



The money behind the madness

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Rally against health care reform. Source: bartcoop.com

Many people who follow politics may have heard of organizations such as the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Prosperity and Patients United. But very few have heard the names David and Charles Koch.

That is because these billionaires like to stay under the radar in name, but their funding of political action organizations is a giant blip on the political radar screen if one watches and pays attention.

Billionaires David and Charles Koch have been financial leaders in opposing anything that resembles a progressive agenda for years. They have been looming in the background of every major domestic policy dispute this year, and may be the most effective opponents of President Obama's policies. For example, as health care reform protesters descended upon Washington last month, few were aware, as they were greeted with dough nuts and coffee, and handed protest signs and talking points about socialized medicine, that a right-wing billionaire had paid for the meals, buses, or salaries of the helpful guides.

Ranked as the 9th wealthiest men in America, according to *Forbes*, the Koch brothers sit at the helm of Koch Industries, a massive privately-owned conglomerate of manufacturing, oil, gas, and timber interests. They are best known for their wealth, as well as for their philanthropy for the arts, cancer research, and the Smithsonian Institute. But David and Charles are also responsible for a vicious attack campaign aimed directly at obstructing and killing progressive reform.

The two sides to the Koch's activism are not unprecedented. They follow a long tradition of conservative tycoons who were great philanthropists with one hand and ruthless power brokers with the other. Koch's hidden

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presence in the health care debate illustrates the extent to which the right-wing is creating, and then hiding behind, a grassroots fervor of middle-class opponents of health reform.

The AFP, founded in 1984 by David and managed day to day by the astroturf lobbyist [Tim Phillips](#), has spent much of the year mobilizing "tea party" opposition to health reform, clean energy legislation, and financial regulations. According to an article written by a [compilation of authors for Think Progress](#), over the years, [millions of dollars](#) in Koch money has flowed to various right-wing think tanks, front groups, and publications. At the dawn of the Obama presidency, Koch groups quickly maneuvered to try to stop his first piece of signature legislation: the stimulus. The Koch-funded group "[No Stimulus](#)" launched television and radio ads deriding the recovery package as simply "pork" spending.

The Cato Institute, founded by Charles, as well as other Koch-funded think tanks like the [Heritage Foundation](#), [financed a wealth](#) of reports distorting the stimulus and calling for a return to Bush-style tax cuts to combat the recession. As their fronts were battling the stimulus, David's Americans for Prosperity (AFP) spent the opening months of the Obama presidency placing calls and [helping to organize](#) the very first "tea party" protests.

Much of the fierce opposition to health reform can be credited to Koch organizations. As the health care debate began, AFP created a front group, known as [Patients United](#), that dedicated itself to attacking Democratic health care reform proposals. The Koch brothers clearly have a financial stake in blocking reform. Koch Industry oil refineries are major carbon dioxide polluters, and George-Pacific, a Koch Industries timber subsidiary, is one of the largest contributors to the loss of carbon-sink capacity.

According to the EPA, Koch Industries is responsible for over [300 oil spills](#) in the U.S. and has leaked three million gallons of crude oil into fisheries and drinking waters. So there are clear economic interests in why the Koch brothers would want to block regulatory enforcement, clean energy, labor, and other reforms. But part of their opposition stems from a long family tradition of funding conservative movements to shift the country to the far right.

According to the authors at [Think Progress](#) and [The Boston Globe](#), Fred Koch, father of Charles and David and the company's namesake, helped to found the John Birch Society in the late 1950s. The John Birch Society harnessed Cold War fears into hate against progressives, warning that President Kennedy, Civil Rights activists, and organized

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labor were in league with communists. By presenting progressive reform as a capitulation to the Soviet Union, Fred Koch and the other industrialists bankrolling the Birch Society were able to galvanize hundreds of thousands of middle class people into supporting their narrow agenda of cutting corporate taxes and avoiding consumer regulations.

Hate has manifested itself once again in tea bag rallies and town hall meetings across the nation. While the corporatists reap the benefits, the people do their bidding. Rage can be productive if directed at the proper targets. But misdirected rage is counter-productive, and a certain segment of this nation has been led in the wrong direction by a few billionaires.

For more info:

http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2009/12/06/in_glitz_shadow_a_health_reform_foe_lurks/

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