

Photo Credit: John Fowler



Climate Change and the Energy Industry

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As people of faith, we recognize the responsibility of our government to seek justice for all people and to build the common good. Justice cannot be achieved unless the rules governing the democratic process are just and fair to all. Central to that process is a citizen's vote—not limited by the powers of money, social class and unequal access to public media.

Unfortunately, the January 2010 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in its *Citizens United v. FEC* decision has rendered the prospect of meaningful campaign finance law protecting the voices of individual voters even more elusive.

The Court stretched to ask a question that had not been posed to them, and they answered it announcing that private businesses—including for-profit corporations—have a right to spend unlimited money in elections. The decision reversed numerous Supreme Court precedents and toppled dozens of long-standing campaign finance laws at the federal and state level.

Money has, and probably always will, play a role in electoral politics, but what kind of role it plays should be subject to regulations that reflect ethical and democratic values.

Most important, it is necessary to have policy safeguards in place which ensure that more than just the wealthiest interest groups have a voice in the public sphere.

The Koch Brothers



Credit: Jared Rodriguez / Truthout

The billionaire Koch brothers, Charles and David, once anonymous businessmen, have now emerged as major political players due to their election spending. The Koch brothers have always given money to political allies and groups, and, thanks to Citizens United, that spending has increased. The Koch brothers own an oil company that is the second largest privately-held company in America¹, they have a specific interest in making sure those profits increase—regardless of the effect on the environment.

Not only do the Koch brothers spend in federal elections, but they contribute at the state level as well. The Koch brothers' campaign against solar power net metering in Arizona is a prime example of the Koch brothers using innocuous sounding groups to promote their agenda at the local level.²

The shadowy lobby group the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) which is funded by the Koch brothers and ExxonMobil, among others, not only funnels money from the Koch brothers, it also helps to draft legislation on a variety of issues, including climate change, that it then promotes in multiple states. State legislatures are then able to take up these drafts and eventually turn them into laws.

At this point, there is little doubt that climate change is real. According to a recent study, 97% of scientists agree that not only is climate change real but that it's also caused by human activities emitting fossil fuels.³ A majority of scientific societies have also released statements in support of these findings.⁴

They note that, "Observations throughout the world make it clear that climate change is occurring, and rigorous scientific research demonstrates that the greenhouse gases emitted by human activities are the primary driver."⁵ Yet, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, various organizations and other fossil fuel interests such as oil companies have a vested interest in misleading the American public about climate change in order to reap bigger profits for themselves.

How much are the Koch Brothers Spending?

Charles and David Koch have donated \$67 million (and counting) to climate change denial groups alone since 1997.⁶ Citizens United has allowed them to increase this spending and to more directly support candidates who are climate change deniers. In the 2012 election cycle alone, they donated \$400 million to various candidates and PACs, all of whom deny that climate change is caused by human activities. That's more money than John McCain spent for this entire Presidential campaign in 2008.⁷ The Koch brothers have always spent a lot of money in elections, and now they can do even more so without as much restriction.

¹ <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/en/campaigns/global-warming-and-energy/polluterwatch/koch-industries/>

² <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2013/10/16/in-sunny-arizona-a-battle-over-solar-power/>

³ <http://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus>

⁴ Id.

⁵ <http://climate.nasa.gov/scientific-consensus>

⁶ <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/en/campaigns/global-warming-and-energy/polluterwatch/koch-industries/>

⁷ <http://content.sierraclub.org/politics-elections/impact-2012>

Political Spending by Energy Companies

It's not just the Koch brothers that spend big in elections. Many other large energy companies are making use of what many call "legalized bribery" in the form of multimillion dollar expenditures in support of candidates. In the 2012 election cycle, "Fossil fuel interests spent more than \$296 million on advertising between September 1 and Election Day."⁸ While most oil companies now have official stances that do not deny the existence of climate change,⁹ their contributions to politicians and groups are used to protect their tax breaks and undermine clean energy initiatives. And while the oil industry no longer directly denies the existence of climate change, their support of climate change denying politicians has a powerful impact.

From 2011 through the third quarter of 2012, (which would include last year's election) \$105 million was spent on lobbying by oil companies, with 90 percent of campaign contributions going to the Republican Party. Oil companies might no longer deny that climate change is real, but they help to bankroll politicians who do. In addition, they spent over \$150 million in election ads, (often with the help of another Koch brothers-backed group—Americans for Prosperity) that promoted the oil and gas industry. And this is all to the oil industries immediate benefit—the 112th Congress was the most anti-environment Congress in history¹⁰ -- and with many politicians in the pockets of big energy, the 113th Congress shows no signs of change.

Energy Corporations and the Heartland Institute

The Heartland Institute is another anti-climate organization funded by energy corporations that seems intent on misleading the public. Perhaps best known as the organization that erected a billboard equated belief in climate change to the beliefs of the Unabomber, ClimateScienceWatch.org takes a closer look at their funding sources, and it's many of the same energy companies:

Heartland's funding over the past decade has included thousands of dollars directly from ExxonMobil and the American Petroleum Institute, but a large portion of their funding (\$25.6 million) comes from the shadowy Donor's Capital Fund, created expressly to conceal the identity of large donors to free-market causes. The Koch brothers appear to be funneling money into Donor's Capital via their Knowledge and Progress Fund.¹¹

This is another instance where energy companies say that climate change exists, but pulls the wool over the eyes of the general public and instead funnels money to outside organizations which do their dirty work for them. Instead of being direct, energy companies are finding new ways to push their apparent anti-environmental agenda even if they claim to believe the opposite. Millions of dollars are being spent climate misinformation, and the American public no longer knows who to believe.

Clean Energy Myths

As more emphasis is put on "clean energy" to avoid climate change, there has been a shifting away from oil and towards other options. Concerns about Peak Oil—a theory as to when the rate oil production will begin to decline—and Peak Gas and foreign dependency drive the discussion about alternatives as well. But nothing is simple: electric cars are fueled by coal and gas produced electricity. Depending on the part of the country in which you live, clean, sustainable energy that reduces foreign dependence may be defined as coal, natural gas, corn ethanol, solar or wind power.

In Pennsylvania and West Virginia, where Coal is King, ads promote "clean coal." Coal, which is used to produce approximately 50% of U.S. electricity, is the second largest producer of carbon dioxide emissions in the U.S.¹²

To combat this fact, the coal industry invested in technology to reduce the effects of burning coal for electricity,¹³ But it has also increased its political spending giving as much as \$2 billion annually.¹⁴

⁸ Id.

⁹ <http://www.skepticalscience.com/bigoil.html>

¹⁰ http://scorecard.lcv.org/sites/scorecard.lcv.org/files/LCV_Scorecard_2012.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.climate-science-watch.org/2013/09/09/heartland-institute-nipcc-fail-the-credibility-test/>

¹² http://cdiac.ornl.gov/trends/emis_mon/graphics/graphics.html

¹³ <http://energy.gov/fe/science-innovation/clean-coal-research>

¹⁴ <http://www.citizensforethics.org/press/entry/crew-report-mining-industry-influence-lobbying-congress-washington>

In Texas, Oklahoma, and other western states, natural gas is the solution to the energy/environment issues. In 2006, natural gas in the United States was considered a nearly drained resource. With natural gas fracking—the pool of natural gas has become large enough to supply the United States for decades if not centuries. The topic of fracking, however, is clouded by large political funding on both sides of the issue.¹⁵

Nevertheless, there is no question that the political spending has increased from natural gas companies such as Chesapeake Energy to candidates of both major political parties.¹⁶ All together the oil and gas industry donated approximately \$82.7 million in the 2012 election cycle. As fracking becomes more politically acceptable, one can expect these contributions to increase even more.

Alternative fuels seek their piece of the political pie, too. The ethanol industry has its own PACs.¹⁷ Solar and wind energy have their own PACs¹⁸¹⁹ as well with ever increasing contributions.²⁰ While they have not reached anywhere in the range of spending as the other energy PACs, the percentage of spending compared to income is much higher: oil and gas spent approximately 1% of their income (82.7 million [including CEO contributions]/91.1 billion²¹) on influencing elections while solar and wind spent approximately \$650,000²² (not including CEO contributions) during a period that they had negative net earnings.²³ Some of the issues solar and wind want to weigh in on are: birds killed by wind turbines²⁴ and the disposal of heavy metals used in solar batteries and panels.²⁵ In fact, the solar industry worked with Organizing for America, a well-funded liberal PAC to oppose the Koch brothers' campaign against solar power net metering in Arizona.²⁶

Summary

Wealthy individuals have always spent money to promote their political agenda and probably always will, but they should not be able to drown the voices of all the people affected by environmental laws—which is everyone in the country. Everyone, then, should have a chance to make informed choices and hear the potential solutions to the many possible choices we have to make. A handful of special interest groups and corporations—regardless of their position—should not be able to drown out discussion and debates around the environment. Our government is built on checks and balances and each citizen should be able to have their voice heard, and not drowned out by big money.

For more information

To learn more about Faithful Democracy, an interfaith money in politics coalition, please contact Jason Miller: jason@franciscanaction.org.

¹⁵ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jonentine/2013/09/18/university-of-texas-environmental-defense-fund-shale-gas-study-unmasks-politics-of-anti-fracking-activist-cornell-scientists/>

¹⁶ <http://www.opensecrets.org/industries/indus.php?ind=E01>

¹⁷ <http://www.opensecrets.org/usearch/index.php?q=ethanol&sa=Search&cx=010677907462955562473%3Anlldkv0jvam&cof=FORID%3A11&siteurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.opensecrets.org%2Findustries%2Findus.php%3Find%3DE01>

¹⁸ <http://www.opensecrets.org/usearch/index.php?q=solar+energy&sa=Search&cx=010677907462955562473%3Anlldkv0jvam&cof=FORID%3A11&siteurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.opensecrets.org%2Fusearch%2F%3Fq%3Dsolar%26cx%3D010677907462955562473%253Anlldkv0jvam%26cof%3DFORID%253A11>

¹⁹ <http://www.opensecrets.org/usearch/?q=wind+energy&cx=010677907462955562473%3Anlldkv0jvam&cof=FORID%3A11>

²⁰ <http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2010/08/solar-wind-power-groups-becoming-pr.html>

²¹ <http://www.ogi.com/articles/print/volume-111/issue-9/special-report-ogi-150-100/ogi150-earnings-down-as-us-production-climbs.html>

²² <http://www.opensecrets.org/pacs/lookup2.php?strID=C00259572&cycle=2014;>

<http://www.opensecrets.org/usearch/index.php?q=wind+energy&sa=Search&cx=010677907462955562473%3Anlldkv0jvam&cof=FORID%3A11&siteurl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.opensecrets.org%2Findustries%2Findus.php%3Find%3DE01>

²³ <http://cleantechnica.com/2013/09/20/solar-stocks-taking/>

²⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/17/science/earth/a-struggle-to-balance-wind-energy-with-wildlife.html>

²⁵ <http://www.kcet.org/news/rewire/solar/photovoltaic-pv/state-rejects-loosening-toxic-waste-regs-on-old-solar-panels.html>

²⁶ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/govbeat/wp/2013/10/16/in-sunny-arizona-a-battle-over-solar-power/>