



Men on a mission: The Koch brothers and US conservatism

By: Michael Knigge – May 10, 2013

Charles and David Koch have a plan: They want to give the US a conservative makeover and are reportedly interested in buying some of the country's biggest newspapers. What makes the billionaire brothers tick?

What do the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, the Independent Women's Forum and the Washington Legal Foundation have in common? They, like dozens of other groups that make up the ever expanding universe of Koch-aligned organizations across the United States, received money from the billionaire brothers.

While some of them like the Cato Institute, Americans for Prosperity and the Heritage Foundation are known beyond their immediate libertarian-conservative ecosystem others like the Property and Environment Research Center or the now defunct Environment Literacy Council aren't. However, all of them regardless of their size and scope share a strong disdain for government coupled with a fervent belief in unfettered markets and their connection to the Koch brothers.

Men with a plan

"The Koch brothers have a multifaceted approach," explains Joseph Aistrup, professor of political science at Kansas State University, the home state of Koch Industries, the brothers' conglomerate. Unlike some other rich financiers of the political left and right in the US, the Kochs do not just write checks for candidates or causes in an election season, but have a long-term strategy.

Their funding is continuous and spans across what could be called the entire ideological supply chain, from research at universities to think tanks and policy organizations to grass roots and legislative affairs groups at the state and national level.

For the 2012 election campaign, the Koch-backed Americans for Prosperity alone spent \$36 million - according to political money tracker Open Secrets - almost all of it to defeat Barack Obama.

Since the Kochs conduct most of their political operations via so-called shadow money outfits that do not have to reveal their funders, it is impossible to fully know how much exactly they dished out. But given that Charles Koch had called the 2012 election a fight "for the life and death of this country" in a secret audiotape obtained by Mother Jones

magazine, the \$400 million-figure that Koch-connected organizations reportedly were planning to spend according to a Politico article from last May seems entirely possible.
Healthy finances

That's because for the Koch brothers who control the US' second largest private company and rank number six in this year's Forbes list of the world's richest billionaires with a net worth of \$34 billion each, money is not an issue. But despite their great wealth and their large political role the brothers try to avoid the public spotlight. "My guess is is probably most people wouldn't know them if they saw them out on the street", say Aistrup.

And yet their spending prowess coupled with the dedication and determination to shape America's political landscape makes them "the most significant conservative financiers of the 21st century," says Alan Lichtman, a history professor at American University in Washington, DC:

"Their political influence has been immense and it cannot be overemphasized."

And it goes back to at least 1980 when David Koch ran as the vice presidential candidate for the Libertarian Party outflanking Ronald Reagan on the right by vowing to essentially shutting down large parts of the US government by abolishing the Federal Reserve, the Security and Exchange Commission (SEC), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and a host of other programs like social security should the ticket get elected.

"They are anti-government activists, indeed extremists," says Kert Davies, research director of Greenpeace USA who tracks the political activity of the Koch brothers. "They were running for president to close the government which is a fairly extreme point of view."

Shift to the right

The Kochs soon realized however that in the US two-party system, the Republican Party was a much more promising entity to popularize their ideas than the fledgling Libertarian Party and that leading political campaigns from behind can be as - if not more - effective than running on the ticket. As a consequence they essentially built their intellectual and ideological network from scratch to promote their cause.

"And over the course of time the country as a whole in terms of its politics has drifted toward them," notes Aistrup. "And as the Republican Party has become increasingly rightward-driven and Libertarian perspectives have really become a more dominant aspect of the Republican Party, the Koch Brothers have really seen their efforts bear fruit."

While their strategy has changed over time, their positions have not.

"They truly believe when it comes to economic matters in a minimal government that taxes very little, that doesn't regulate industry," says Lichtman. "I think they are true believers in their opposition to unions." That's why they recently supported the controversial efforts of Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin to undermine public employee unions and why they were instrumental into turning the Tea Party movement into a nationwide force, adds Lichtman.

Climate change

The Koch brothers' anti-regulation and anti-government stance culminated in a widely reported climate change denial campaign for which they have spent at least \$67 million since 1997, according to a Greenpeace expose from 2012. And while their political activism is clearly aligned with the corporate interests of Koch Industries, a major oil and gas company that owns pipelines and refineries, that is not what makes them tick.

"I don't think it's merely about profit," says Aistrup, who has observed how the Koch brothers "purged the Republican Party of the moderate element" in their home state of Kansas. "The story goes the entire Koch family became more politicized because their dad had worked in the Soviet Union and had basically been cheated out of some money by the Communist government there."

In any case, adds Aistrup, "there is a lot more going on than simply trying to line their own pockets. Anybody who thinks that the Koch Brothers do not fervently believe in their cause, does not really understand them."

"I think they are true believers," says Lichtman, who like Aistrup is not surprised by their reported interest to buy the newspaper arm of the Chicago-based Tribune company that includes some of the country's biggest dailies including the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune.

"If they go after these media outlets, primarily newspapers, that just adds on more pieces to making sure that their particular perspective is reported on in the news and is reflected more positively in the broader mass media," notes Aistrup.

"Buying the media would obviously in their eyes be the strongest remedy to the alleged liberal bias of the media," says Lichtman.

No comment

The Koch brothers were not available for an interview for this article. Koch Industries referred to their previously released statement that the company does "not comment on deals or rumors of deals we may or may not be exploring."

Regardless of the outcome of their alleged interest in buying the Tribune newspapers, the Koch brothers will keep trying to grow their political influence in the US, say the experts. Their goal, explains Lichtman, is an even more conservative government that taxes wealth even more lightly than the current government, that virtually eliminates any control or regulation over business and that snuffs out the last remaining remnants of the union movement and substantially cuts down social programs like social security.

"It's in essence in many ways turning back the clock to the conservatism of the 1920s, of Calvin Coolidge and Warren Harding."