



The Hidden Campaign to Spread Doubt about Climate Science

Robert J. Brulle, Brown University

In the summer of 1988, Dr. James Hansen gave dramatic testimony to Congress on the threats posed by climate change spurred by human exploitation of carbon energy sources. Since then, social movements have grown up in the United States and beyond to demand remedial actions, including new mandatory regulation of dangerous greenhouse gas emissions. Yet during the same period, especially in the United States, a powerful “counter-movement” has been active – a set of well-funded, organized, and sustained efforts to undermine public faith in climate science and block action to regulate emissions by the U.S. government.

A 1998 strategy document from the American Petroleum Institute explained that the goal of this concerted campaign has been to ensure that a “majority of the American public, including industry leadership, recognizes that significant uncertainties exist in climate science.” “Victory will be achieved,” the plan explained, when average citizens believe there are “uncertainties” in climate science and such doubts become part of the “conventional wisdom.”

So far, denial efforts have been quite successful. Although scientific consensus is strong and scientists issue increasingly alarmed reports about rising global temperatures, the U.S. government has failed to manage greenhouse gas emissions. Opponents of regulations and laws have been aided by persistent public doubts. As of 2013, less than half of the U.S. population believes in human-induced global warming. Public acceptance of findings that virtually all scientists accept is actually below what it was in 2007.

Organizations and Funders

Public doubts have been deliberately stoked, but how? Previous scholarship has documented publications and publicity efforts by individual authors who have written books and reports denying climate-science findings. This is fine as far as it goes, but does not reveal the organized basis for sustained efforts to undermine faith in science. My research goes deeper to document the organizational underpinnings and funding behind climate-change denial.

To discover how the denial campaign was built and maintained, I developed a listing of 118 important climate denial organizations in the United States. Then I coded data on philanthropic funding for each organization, combining information from the Foundation Center with financial data submitted by organizations to the Internal Revenue Service. Hefty sums have been donated – \$235 million in 2010 alone. Here are my key findings about funding flows from 2003 to 2010:

- **Conservative foundations have bank-rolled denial.** The largest and most consistent funders of organizations orchestrating climate change denial are a number of well-known conservative foundations, such as the Searle Freedom Trust, the John William Pope Foundation, the Howard

Charitable Foundation, and the Sarah Scaife Foundation. These foundations promote ultra-free-market ideas in many realms.

- **Koch and ExxonMobil have recently pulled back from publicly visible funding.** From 2003 to 2007, the Koch Affiliated Foundations and the ExxonMobil Foundation were heavily involved in funding climate-change denial organizations. But since 2008, they are no longer making *publicly traceable* contributions.
- **Funding has shifted to pass through untraceable sources.** Coinciding with the decline in traceable funding, the amount of funding given to denial organizations by the Donors Trust has risen dramatically. Donors Trust is a donor-directed foundation whose funders cannot be traced. This one foundation now provides about 25% of all traceable foundation funding used by organizations engaged in promoting systematic denial of climate change.
- **Most funding for denial efforts is untraceable.** Despite extensive data compilation and analyses, I have learned that only a fraction of the hundreds of millions in contributions to climate change denying organizations can be specifically accounted for from public records. Approximately 75% of the income of these organizations comes from unidentifiable sources.

Democracy and Public Accountability

With delay and obfuscation as their goals, U.S. climate-change deniers have been quite successful in recent decades. The key actors in this drama have not just been the self-appointed “experts” who appear in the media spotlight on cable television, not even the authors of weighty “reports” and books that publicize a drumbeat of “questions” about climate science findings. The roots of climate-change denial go deeper, because individuals’ efforts have been bankrolled and directed by organizations that receive sustained support from foundations and funders known for their overall commitments to extreme free-market ideologies. Where funding can be traced, it has come from foundations driven by an encompassing ideological vision that posits government “interference” in markets as inherently illegitimate. Regulations and taxes are demonized, yet both are ingredients of proposals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Despite thorough efforts, I could not find all of the sources of funding for organizations that mount climate-change denial efforts because the law allows secrecy. Many of the actors and organizations that have done so much to block U.S. actions to counter the global warming threat are able to operate in the shadows. Americans hear denial arguments funded on a grand scale by unknown wealthy manipulators.

This is a big problem for American democracy. Our constitution guarantees free speech, and the current Supreme Court enforces that right for corporations as well as individuals. In addition, current U.S. rules applying to “nonprofit” organizations make it easy for political activities to be supported on a huge scale in hidden ways. Nonprofit organizations not required to reveal their donors can simply collect funds and pass them to campaigns and think tanks.

This hidden-funding system needs to change, through revision of nonprofit reporting laws. Without a free flow of accurate information, democratic politics and government accountability become impossible. Powerful funders are supporting the campaign to deny scientific findings about global warming and raise public doubts about the roots and remedies of this massive global threat. At the very least, American voters deserve to know

who is behind these efforts.