

Untangling the “WAR” Machine Led by Right-Wing Dark Money Operative Eric O’Keefe Part 4 of a New Guide to the Right-Wing Groups Targeting the Wisconsin Supreme Court By Lisa Graves and Evan Vorpahl

Eric O’Keefe is redeploying Wisconsin Alliance for Reform (WAR) in the 2023 Wisconsin Supreme Court election. Through WAR, O’Keefe is reportedly spending at least \$500,000 attacking Judge Janet Protasiewicz,¹ who graduated from Marquette University Law School in 1988 and has been a Milwaukee circuit court judge since 2014. Some of WAR’s attack ads have the same content as those of Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce (WMC/hydra),² a long-time ally of O’Keefe and his agenda.

Zoom in: O’Keefe has a documented history of moving millions in dark money through an array of groups to influence Wisconsin voters, primarily with attack ads that aid right-wing candidates.

- **O’Keefe has substantial if not complete control over both WAR, a 501(c)(4), and the Wisconsin Reform Fund (WRF), a 527 group,** according to an IRS filing he signed in 2021. In 2022, “Fair Courts America” (fueled by Dick Uihlein) and WRF ran attack ads to help Judge Maria Lazar win an appellate seat.³ She previously defended Gov. Scott Walker’s anti-labor law, Act 10.
- **\$1.5 million in WAR funding in 2016 came from the WMC/hydra and its secret funder(s).** Back in 2012, O’Keefe funneled millions to the WMC/hydra. In *the Guardian* John Doe II documents⁴ you can see the \$2.5 million in checks O’Keefe’s Wisconsin Club for Growth (Wi CFG) sent to it; it then spent huge sums on ads by Ten Capitol (TC) just before Walker’s recall election.
 - **Documents show Walker secretly raised millions from right-wing CEOs for Wi CFG** to use on ads in the elections, including his own. Spending by that O’Keefe group—which has been functionally superseded by WAR since 2016—was coordinated by RJ Johnson, who told people “we own CFG.” Documents show Johnson later got a \$50K commission from TC.⁵ (A criminal probe on this was challenged by Johnson, O’Keefe, et al. In 2016, the Wisconsin Supreme Court killed the probe after David Prosser and Michael Gableman refused to recuse. (*Walker had told Karl Rove that Johnson was key to their elections.*))
- **WAR’s spending in 2016 and 2018 was also subsidized by a special interest group whose biggest funder then was a conduit for anti-choice/anti-gay/anti-regulation operatives.** In 2016, WAR spent more than \$2.6 million⁶ to retain Walker appointee Rebecca Bradley on the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Bradley won. She had made numerous homophobic statements at Marquette and had been the President of the Milwaukee Chapter of the Federalist Society, when Leonard Leo was the Executive VP of the Federalist Society; he now co-chairs its board.
 - **More than \$1.3 million of WAR’s 2016 cash came from the Judicial Crisis Network (JCN), a core part of Leo’s efforts to reshape American courts and law to be hostile to reproductive rights, gay marriage, and corporate regulation.** In 2017-2018, JCN gave WAR \$255K and then WAR spent \$125K⁷ on ads to help anti-choice activist Michael Screnock, a Walker-appointed judge, in his race against Judge Rebecca Dallett. He lost.
 - **The true original source of JCN’s funding is secret but its biggest funder then was a conduit, Wellspring Committee, managed by anti-choice/anti-gay operatives central**

¹ <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2023/02/10/wisconsin-supreme-court-race-expected-to-top-6-million-dollar-spending-february-primary-2023/69890580007/>

² <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/buying-time-2023-wisconsin>

³ <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/elections/2022/03/30/ads-appeals-court-race-invoke-waukesha-parade-tragedy-sex-assault/7193368001/>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2016/sep/14/john-doe-files-scott-walker-corporate-cash-american-politics>

⁵ <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3105195-2013-10-01-Stelter-Aff.html/#document/p15>

⁶ <https://www.acslaw.org/expertforum/acs-on-dark-money-who-is-capturing-our-courts-wisconsin-edition/>

⁷ <https://www.wisdc.org/interest-group-spending/99-hijacking-campaign-2018/6092-hijacking-campaign-2018-information-on-wisconsin-alliance-for-reform>

to Leo's court capture operation. Leo now controls a billion-dollar trust fund via Chicago industrialist Barre Seid, to whom Leo is deeply tied. For years, Seid has tried to secretly aid anti-choice candidates, Supreme Court briefs by electeds, climate denial, and more.

- **Wellspring also gave \$400K to O'Keefe's Wi CFG in the same year Wi CFG directly spent \$500K on attack ads to help Prosser stay on the state Supreme Court.**
- **Documents also show O'Keefe and Johnson were conferring with Leo expressly about securing \$200K and how to spend it to help Prosser win that 2011 race.**
- **Documents also show O'Keefe's WiCFG passed a staggering \$4,620,000 in 2011 to a front group called "Citizens for a Strong America" (CSA), which Johnson was using to manage ads to aid Prosser's reelection and to try to thwart the recall of Walker and others.⁸ CSA had no real office address or phone number, and was helmed by John Connors, a recent college graduate who had worked for O'Keefe's Sam Adams Alliance and Franklin Center before taking a job with Koch's Americans for Prosperity arm in state.**
 - Johnson's wife, Valerie, was and still is CSA's treasurer, and she was WiCFG's treasurer. She is also now the treasurer of another O'Keefe group that has shared an address with his WAR machine: Empower Wisconsin (EW) and its related EW Foundation, which O'Keefe leads along with another director from WAR: Kim Gorden. These groups have all used the same accountants' address as WAR.

The Bottom Line: WAR is just the newest name of the game Eric O'Keefe has been playing for years in deploying secret funding to influence elections.

Curated Resources about O'Keefe's WAR and His Dark Money Funders

- Brendan Fischer, "The Kochs Want to End WI's Era of Clean Government," PRWatch/Center for Media and Democracy (October 19, 2015). [Link](#)
- Jessica Mason, "WAR on Voters: Big Money Streams into WI Supreme Court Race," PRWatch/Center for Media and Democracy (April 1, 2016). [Link](#)
- Ed Pilkington, "Because Scott Walker Asked," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2016. [Link](#)
- John Doe Files, "2012-08-14-Exhibits-01-100-PT1," *The Guardian*. [Link](#)
- John Doe Files, "2012-08-14-Exhibits-01-100-PT2," *Wisnews*. [Link](#)
- Matt Rothschild, "Outside funders backed winner Lazar in Court of Appeals election," *Wisconsin Examiner*, (April 6, 2022). [Link](#)

Key Financial Documents

- Citizens for a Strong America 2011 990. [Link](#)
- Empower Wisconsin Foundation, Inc 2019 990. [Link](#)
- Empower Wisconsin, Inc 2019 990. [Link](#)
- Judicial Crisis Network 2012 form 990. [Link](#)
- Judicial Crisis Network 2015 form 990. [Link](#)
- Judicial Crisis Network 2017 form 990. [Link](#)
- Wisconsin Alliance for Reform 2018 form 990. [Link](#)
- Wisconsin Club for Growth 2011 form 990. [Link](#)

⁸ <https://www.prwatch.org/news/2011/04/10534/group-called-citizens-strong-america-operates-out-ups-mail-drop-runs-expensive-ad>

- Wisconsin Club for Growth 2012 form 990. [Link](#)
- Wisconsin Reform Fund 2020 form 8871. [Link](#)
- Wisconsin Reform Fund 2021 (March amended) form 8871. [Link](#)
- Wellspring Committee 2011 form 990. [Link](#)
- Wellspring Committee 2015 form 990. [Link](#)

About this series. Together, Lisa Graves and Evan Vorpahl have been covering [outside spending in state supreme court races](#) since 2019, including [in Wisconsin](#). Graves has lived in Wisconsin for more than a decade and graduated from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse before attending Cornell Law School. Vorpahl is a native Wisconsinite who graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. True North Research is a national watchdog group, and Graves is the President of the Board of the Madison-based Center for Media and Democracy, which she previously led for eight years, writing and editing numerous Wisconsin and national stories.

Graves received the Milwaukee Press Club’s “Excellence in Journalism” Award for her coverage of the Wisconsin Supreme Court race in 2011. Her investigations of the American Legislative Exchange Council (“ALECExposed”) have won an “Izzy”/I.F. Stone Award and the Association for Education in Journalism’s “Professional Freedom and Responsibility” Award, whose other recipients include Bill Moyers and Molly Ivins—in addition to other honors.

Graves previously served as Deputy Assistant Attorney General in the Office of Legal Policy in the U.S. Department of Justice where she worked on judicial nominations, federal and state court relations, and other policies; as the Chief Counsel for Nominations for the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee where she handled judicial nominations; as the Deputy Chief of the Article III Judges Division of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, where she advised judges and judicial programs on anti-corruption measures; and other posts. She has testified before Congress about the U.S. Supreme Court, the U.S. Postal Service, FOIA reform, and national security matters.

She is one of the nation’s foremost experts on the infrastructure of right-wing groups, both nationally and in the states, and how their billionaire funders and influence are regressing American public policies and institutions.

For additional information about this series, please contact Evan Vorpahl via evan@truenorthresearch.org.