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Politics of science, with federal grants

One of the worst abuses of four decades of Democratic congressional rule was the majority's constant mulcting of taxpayers to enrich their political allies. The Legal Services Corp., for instance, became a fount of left-wing political activism. Influential special interests like the American Association of Retired Persons and Planned Parenthood collected tens of millions of dollars annually.

Seeking to end these abuses are GOP Reps. David McIntosh of Indiana, Ernest Istook of Oklahoma, and Robert Ehrlich of Maryland, who propose tightening the prohibition on the use of federal funds for "political advocacy" and barring any public support for organizations that devote significant resources to lobbying. A second, even simpler, strategy would be to eliminate the federal cornucopia for interest groups. Let taxpayers, rather than legislators, decide whom to support.

Even the best of congressional intentions can be perverted by federal grantors and activist grantees. For instance, in the name of preventing alcohol abuse, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention uses public funds to promote higher alcohol excise taxes, restrictions on advertising and destruction of private billboards. Officials have skirted the ban on taxpayer-funded lobbying, violating the spirit if not the letter of existing law.

According to CSAP, its programs "are designed to help eliminate or reduce alcohol, tobacco, and other drug problems in our society." Few could disagree with such a goal in theory.

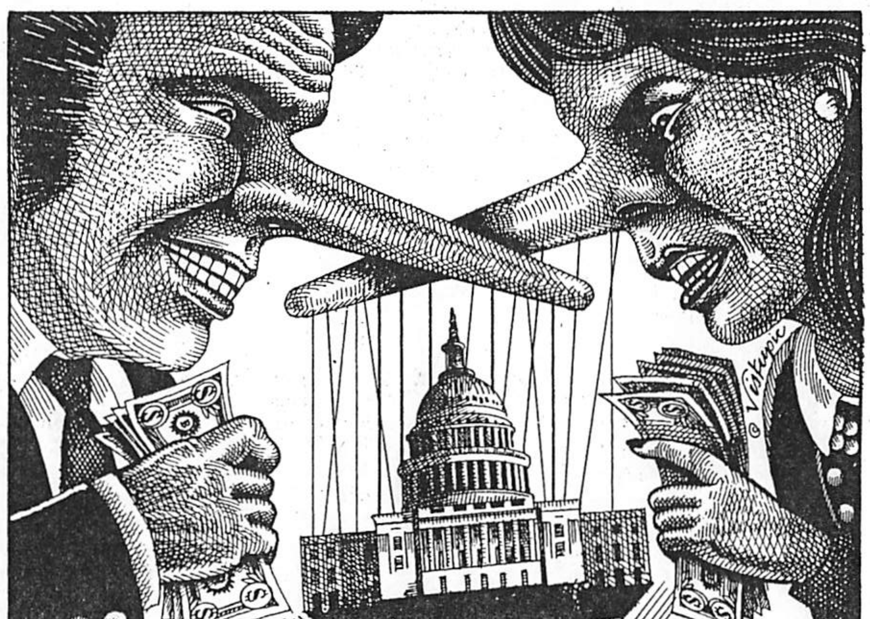
Alas, the agency has preferred to assist local activists in attacking people's drinking preferences.

For instance, CSAP has lavished federal largesse on the Marin Institute, which aids other neo-prohibitionist groups. The Institute explains that "effective prevention must incorporate principles of social justice and a special focus on populations that have been traditionally disenfranchised." Institute senior fellow James Mosher writes that his organization's approach "provides the means to build a coalition for broad social change in regard to health policy."

CSAP provided nearly $1 million between 1990 and 1993 for the Institute's Youth Alcohol Environment On-Line Information Project. This "media advocacy" program, explained the Institute, "tries to reframe health issues to focus on industry practices as a primary problem, exposing them as exploitive and unethical." Indeed, the Institute stated that the project would have been useful in handling past queries from local "alcohol control activists" about such issues as the industrial ownership patterns, the background of industry spokesmen, industry promotional expenditures, and likely industry arguments. These sort of questions have nothing to do with substance abuse; rather, they involve attacks on the alcohol industry and the very idea of social drinking.

The University Research Corp., another agency grantee, put together a set of "media advocacy case studies" at CSAP's behest. The report highlighted activists' use of the media in "reducing the presence of alcohol and tobacco advertising and sales in their neighborhoods." CSAP's underlying political agenda was clear: Local activists "had to take on government and business. In some cases, they changed or created city and local ordinances."

One example publicized at taxpayer expense was an ACT UP sponsored campaign to link alcohol with the transmission of AIDS, increase alcohol excise taxes, and expand condom availability. The report quoted one local activist: "We need sex, kids, gays, motion, emotion, and real university researchers." CSAP also promoted "Artfux," a group of so-called guerrilla artists who deface private billboards with alcohol advertising. Since 1989 Artfux has vandalized 41 billboards, painting their own messages. CSAP went on to list the "lessons learned," including that "sensationalism makes news" and "even with a sensational event, careful planning is necessary."



The agency touts the importance of media advocacy training for its own staffers and local activists, and aids neo-prohibitionist groups in other ways. For instance, CSAP helped create the National Prevention League (recently renamed the National Drug Prevention League), which terms itself a "supergroup" advocacy organization that, among other things, lobbies Congress on CSAP's behalf.

In fact, two years ago the General Accounting Office warned CSAP (then the Office for Substance Abuse Prevention) about funding illicit political activities. The fact that these problems continue should come as no surprise: The agency seems intent on operating as close to the line of illegal lobbying as possible.

Taxpayers should not be forced to pay for political campaigns, whether neo-prohibitionism or anything else. Congress needs to impose tighter restrictions on the use of federal funds, inaugurate more intensive inspector general investigations, and cut off miscreants. In the case of CSAP, legislators should consider dismantling the agency entirely. Congress could eliminate the funds now used for political advocacy while shifting research money to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and turning genuine prevention activities into block grants for the states. Democracy means little if influential interests are able to raid taxpayers' wallets to advance their own partisan goals.

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