

Spring 2019

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Recommended Citation

Geary, John (2019) "The Dark Money of Climate Change," *ESSAI*: Vol. 17 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol17/iss1/17>

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The Dark Money of Climate Change

by John Geary

(English 1102)

Since the beginning of humankind's industrialization and propagation of fossil fuels, the Global Average Temperature has consistently increased with the rise in carbon dioxide emissions (IPCC). Carbon dioxide is emitted whenever oil, coal, fossil fuels, and other sources of energy are burned and released into the atmosphere. Ronald Stenz is a professor of Meteorology and Climate Change at College of DuPage with a Masters in atmospheric sciences, and is currently in the process of finishing a PhD in atmospheric sciences. Stenz is certain in the effects of carbon emissions:

You could basically treat this as a fact right now- Doubling carbon dioxide emissions raises temperature 1 degree Celsius. So that is not disputed in the scientific community... It seems that there is an overwhelming consensus that there is going to be additional warming from carbon dioxide emissions. (Stenz)

Stenz makes very clear that burning fossil fuels and oil directly leads to an increase in Global Average Temperature. Similarly to many environmental issues, the topic of the causes, effects, and solutions to Global Warming have become a highly polarized subject politically. Many conservative politicians have aligned themselves with pro-fossil fuel groups, while liberals tend to support pro-Environment groups. Groups known as PACs, or political action committees, are political committees organized based on a set of interests or ideas that aim to elect or defeat one particular political candidate. PACs can also serve as a way for executives of corporations to pool money from the corporation into the PAC as an individual staff member, not as a corporation (Carlin). Lobbyists are individuals that are paid to influence legislation by directly communicating with lawmakers, and often directly pay the politician to schedule a meeting with them. Along with PACs, lobbyists and corporations form a sphere of influence in politics that revolves around money. One of the most influential types of PACs are those stemming out of the fossil fuel industry. PACs that focus on promoting the oil and gas industries contributed \$13,571,886 to the 2018 election cycle alone (Center for Responsive Politics). The term "Dark Money" refers to anonymous money that is funneled through different PACs and non-profit organizations, a portion of which ends up in the hands of politicians (Carlin). As pro-environment groups are flourishing, spending to counter this and maintain the success of the fossil fuel industry are skyrocketing. This type of money is most definitely influential to the politicians paid, but it is disputed whether this money actually affects how these individuals vote. Are an individual's votes or opinions on environmental policy affected by where their money comes from?

Money in politics is not inherently a negative concept in the slightest. Political campaigns need money to pay for rallies, advertisements, and other campaign-related costs. It is absolutely common and expected for politicians to receive sums of money from PACs, lobbyists, and corporations to fund their campaigns and gain more influence. For instance, a candidate that supports conceal and carry may receive money from the National Rifle Association, as their beliefs are in line with each other. What matters is where this money is coming from. Not every lobby, PAC, or corporation has the people's best interest in mind, as groups such as the Koch brothers and ExxonMobil seem to only be looking out for the benefit of their company when paying politicians. "Politics" originates from the Latin word "politicus" meaning "of, for, or relating to citizens." Given

this notion, it can be problematic for a politician to possibly be influenced by a corporation, PAC, or lobby who is only looking out for their industry's best interest, not the American people's best interest, nor that of future generations. It is difficult to analyze whether a politician's vote is motivated by their independent beliefs or financial influences. However, one can compare the particular votes a politician makes on laws regarding the environment to the amount of money received by fossil fuel to show a correlation between the two.

While there are a number of political powers that gain influence from the fossil fuel industry, particular individuals can be revealed to be financed by groups stemming from oil and fuel. Pat Michaels, a researcher for the Cato Institute, has promoted global warming denials for decades. Michaels has continuously promoted the fabrication that limiting carbon emissions will not affect climate change (Johnson). This directly conflicts with the scientific consensus on warming models based on carbon emissions that Professor Stenz presented. While attempting to clarify that most of his funding does not come from oil and coal companies, Michaels admitted that approximately 40% of his work is funded by the petroleum industry (Johnson). Though one cannot directly link Michaels's income with his public opinions, one can note the common thread of prominent climate skeptics being financially tied to fossil fuel. One of the most infamous climate change deniers, Senator James Inhofe has received \$1,530,500 from the fossil fuel industry during his career (Maiorana). Senator Inhofe is best known for bringing a snowball onto the floor of Congress in an attempt to disprove global warming by demonstrating that it was currently cold outside (Bump).

However, just because it was cold outside where Senator Inhofe was located, that does not mean that the global average temperature of the entire planet has not increased significantly over the past decade. Inhofe was definitively promoting misinformation about climate change on the United States Senate floor. It is exceptionally suspicious that Inhofe was promoting an ideology that will benefit the sales of fossil fuels, if this ideology is internalized by the audience. In addition to Senator Inhofe's Senate floor presentation, he supported withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement, an international safeguard put in place to limit carbon emissions (League of Conservation Voters). This is a conflict of interest because Inhofe is dismissing the fact that fossil fuel-induced warming is a threat through the public sphere and legislation. Inhofe is dismissing this fact, while he is directly receiving over a million dollars in funding by the same industry. Representative Jeff Denham has been funded \$166,850 from pro-oil and gas PACs (Center for Responsive Politics). This financial pressure from these PACs has seemingly resulted in Congressman Denham's voting record to become pro-oil, and in turn anti-environment. Denham has voted no on regulations that promote clean air along with restricting carbon emissions, voted no on regulations on smog produced by fossil fuels, voted no on safeguards for methane pollution, along with a number of other pro-oil and anti-environment votes (League of Conservation Voters). Once again we see the trend of a politician being financed by oil and gas, and the same politician voting in a manner that almost always benefits the oil and gas groups backing them.

Senator Ted Cruz of Texas has received \$128,000 from oil and gas PACs alone and \$1,813,163 in total from the oil and gas industry (Center for Responsive Politics). Senator Cruz notably supported withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement, which directly allows fuel companies to increase their emissions (Campus Election Engagement Project). The withdrawal from this agreement allows oil and gas companies to further pollute our atmosphere, while increasing their profit. Cruz stated his reasoning for supporting this measure was the Agreement's harm to the American GDP. While the Paris Climate Agreement may have an impact on American GDP, changing our global fuel sources to combat climate change is a give and take solution. We must give up the money that the fossil fuel industry generates to promote cleaner sources of energy. Senator Cruz's anti-environment voting record along with his support for measures that would benefit the fossil fuel industry demonstrate the commonality of oil-funded politicians continuously supporting measures that deregulate carbon emissions.

As previously mentioned, it is difficult to directly link the money a politician or researcher collects from fossil fuel to the thought processes of these individuals when sharing an opinion or casting a vote. However, one can compare the voting records or statements of individuals heavily financed by fossil fuel to the records of individuals who receive absolutely no funding from these groups. Senator Bernie Sanders has received no money from fossil fuel companies or PACs in his entire political career. Senator Sanders is extremely pro-environment in his voting and public opinions, as he has supported maintaining the Paris Climate Agreement, and has voted yes on numerous bills that reduce the carbon emissions produced by oil companies (League of Conservation Voters). There is a similar situation with Senator Elizabeth Warren, who obtains no financial support from the fossil fuel industry, and has one of the most pro-environment voting records in Congress. Senator Warren is a firm supporter of bills that aim at promoting education on climate change in schools, set a limit to carbon emissions by oil and gas companies, and has campaigned on the basis of combating climate change. In comparing Senator Sanders and Senator Warren to politicians that are financed by fossil fuel, one can infer that there is a link between financing from oil and gas, and the opinions or votes on the environment that are produced. It seems as if when a government official or researcher receives money from a group with special interests, the official forms a bias based on what will benefit these interests. Financial pressure acts upon individuals in Congress, such as Cruz, Denham, and Inhofe, to repay the fuel groups that support them by imposing legislation that directly allows an increase in profit for the fuel companies that paying them. Who are the financial powerhouses paying these influential individuals to legislatively support their businesses and what are their motivations?

Over the last century, certain oil and gas companies have maintained a monopoly on their commodities, and in turn, have produced astounding profits. One of these oil companies, Exxon Mobil, has contributed \$1,530,302 directly to candidates, while spending \$11,150,000 on lobbying (Center for Responsive Politics). Exxon directly pollutes our atmosphere with greenhouse gases, and individuals from this corporation have begun to infiltrate our government, seemingly to push back on regulations that would affect the business's production. CEO of Exxon and avid climate change denier, Rex Tillerson, worked as Trump's Secretary of State, an incredibly influential position, for over a year. While it is unclear whether Tillerson had any influence on the President regarding environment issues, it is very clear that President Trump's motivations are pro-fossil fuel and anti-climate change, as he pulled out of the Paris Agreement, slashed funding to the EPA, and has made countless statements that attempt to undermine the severity of climate change (League of Conservation Voters).

The Koch Brothers, oil billionaires and owners of Koch Minerals LLC (an oil and gas production/exploration corporation), have directly funded Americans for Prosperity, a large group of political "activists," to protest against nationwide public transit laws that would reduce carbon emissions, but would in turn affect the Koch corporation's profit (Tabuchi). The Koch brothers paid Americans for Prosperity to knock on the doors of people living in districts that are planning to vote on these types of laws to persuade them to vote no on pro-public transit legislation (Tabuchi). One of the activists claimed these laws would "waste taxpayer money," (Tabuchi). These methods were highly effective in Nashville, where Americans for Prosperity campaigned, in which the pro-public transit laws were voted against by a landslide (Tabuchi). In total, the Koch brothers alone spent nearly \$25 million on organizations fighting climate reform. (Kaiser). It is problematic that the Kochs are taking such extensive measures to inhibit bills that reduce carbon waste, when the EPA database identified Koch Industries in 2012 as the single biggest producer of toxic waste in the United States (Mattera). In addition to this, an August 2012 report by the Political Economy Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst identified Koch LLC as one of the top five corporate air polluters in the US (Mattera). It is apparent that the Koch brothers are fighting climate reform to further their environmentally dangerous business interests.

However, what is most alarming is the amount of individuals currently sitting in the White House who have worked for Koch affiliated groups, and who have been compensated by the Koch Brothers directly. These individuals include Kellyanne Conway (provided consulting services for Koch), Donald McGahn (provided legal services for Koch), Marc Short: Trump's chief liaison to Congress (leader of Koch sponsored Freedom Partners Chamber of Commerce), Andy Koeing: a policy assistant (former Koch sponsored Freedom Partners Vice President) (Kravitz). The Koch brothers often funnel dark money through the organizations these administration personnel worked for, and they then use the money towards lobbying, PACs, and other financial contributions to the government. The Kochs presumably donate so much to gain increasing influence over government regulations on carbon emissions. In fact, the Koch Brothers directly thanked Trump in an email for issuing an executive order to repeal Obama's "Clean Power Plan", the biggest pillar in the previous administration's climate change strategy (Fang). This demonstrates that the Trump administration is working to implement policies that are in favor of the fossil fuel industry, likely because of the large number of individuals working for the administration that have financial ties and similar ideologies with oil companies like Koch Minerals LLC. With these individuals in positions of political power influenced by oil companies, misinformation on climate can spread rapidly through not only the White House, but also the entire country. This is dangerous territory, as scientists have already reached a consensus regarding the emissions that cause climate change, and this industry's stronghold on our government is counteracting this consensus by continuously promoting climate skepticism. There is no denying the incredible influence that the fossil fuel industry currently has on Washington.

All aspects considered, the number of individuals that are currently influenced by oil and gas companies through money is unknown. However, we know for a fact that there are individuals in the government and society that are financially motivated to promote benefits towards the fossil fuel industry. This situation is fundamentally unacceptable, as politics is supposed to act for the citizens. Politics are not for select billionaires seeking to increase their profit by abolishing or preventing regulations on their company's carbon emissions. In the near future, it is essential that the American people speak up about the special interests that are currently motivating legislation, and promote regulations on the sources of campaign financing. The more time we allow the fossil fuel industry to manipulate our politicians with money to promote their special interests, the less time we may have to enjoy life on this planet.

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