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Wisconsin Democracy Campaign: Influence peddler for September 2022 – Club for Growth

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After a nine-year hiatus from trying to influence Wisconsin state elections, Club for Growth spent more than $3.5 million in the two weeks leading up to this year's Aug. 9 primary to successfully oppose Republican Rebecca Kleefisch's bid for governor.

Documents filed by the group's independent expenditure arm and Super PAC, Club for Growth Action, showed it spent $3.55 million on television, radio, and digital ads, like these – here and here – between July 26 and Aug. 5 against Kleefisch, a former two-term lieutenant governor.

One ad accused Kleefisch of taking junkets around the world paid for by foreign interests while she was lieutenant governor between 2011 and 2018. The other ad criticized Kleefisch for a 2014 trip to China, saying she returned to Wisconsin "spouting Chinese propaganda," and that Kleefisch was "easy to co-opt, too weak to lead."

Kleefisch, who entered the governor's race in September 2021 and was viewed as the front-runner for months, ended up losing to millionaire construction company co-owner Tim Michels, who will face Democratic Gov. Tony Evers on the November ballot.

The national Club for Growth was founded in 1999 and draws support from a wide array of special interests and billionaires. Among the group's largest funders is billionaire Richard Uihlein, founder of Uline, who contributed about $34 million to Club for Growth in 2018 and 2020.

The group's leaders as of June 2022 include its chairman, Virginia James, a New Jersey investor and longtime supporter of school voucher programs and rightwing causes, and David McIntosh, a former Indiana congressman, who serves as its president.

The Club for Growth and its Super PAC, which are located in Washington, D.C., have a track record of opposing Democrats in federal and state elections as well as Republicans in primary races who it does not feel are conservative enough. Like other rightwing groups, the Club for Growth supports cutting taxes, shrinking government, deregulations, school choice, and reforming programs like Social Security and Medicare.

The Super PAC focuses on "defeating big-government politicians and replacing them with pro-growth, limited-government conservatives," according to its website. To that end, it spent more than $71 million in the 2020 election cycle on congressional races.

Last year, The Guardian reported that the national Club for Growth spent $20 million in 2018 and 2020 to support 42 congressional Republicans who voted to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, including GOP Sens. Josh Hawley of Missouri and Ted Cruz of Texas.

The group also supported Cruz's 2016 failed presidential run and opposed former President Donald Trump. In the six years that followed, Trump and the group grew politically closer. But then in 2022, a rift between Trump and the Club occurred over differences in federal candidate endorsements in races in Ohio and Pennsylvania.

Years earlier, a state arm of the national Club for Growth called Club for Growth Wisconsin spent $11.37 on undisclosed phony issue ads in Wisconsin legislative and statewide races from 2010 through 2013. The state group ranks as one of the top spenders in Wisconsin legislative and statewide races. Most of the group's spending, $9 million in 2011, supported nine GOP state senators facing recalls because they backed a measure to cripple public employee collective bargaining rights.

Club for Growth Wisconsin later became one of numerous organizations targeted in a John Doe investigation into the alleged campaign finance law violations between outside electioneering groups and former Republican Gov. Scott Walker's campaign during Wisconsin's 2011 and 2012 recall elections.

Documents from the John Doe probe show Walker asked wealthy donors from Wisconsin and around the country to contribute to the Club, which in turn spent an estimated $9 million to support targeted GOP senators in the 2011 recall elections and $100,000 to support Walker in the 2012 recall elections.

A 2015 decision by the Wisconsin Supreme Court's conservative majority ordered an end to the John Doe probe and granted political candidates and wealthy special interests that operate phony issue ad organizations wide latitude to coordinate campaign activities during elections.

After the state Supreme Court's decision, Wisconsin Club for Growth supported the GOP-controlled legislature's successful effort to decimate the state's campaign finance laws and abolish the Government Accountability Board (GAB), the state's nationally acclaimed elections, lobby and ethics watchdog, claiming that GAB and prosecutors used the John Doe probes to harass conservatives and suppress free speech.