



How does conservative money work on climate change?

Why have conservative groups been so successful in casting doubt on global warming?
Mar 5, 2014 | By [Daniel Lippman](#) and [ClimateWire](#)

Searching for a reason major climate change legislation hasn't passed Congress yet?

You could do worse than start looking around Washington, D.C., with its endless think tanks, lobbying firms and trade groups, many of which have swung into action in the past to block such bills and stand ready to do so in the future.

A recent [study](#) published in the journal *Climatic Change* finds that much of the millions of dollars that funds these groups comes from secret sources, and a good portion of the rest is from publicity-shy conservative foundations and wealthy donors.

The groups, such as the American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation, and wealthy individual donors often espouse libertarian views that don't jibe well with giving the government more power to combat climate change.

That there's still a debate about whether climate change exists is not an accident. Conservative think tanks over the last two decades have consistently warned about the costs of addressing climate change and raised doubts in the minds of the public about the accuracy of the science behind it.

The study's author, Robert Brulle, a sociology and environmental science professor at Drexel University, takes a systematic look at what he calls the climate change counter-movement (CCCM), made up of groups that Brulle says have an average annual income of just above \$900 million, although much of that money is not even spent on climate change-related activities and is used for other issues.

To be most effective in spreading their message to the public to influence opinion, staffers in these groups "publish books, they give congressional testimony, they go around and make speeches, they serve as sources for newspapers, they write op-eds," Brulle said.

"It's based on a political strategy, which is to develop these arguments and get them out into the public," he said, adding that the environmental movement doesn't have equivalent think tanks.

The total impact is hard to tell, but only 46 percent of Republicans believe there's solid evidence the world is warming, compared with 84 percent of Democrats, [according](#) to a 2013 Pew study.

The reason these foundations and think tanks matter is that they appear to have influenced the views of many in the public and Republican lawmakers who have opposed strong congressional action on climate change. For example, a review of House floor transcripts shows that Republicans repeatedly cited Heritage Foundation studies on the negative U.S. economic impacts of the climate legislation sponsored by Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.) and then-Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass.) that passed the House in 2009 but later stalled in the Senate.

'Like guerilla warfare'

Brulle's study found that a lot of these groups' funding comes from just over 20 wealthy foundations. For example, from 2003 to 2010, foundations that were partly associated with Mellon fortune heir Richard Scaife gave \$39.6 million; the Bradley Foundation of Milwaukee gave \$29.6 million; and foundations affiliated with Koch Industries Inc. or its owners, the Koch brothers, contributed \$26.3 million. About 70 percent of the groups' income sources are not even known, according to Brulle.

"It's like guerilla warfare; all you can hope for is to stay [in the debate] long enough for people to wake up," said Richard Lindzen, a professor emeritus of meteorology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, who said he believes think tanks have "relatively little" influence over the climate debate.

Environmental groups that urge strong action on climate change, he said, "want power; they want influence. The more they can frighten people, the more influence they have. ... It's always been a vehicle for control."

Nicolas Loris, a fellow focused on energy and environmental issues at the Heritage Foundation, acknowledged that the climate is changing and said man-made emissions are "certainly" affecting the climate.

Loris said he doesn't think it is necessary to disclose Heritage's donors, because it's a private organization. "To me, that's an attack on liberty, and it discourages giving, and it really is a distraction from the real issues at hand," he said.

He said Heritage isn't " beholden to the fossil fuel industry or wealthy donors" and said his group wants energy subsidies removed for all sources.

When asked whether the climate debate has gone on so long because conservative think tanks have raised doubts about the issue, he said: "I think that's partly true, certainly the economic effects of the policy proposals."

The biggest donor listed is Donors Trust/Donors Capital Fund, which accounted for almost \$79 million; individuals can put their so-called donor-advised funds at Donors Trust and then direct the organization to give money on their behalf to nonprofits.

'Good reasons to be anonymous'

"They've totally inflated the amount of money," said Whitney Ball, president and CEO of DonorsTrust, who pointed out that, for example, one big annual grant to AEI from DonorsTrust "has nothing to do with global warming." She later said: "No one ever talks about the funding that's on the other side. There's a lot of money out there ... to prove global warming."

She conceded that she hadn't read the study but said the Drexel researcher seemed to be more "systematic and intellectual honest about the whole thing" than previous researchers on the topic had been. She said that DonorsTrust does not reveal its account holders, many of them individuals from the business world, but said that "there are plenty of good reasons to be anonymous" when giving money.

She said that groups like the Rockefeller Foundation, which partly works on climate change and environmental issues, are on a "jihad against capitalism," but her group helps its donors "protect their legacy of liberty."

Exxon Mobil Corp. used to be a prominent funder of organizations that took a skeptical view of climate change, but in the mid-2000s, it stopped funding several think tanks "whose position on climate change could divert attention from the important discussion" about the world's energy future, said Exxon spokesman Scott Silvestri.

Sounding more like a tree hugger than a representative of the world's leading oil company, Exxon's Silvestri said in a statement that "the risk of climate change is clear and the risk warrants action. Increasing carbon emissions in the atmosphere are having a warming effect."

A number of the foundations and individuals, including the Bradley Foundation, Scaife and the Koch brothers, named in the study did not respond to requests for comment.

"If they want to hide their tracks on the funding flow, they can do so pretty easily under current laws. They give to 501(c)(3)s and (c)(4)s, and those funders don't have to reveal their sources, and so unless Congress changes the law, you're not going to get into the visibility of what those contributions are," Brulle said.

'In it for the long haul'

Why have the conservative think tanks been so successful on climate change?

"When it comes to conservative philanthropy ... the way in which they fund is that conservatives tend to fund large general operating support grants over many, many years, so they're in it for the long haul, and that allows the nonprofits that they fund to do things to be more flexible and mobile and agile and active in the advocacy realms," said Kevin Laskowski, senior research and policy associate at the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy.

On the other hand, liberal foundations often tend to fund only for particular purposes and grant cycles, he said.

"It's very hard for an organization to string together its budget from restricted funding streams, and you tend to have a situation where some go into the battle with their hands tied [behind their back] and others have *carte blanche* to do what their funders are hoping they do," he said.

Climate change has also been made into a political hot-button issue, which makes it harder for both parties to find common ground to solve it.

"It's clear now that there's ... people who are in it for ideological reasons, over and above material interests, and I think the success of the think tanks has made climate change an ideological topic," said Riley Dunlap, a sociology professor at Oklahoma State University who has studied the climate change counter-movement.

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