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Exclusive: Donors Trust, The Right's Dark-Money ATM, Paid Out \$30 Million in 2011

By Andy Kroll February 11, 2013

Last week, I reported on an obscure yet powerful group called Donors Trust, a dark-money ATM funding the conservative movement with hundreds of millions of dollars in mostly anonymous money. Donors Trust bankrolls the Heartland Institute, a shrill flag-bearer for climate-change denialism; the American Legislative Exchange Council, the right-wing bill mill; and a slew of think tanks and advocacy shops promoting an anti-union, free-market agenda. As *The Nation's* Ari Berman recently reported, Donors Trust is also the sole funder of the Project on Fair Representation, a group trying to gut the Voting Rights Act.

When I published my Donors Trust story, though, the picture was incomplete. There's a lag of a year or more between when Donors Trust, a nonprofit, raises and spends its millions and when it publicly discloses its activities. At the time I reported my story, the most recent IRS filing I could draw on covered only 2010. Over the weekend, however, I obtained a copy of Donors Trust's 2011 filing—previously unavailable anywhere online until now.

Here's what the latest filing shows us: Donors Trust is only getting bigger. In 2011, the group received more than \$39 million in donations, an increase of \$10 million from 2010, and handed out almost \$30 million—both record sums. As in years past, recipients of Donors Trust cash include the biggest players in conservative politics today: the David Koch-chaired Americans for Prosperity Foundation, the Cato Institute, the FreedomWorks Foundation, the Heritage Foundation, the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation, and the influential State Policy Network.

Like all of its previous IRS filings, Donors Trust's 2011 paperwork does not include a shred of information about the identity of Donors Trust's bankrollers. That's partly why the nonprofit is increasingly popular: At a time when conservative donors find themselves singled out by political candidates and the media, Donors Trust offers anonymity. When Donors Trust money lands at Heritage or Cato, it doesn't include the name of the original source of the money; it simply says Donors Trust. Increasingly, as this latest filing shows, conservative donors are choosing to funnel their money through

Donors Trust instead of giving it themselves, meaning more of the money fueling conservative politics is draped in secrecy. "We just have this great big unknown out there about where all the money is coming from," Robert Brulle, a sociologist at Drexel University who studies money in the conservative movement, recently told me.

Here is Donors Trust's full 990 form