

Book review

DARK MONEY

How a SECRETIVE GROUP of BILLIONAIRES is TRYING to BUY POLITICAL CONTROL in the US

Jane Mayer

Despite the breathless subtitle, Jane Mayer's book, published in 2016 and expanded from her 2010 *New Yorker* article on the Koch brothers, is a well researched, well documented and detailed account of how Charles and David Koch and a small group of other very wealthy individuals inspired by libertarian economic icons like Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, have been directing unprecedented amounts of money into the election of political candidates in national, state and local elections.

But more than “the Koch Brothers are evil!!!!!!”, this book, provides fascinating insights into where their ideas came from, how they managed to take what was originally a fringe political movement in the 1950s and 60s (remember *The John Birch Society?*) and methodically over decades, and by using a multi-pronged “vertically and horizontally integrated” strategy, have profoundly altered American politics. Starting in 2003, to fund this project the Kochs have been hosting semi-annual “donor conferences” for a confidential group of like-minded and extremely wealthy individuals, often joined by politicians seeking their support.

Since the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision allowing groups classified as 501(c)(4) “social welfare” organizations to make unlimited campaign contributions while keeping their donors secret, (so-called “dark money”), Republicans in the Koch donor network have used contributions funneled through layers of such organizations to help their preferred candidates defeat incumbent Democrats and more moderate Republicans in a significant number of states. After the 2010 census, Republican legislatures often used contractors affiliated with these organizations to redraw US Congressional districts to favor Republicans. Though such “gerrymandering” has been practiced throughout US history, after *Citizens United* this process was influenced by unelected mega-donors as much as, or more than, by the parties themselves.

Around this time, the rise of the Tea Party presented the Kochs with a new opportunity. Economist Bruce Bartlett explains, “The problem with the whole libertarian movement is that it's been all chiefs and no Indians. There weren't any actual people, like voters, who gave a crap about it.” But with the rise of the Tea Party “...everyone suddenly sees that for the first time there are Indians out there—people who can provide real ideological power.” The Kochs immediately began “trying to shape and control and channel the populist uprising into their own policies.”

In the presidential election of 2012, the first after *Citizens United*, the Koch donor network spent huge amounts of dark money in their attempt to defeat the incumbent president. Ironically, in that year's presidential primary wealthy backers of Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum could also use unlimited sums to run a great many negative ads against the Kochs' preferred candidate, Mitt Romney; these messages were a big help to Barack Obama in defeating Romney later that year.

After analyzing their disappointing loss in 2012, the Kochs invested several million dollars to purchase a state-of-the-art political data company called *i360*, giving them a data collection operation that many thought easier to use and more sophisticated than that of the Republican National Committee, who they

no longer had to rely on for voter information. The 2014 mid-term election was a Republican triumph and a big victory for the Koch donors as well.

Donald Trump is mentioned briefly toward the end of the book. Trump, who was never invited to the Kochs' donor conferences, tweeted in August, 2015 "I wish good luck to all of the Republican candidates that traveled to California to beg for money etc. from the Koch Brothers. Puppets?" The book follows with this observation: "Trump's popularity suggested that voters were hungry for independent candidates who wouldn't spout the donors' lines. His call to close the carried-interest tax loophole, and talk of the ultra-rich not paying its share, as well as his anti-immigrant rants, made his opponents appear robotically subservient and out of touch."

A remarkable coda to the book after its publication was the surprising outcome of the 2016 presidential election and its tumultuous aftermath, both within the new administration and among those who can't come to terms with it. Tea Party-style protests are popping up everywhere and progressives are encouraging Senate Democrats to adopt the base-pleasing obstructionist tactics employed by Senate and House Republicans throughout the Obama administration.

Though effective for Republicans over the last eight years, this may not be a winning strategy for Democrats. As Aaron Blake pointed out in the Washington Post (Feb 11, 2017), polarization favors Republicans—currently 53% of House districts are Republican and 60 Senators are from red states. These numbers suggest that if they want to win enough elections to rein in the actions of the new administration, progressives must craft a message and deliver it in such a way that will appeal to voters beyond their base. It will be a lost opportunity if the opposition forces allow anger and disappointment to distract them from this important task.