



Tennessee Republicans among recipients of Koch donations

Rep. Blackburn receiving highest amount at \$17,500

Paul C. Barton – September 15, 2012

WASHINGTON —The Koch brothers, the Kansas billionaire industrialists known for financing the tea party movement and countless conservative groups, extend their generosity to the Tennessee congressional delegation as well.

So far for the 2012 elections, the Koch Industries political action committee, Koch PAC, has spread \$42,500 among five Republican members of the delegation.

Getting the most has been Rep. Marsha Blackburn (\$17,500), followed by Reps. Diane Black of Gallatin (\$10,000); Stephen Fincher of Frog Jump (\$7,500); Chuck Fleischmann of Ooltewah (\$5,000); and Scott DesJarlais of Jasper (\$2,500).

And the Tennessee Republican Party has received \$5,000 from the PAC.

The Tennessee money is part \$2.04 million in Koch-related contributions to congressional candidates nationwide.

States getting the most include Texas (\$180,500), Kansas (\$153,250), Ohio (\$114,250) and Indiana (\$102,000).

Among the 11 states of the old Confederacy, not only congressional candidates in Texas but those in Georgia (\$99,750), Florida (\$82,500), Louisiana (\$46,000) and Arkansas (\$44,000) get more than Tennessee's.

The figures come from a breakdown of Federal Election Commission records done for Gannett's Washington Bureau by the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan research organization.

The totals include contributions to leadership political action committees, the special political funds most congressional incumbents maintain apart from their

main campaign committee. Money from a leadership PAC can be used for almost any purpose, but is most often used by members to make contributions to other congressional candidates, enhancing the influence of the giver.

Koch Industries, an oil, gas, chemicals and consumer products conglomerate headed by Charles and David Koch, has vigorously pursued an agenda in Washington that includes staunch opposition to Environmental Protection Agency regulations on carbon emissions, plus numerous other hot button issues for conservatives, including tax relief and opposition to the financial industry reforms pushed through by President Barack Obama.

They are fierce critics of global climate-change theories.

In recent years, the Koch brothers have emerged as one of the most powerful forces in politics, especially Republican politics.

“They have been sort of a George Soros for Republicans,” said Michael Tanner, political analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank associated with the Kochs. It was a reference to the billionaire investor of Hungarian descent who donates generously to Democratic and liberal causes.

In addition to supporting numerous conservative political candidates –including the overwhelming majority of freshman House Republicans elected in 2010 –the Koch brothers also finance dozens of conservative and libertarian think tanks and advocacy groups, including Americans for Prosperity. The latter is one of the many politically active nonprofit groups that don’t have to disclose their donors as result of 2010 federal court decisions on campaign finance.

Tennessee lawmakers contacted about their Koch donations were reluctant to comment, Blackburn saying only that she appreciated all her supporters.

“I do think that Representatives Blackburn and Black are good investments for the Koch brothers,” said David Kanervo, political analyst at Austin Peay State University.

“Both members of the House have taken positions which support a smaller role for the federal government in our economy and society more generally.”

Since both regularly boast of their actions to limit government, Kanervo said, “it is not surprising that the Koch brothers have contributed to the Blackburn and Black campaigns. They appear to be a good match.”

But Bruce Oppenheimer, political scientist at Vanderbilt, said, “It’s not a very effective use of (the Kochs’) money because both districts are safely Republican.

Meanwhile, liberal and progressive groups in Washington closely monitor the Koch brothers’ every move.

In 2011, the progressive Center for American Progress issued a special report titled “The Koch Brothers: What You Need to Know About the Financiers of the Radical Right.”

It says: “Any attempt to understand the modern conservative movement will eventually lead to billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch. Using their vast wealth and connections, the Koch brothers are key players in bankrolling right-wing political action groups, think tanks and individual politicians, using this array of political power to advance their ideological agenda of limited government and less regulation. Chances are they are part of any right-wing attack you have seen recently.”

Josh Israel, an investigator with the liberal group Think Progress, said the Kochs want a government “that lets corporations do whatever they want,” regardless of the consequences for consumers and the environment.

When asked about such criticisms, officials at the Koch Industries headquarters in Wichita, Kan., called them false.

“Koch companies are fully committed to compliance with all laws and regulations, including those that relate to health, safety and environment,” Rob Tappan, spokesman for Koch Industries, said in an e-mail. “We have been recognized for our commitment in these areas, with more than 550 awards received just since January 2009.”

As to the brothers’ interest in politics, the spokesman said, they “participate in the political process to support those candidates who advance free market principles and economic freedom, because they are very concerned that government policies are destroying the economic foundation of the country and threatening to bankrupt it.”

Tanner, the Cato analyst, added, “I think they have been a tremendous force for good in this country.”

But Meredith McGehee of the Campaign Legal Center, a research and advocacy group on issues of political funding, said Koch money often represents money from outside a state or district that is unduly influencing elections.

“It meets the definition of special-interest money,” she said, adding, “It is very ideological money that is making Congress more partisan.”