leading conservative think tanks helped develop many policies that were the basis of much of the Bush administration's financial and regulatory agenda, according to *The New Yorker*.

As for the AFP, it's played a leading role in creating, promulgating and financing the Tea Party movement along with its 30 chapters (including the one in Wisconsin). AFP-funded rallies across the country capitalized on "grassroots" support from anti-big-business, anti-big-government members.

Democrats such as David Axelrod, senior advisor to President Barack Obama, tell the magazine there's an irony in Tea Party history. "What they don't say is that, in part, this is a grassroots citizens' movement brought to you by a bunch of oil billionaires," Axelrod says.

### **IRS: Tea Party is nonpartisan**

AFP is classified as a 501(c)4 corporation with the IRS, also known as a "social welfare organization." Its operations are largely tax-free but enjoy fewer exemptions than a public charity, a 501(c)3.

With 501(c)4 classification, AFP is still allowed to lobby. So says the IRS website, "Seeking legislation germane to the organization's programs is a permissible means of attaining social welfare purposes."

That purpose, according to a [2008 AFP tax return](#) (pdf), is to "mobilize citizens to achieve fiscal and regulatory restraint by state governments and a return of Federal government to its constitutional limits."

[AFP's sister foundation](#) (pdf), the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, is classified as a public charity, however. Both groups receive about \$7 million per year in funding, almost entirely from other Koch-related foundations.

Both AFP and its foundation have answered "no" to the following question on tax returns: "Did the organization engage in direct or indirect political campaign activities on behalf of or in opposition to candidates for public office?"

Yet Republicans are eager for Tea Party support. "I don't think the Tea Party movement is aligned with the Republican Party," says chairman Reince Priebus. "I think the Republican party has a lot of work to do. It's going to take time for the party to be fully embraced by a large part of the conservative movement."

### **Tea Party lobbyist**

The AFP wants to be seen as a grassroots group, but its lobbying arm pays its leader, Mark Block, to operate as a high-powered lobbyist. Mark Block has served as its sole [Madison lobbyist](#) since January 2009. In the last legislative session, he billed AFP \$56,967 for

lobbying issues.

Block has lobbied on issues – most of which never find their way into legislation – and which are often rallying points for tea partiers and the candidates who rise from their ranks to run for public office. According to The New Yorker, a Republican campaign consultant who has done research on behalf of the Koch brothers, says of the Tea Party, “The Koch brothers gave the money that founded it. It’s like they put the seeds in the ground. Then the rainstorm comes, and the frogs come out of the mud — and they’re our candidates!”

AFP creates issues like “No Climate Tax,” a national pledge against growing the size of government in response to claims of climate change, and then has candidates like Republican candidate for U.S. Senate Ron Johnson pledge ([as he did](#)) to oppose the tax, and the non-existent legislation to impose it.

However, the group’s lobbying effort only included positions on four bills in the last session – including the state budget and the governor’s initiative to reduce greenhouse emissions in Wisconsin, which Block lobbied was a “Climate Tax.”

Slightly more than half of Block’s time (54 percent) was spent on these bills. The rest went to topics “not assigned a bill or rule number” and included “The Competitive Marketplace Act” (though no such act has been introduced), the taxation of tobacco products, state and local government tax and spending limits, transparency for health care and property rights.

Block’s career has also rebounded in that he’s a board member for the Madison-based conservative think tank the John K. MacIver Institute, which has close ties to the Republican Party.

Nice work if you can get it.

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