

Koch brothers pledge to spend nearly \$900 million on 2016 US elections

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In a staggering display of aristocratic arrogance, billionaires Charles and David Koch announced Monday that they would spend nearly \$900 million to elect ultra-right candidates, mainly Republicans, in the 2016 presidential and congressional elections.

The Koch brothers are the fifth and sixth wealthiest individuals in America, with about \$40 billion apiece, most of it derived from their privately held Koch Industries, which has expanded from its base in the oil industry to include a vast array of manufacturing and other assets.

Spending nearly \$1 billion on the 2016 campaign will barely make a dent in that fortune. The Koch brothers spent nearly \$400 million in 2012 in a failed effort to elect Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney and a Republican majority in the US Senate, although they contributed significantly to the Republicans' success in holding the House of Representatives.

In the 2014 campaign, they underwrote the successful Republican campaign to win a Senate majority, and now they hope to put a Republican in the White House in 2016. Four Republican presidential hopefuls—Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, and senators Rand Paul, Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz—appeared before a fundraising conference sponsored by the Koch brothers last weekend in Palm Springs, California.

The conference included several hundred wealthy donors who have joined the financial network set up by the Koch brothers over the last three elections to boost ultra-right candidates for federal and state office.

The Koch brothers have already carried out a partial takeover of the Republican Party, through the Tea Party campaigns largely financed by Americans for Prosperity, one of their major vehicles for funding right-wing campaigns. The Tea Party groups are not genuine

expressions of popular sentiment, but organizations established and financed at the behest of a small group of right-wing billionaires, including the Koch brothers, to push the US political system even further to the right.

At the Palm Springs conference, Koch representatives revealed plans to promote other front organizations, including the LIBRE initiative, targeting Hispanics, Generation Opportunity, targeting young people, and Concerned Veterans for America, aimed at military personnel and veterans.

The amounts of money being raised are qualitatively new. In the 2012 elections, the Republican National Committee and the party's campaign committees for the Senate and House of Representatives spent a combined total of \$657 million. The Koch brothers plan to spend far more than this in 2016.

A spokesman for the billionaires' campaign finance arm, Freedom Partners, estimated their budget for 2016 at \$889 million, more than the Obama reelection raised in its record-breaking fundraising in 2012, and about what both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party have planned on spending for 2016.

The Koch brothers are only the most extreme manifestation of a process that has developed over many decades and involves both capitalist parties in the United States, the Democrats as much as the Republicans.

Over the past two decades, campaign spending has soared exponentially, even as the actual level of popular support for and participation in the Democratic and Republican parties has declined precipitously.

In the 1980s and 1990s, it was a political rule of thumb that \$20 million was a sufficient war chest to wage a credible presidential campaign in one of the two big-business parties. By 2012, that sum would be

expended on a single contested congressional seat (one of 435 in the House of Representatives). Senate campaigns regularly top \$50 million, even \$100 million. Presidential campaigns cost a billion or more.

The 2012 election, the most expensive in history, saw more than \$6 billion in campaign spending, up from the previous record of \$5.3 billion in 2008. Prior to the Koch brothers' announcement, election observers had estimated that the 2016 campaign would cost \$8 billion. Now even that figure may be far too low.

Hillary Clinton, the Democratic frontrunner, is expected to raise \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion for her primary and general election campaigns, relying heavily on the network of Democratic Party-aligned multimillionaires cultivated over the course of the past two decades.

The bulk of the funding for both of the capitalist parties comes from the super-rich, not the small contributors who send in money through the mail or over the Internet. A recent study found that the 100 biggest campaign donors accounted for more funds than all 4.5 million people who gave \$200 or less to Democratic or Republican candidates.

In the wake of a series of reactionary Supreme Court decisions, culminating in the notorious 2010 *Citizens United* case, which struck down all limits to corporate and individual contributions, the defenders of the existing system of buying campaigns and candidates have relied on equating money and speech. Any limit on financial donations would be a limitation on the "free speech" of billionaires, and thus violate the First Amendment, they argue.

However, if they chose to do so, the Koch brothers have enough wealth to buy the total advertising time of every television and radio station in America—meaning they could exercise their right to "free speech" by silencing every other voice in the country.

This is, for all practical purposes, the state of affairs during September and October of election years. Political action committees financed by billionaires, as well as the two corporate-controlled parties, saturate television, radio and increasingly the Internet with mind-numbing, stupid and reactionary messages, whose combined effect is to suppress critical thought, alienate potential voters and promote abstention from the corrupt and antidemocratic electoral process.



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