

Nation of Change

COVID-19 'Liberate' Groups Are the Same Ones Pushing Climate Denial

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The response among many American public officials and the public at large to the COVID-19 pandemic has, in many ways, paralleled the response to the climate crisis.

First came a denial that it was a problem at all, then a denial of its depth and gravity. Later came an acceptance of the problem but the stance that responding is too economically costly. And as with the climate crisis, this is no accident. The well-funded machinery that sowed doubt about climate is now sowing seeds of doubt over the economic and public health response to COVID-19.

DeSmog previously reported that many conservative groups and individuals who for years downplayed the gravity of the climate crisis did the same as the coronavirus outbreak worsened around the world and eventually made its way into the United States.

Now, weeks into that public health crisis - and with more than three-quarters of a million cases and over 41,000 deaths in the U.S. - groups nationwide are clamoring for an early end to stay-at-home orders and a reopening of state economies. Many of those same groups, a DeSmog investigation shows, are also part of what sociologist Robert Brulle has called the climate change countermovement and what U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) has coined the "web of denial."

Like the eruption of Tea Party protests in 2009, many of the protests have the outward appearance of spontaneity, yet are tied through common funding streams and networks.

In the case of what President Donald Trump has called the "liberate" movement, one major thread tying the groups together is the State Policy Network (SPN). SPN, a network of state-level conservative think tanks advancing pro-corporate agendas, has received money from the likes of the Koch family, the Devos family, the Mercer Family Foundation, and others.

DeSmog traced SPN groups to three states in which protests against stay-at-home orders have ensued.

Michigan Freedom Fund and Mackinac Center

Michigan serves as a perfect case of this right-wing network in action.

The state saw between 3,000 and 4,000 people descend upon the capitol in Lansing on April 15, with some people inside their cars and some outside, some with masks and others without, and with some violating social distancing guidelines while waving Confederate flags or pro-Nazi signs. These protesters were calling for an end to Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer's "Stay at Home, Stay Safe" executive order put into place on March 23.

Dubbed "Operation Gridlock," the rally was convened by the Michigan Freedom Fund and Michigan Conservative Coalition and featured chants of "Lock her up!" - echoing opposition to Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign.

The day after the rally, Republican state representatives introduced legislation to reverse Whitmer's executive order, which she said she would veto.

The Michigan Freedom Fund, which historically has received funding from the Dick and Betsy DeVos Family Foundation, helped to promote the rally on Twitter, through Facebook ads, and via a Facebook livestream. The group is led by Greg McNeilly, former Executive Director of the Michigan Republican Party and campaign manager for Dick DeVos' 2006 gubernatorial run.

DeVos is the husband of Betsy DeVos, current U.S. Secretary of Education under Trump. Beyond his role running the Michigan Freedom Fund, McNeilly works as Chief Operating Officer at The Windquest Group, a privately held investment firm owned by Dick and Betsy DeVos.

The Devos Family Foundation is also a major funder of SPN. While the Michigan Freedom Fund is not an SPN member, the Mackinac Center for Public Policy - which also promoted "Operation Gridlock" via its online news publication Michigan Capitol Confidential - is one. The Mackinac Center also receives huge financial support from the Devos Family Foundation.

In a 2010 policy briefing, SPN wrote of climate change that "the planet is believed to be experiencing a global cooling - not a warming" and referred to potential climate regulations as "federal global warming controls."

The Mackinac Center denies the long-established scientific consensus on climate change, as well. The center led the "My Climate Pledge" coalition, a response to calls for a climate strike last fall. On its website, the coalition writes that "there is a healthy and ongoing discourse over the science of global climate change" and that "it's well past time that we have a full and independent review of the climate science that is driving energy and environmental policy."

Michigan Capitol Confidential subsequently covered the rally and pointed its readers toward the livestream, which ran on Breitbart News' Facebook page. That stream has received over 5.8 million watches as of April 20.

Until 2017, Robert Mercer served as the majority owner of Breitbart, a right-wing news site previously run by former aide to the Trump 2016 campaign and White House, Steve Bannon.

The Mercer Family Foundation has in the past been a major SPN donor and Robert Mercer was a major 2016 donor to the Trump presidential campaign, giving financial support again in 2020.

A 2018 story published by the money-in-politics tracking website Maplight reported that the Mercer Family Foundation had poured over \$4 million into climate denial groups for that previous tax year, according to disclosure forms reviewed by the organization. That included \$800,000 to Heartland Institute, a mainstay of the climate denial stratosphere and an SPN affiliate member.

Idaho Freedom Foundation

Idaho also experienced protests at its State Capitol Building in Boise and like in Michigan, the SPN apparatus played a major role.

For Idaho's protest, which took place on April 17 and saw hundreds descend upon its capitol, the Idaho Freedom Foundation made the call to action for the "Disobey Idaho" protest. Several Republican legislators joined the rally. Idaho Freedom Foundation is an SPN member.

The day before "Disobey Idaho," the group's Executive Director Wayne Hoffman called for the group's followers to disobey Idaho Republican Governor Brad Little's March 25 state-at-home order.

"We should not permit the government to cage us like animals, allowed out for feedings and occasional fresh air," wrote Hoffman. "Free people don't live like this. If you value your freedom - if you want your kids and grandkids and their kids and grandkids to experience what it means to have unalienable rights - the time to act is now."

Hoffman, a former reporter, previously served as Communications Director for U.S. Rep. Bill Sali (R-ID), who is a climate change denier.

Idaho Freedom Foundation has a history of climate science denial, recently opposing the state's K-12 public education standards because it said there is "much diversity of thought surrounding climate change, its potential causes, and human stewardship of the environment," but that "the Idaho Science Standards emphasize climate change, and that human interaction with the environment is routinely harmful."

The group maintains that "the science isn't settled" yet on climate change.

ReopenNC

North Carolina has seen its own wave of "liberate" protests, with more planned.

The movement there was led at first by a disparate set of grassroots groups in an April 14 rally in North Carolina's capital, Raleigh, leading to an arrest for violating Democratic Governor Roy Cooper's stay-at-home executive order.

Now, frequent Republican North Carolina congressional candidate and businessman Tim D'Annunzio has pledged to pay for eight buses to boost the protest efforts for an April 21 convening. In his congressional campaign platform, D'Annunzio called climate change a "hoax."

"Climate change is based in junk science that starts with a conclusion and only accepts data that verifies its assertions," reads the platform for one of his congressional runs. "It's a hoax and not even worthy of discussion."

On April 9, days before the first rally, another deep-pocketed individual in North Carolina with ties to SPN wrote an article titled "Let Our People Work." The piece was written by Bob Luddy, former Board Chairman of the Civitas Institute, North Carolina's SPN affiliate. Luddy, according to Civitas' most recent 990 form, gave \$11,000 to the group during the 2017-2018 fiscal year.

"We are cowering from fear of COVID-19, but quarantine is not a cure to end the virus," wrote Luddy in the article published in American Spectator and also on Civitas' website. "Farmers, who are crucial food producers, will soon go bankrupt, reducing food supplies and causing shortages. COVID-19 will not disappear because we stayed home."

Luddy had previously called for North Carolinians to go back to work by March 30, comparing COVID-19 to the flu and writing that "leaders are creating an economic crisis and a major national security risk with limited data."

Then on the day of the rally in Raleigh, this time while admitting that COVID-19 is a "serious virus," Luddy wrote the governor's "plan is to save us from COVID-19 based on virtually no data and death projections that were wildly overstated and are now being revised downward by the medical community."

Echoing the demands of the protesters, he called on Gov. Cooper to reopen the economy immediately.

On climate change, Civitas has previously written that there is "good reason to be skeptical" about climate change, adding that "the entire foundation of anthropogenic global warming [should] be looked upon with tremendous skepticism and suspicion that should not be soon disregarded" because "liberty is at stake."

Luddy recently echoed Civitas' concerns about the alleged loss of "liberty" involved in combatting the climate crisis in arguing for a reopening of the economy during the COVID-19 outbreak.

"It is clear we have experienced almost a complete loss of freedom," wrote Luddy. "By the end of this quarantine, our jobs and our way of life will have been decimated."

Luddy previously participated in the Koch Network's secretive annual meetings in both 2010 and 2014.

Climate Deniers Lobby Trump

The effort to "liberate" the economy extends beyond statehouses, however, and directly to the White House. But it still involves the same tangled web.

Those conservative groups currently lobbying President Trump to ease COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, first reported by *The Washington Post*, include Freedomworks, Tea Party Patriots, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), and Trump 2016 campaign economic adviser Stephen Moore.

As DeSmog reported in 2013, SPN was a creation of ALEC, a group which for decades has received donations from the fossil fuel industry and Koch family to push its model legislation in statehouses nationwide while also pushing a climate change denial message.

"Climate change is a historical phenomenon and the debate will continue on the significance of natural and anthropogenic contributions," the group explains of its stance on climate change. "ALEC will continue to monitor the issue and support the use of sound science to guide policy, but ALEC will also incorporate economic and political realism."

On climate policy, ALEC has promoted model legislation that would require teaching a "balance" of climate science denial and climate science in K-12 schools. It also has pushed legislation promoting the agenda of the fossil fuel industry, while pushing legislation detrimental to the growth of the renewable energy sector.

FreedomWorks, meanwhile, is an outgrowth of the group Citizens for a Sound Economy, itself a creation funded and founded by the petrochemical billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch. The group's efforts, alongside the Kochs' other front group Americans for Prosperity, were seen as crucial for the rise of the Tea Party movement in 2009 and in opposing the 2009 climate bill proposed by President Barack Obama and the Democrats.

Between 1997 and 2007, the Kochs spent over \$127 million "directly financing 92 groups that have attacked climate change science and policy solutions," according to a Greenpeace USA analysis.

Stephen Moore, for his part, now works as a Senior Fellow at the Heritage Foundation, long considered the brain trust of the U.S. conservative movement and Republican Party and another key prong of the climate denial apparatus. He formerly served on the ALEC Board of Scholars and still serves on its Private Sector Advisory Council.

In a recent episode of the Independence Institute's "Freedom on Tap" show on Zoom, Moore called stay-at-home orders "one of the biggest bone-headed moves by government in 100 years" which will "go down in history potentially as one of the great abuses of governmental power, not just at the federal level, but at the state level and local level."

The Denver-based Independence Institute is also an SPN member and has called Colorado's response "bureaucracy run wild" and called for Coloradans to "challenge these house arrest orders in every legal way possible."

Moore also called for more acts of civil disobedience, drawing media ire for comparing the ongoing protests in states nationwide to the civil rights efforts of Rosa Parks.

"Isn't that called the right of assembly and grievances against your government? I thought that was protected in the Constitution," said Moore. "I'm working with a group in Wisconsin that wants to do a drive-in. So you remember the old sit-ins, but this is going to be a drive-in and they're going to shut down the Capitol. Shhhh, don't tell anybody, but they think they can get 1,500 people to come in."

He also mentioned an anonymous donor in Wisconsin willing to pony up legal and bail fees.

"And we have one big donor in Wisconsin - I'm not going to mention his name - and he told me 'Steve, I promise I will pay the legal and bail fees for anyone that gets arrested,'" said Moore. "So this is a great time, gentlemen and ladies, for civil disobedience. We need to be the Rosa Parks here and protest against these government injustices."

Previously, Moore has called climate change a "dingbat idea" in 2016.

"It's really amazing, I have to say. I have to tip my hat to the left: This has been one of the greatest propaganda campaigns in world history that the left has pulled off," Moore said at the time. "So, it's very alarming how this propaganda campaign, that they made this stuff out of, almost completely out of thin air and they've convinced millions and millions of thought leaders that this stuff is real."

'Genuine Experts'

Not everyone in the conservative movement is engaging in COVID-19 skepticism, however. And that includes the Koch charitable network itself, as least as it pertains to its own employees. Beginning in late-March, they shifted to a work-from-home paradigm, even as they use the Americans for Prosperity Network to promote lifting shelter-in-place orders — including in Michigan.

And as the rise of COVID-19 skepticism swept through social media before the rise of the "liberate" movement, the libertarian-turned-moderate Niskanen Center explicitly called for the novel coronavirus debate not to go the way of climate change. The group started as an offshoot of the Cato Institute, another Koch-funded think tank that is part of the climate denial network, and was founded by several disgruntled Cato staffers.

"[T]here is obviously a range of possible outcomes for coronavirus, just as there is for climate change," wrote the organization. "However, to have value for public deliberation on urgent questions of life or death, skepticism about expert consensus needs to be informed by credible scientific insight and judgment. Otherwise, it is best that the debate play out between genuine experts, while the rest of us act decisively to hedge against the risks as best we can be assessed."