

The trolling of Elon Musk: how US conservatives are attacking green tech

Electric-car evangelist is the target of concerted negative online campaign linked to influential rightwing network

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Elon Musk: target of websites such as stopelonfromfailingagain.com Photograph: Hector Guerrero/AFP/Getty Images

[Jamie Doward](#)

19.05 EST

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This article is **1 month old**

He is the charismatic Silicon Valley entrepreneur who believes his many companies - including the electric car manufacturer [Tesla](#) Motors, solar power firm Solar City, and SpaceX, which makes reusable space rockets – can help resist man-made climate change.

South African-born [Elon Musk](#) is a billionaire green evangelist, a bete noire of the fossil fuels industry who talks about colonising Mars and believes it may be possible that we're living in a computer simulation.

But having been feted by the Obama administration, he now faces an extraordinary barrage of attacks from rightwing thinktanks, lobbyists, websites and commentators. The character of the assault says much about which way the political wind is blowing in Washington – something that will have consequences that stretch far beyond the US.

One of Musk's most trenchant critics has been the journalist Shepard Stewart, who writes for a clutch of conservative online news sites. In several articles in September, not long after a SpaceX rocket exploded, Stewart attacked Musk for receiving billions in government subsidies "to make rockets that immediately self destruct" and branded him "a national disgrace". As Musk fought back on Twitter, it became apparent that Stewart was an invention. Even his photo byline had been doctored from a LinkedIn profile of a tech entrepreneur. "Definitely a fake," Gavin Wax, editor-in-chief of [the Liberty Conservative](#), one of the websites that published Stewart, admitted to Bloomberg.

The revelation triggered several theories: that Stewart was created by speculators shorting shares in Musk's companies, or that he was invented by rival rocket companies keen to bring SpaceX down to earth. But Musk may be reassured to learn that Stewart's attacks on him weren't that personal. Rather, they appear to be part of a wider agenda against big government, the environmental lobby and liberals in general – an agenda reinvigorated by the prospect of a Donald Trump presidency. In recent months, Stewart has twice attacked Oregon's former governor, John Kitzhaber, a supporter of ObamaCare and

solar energy who was forced to resign from office, saying his appearance at a healthcare conference was like “having Bernie Madoff heading an upcoming conference on retirement savings”.

He has also taken aim at Louisiana senator Bill Cassidy for introducing an act that compels online contact lens sellers to seek approval from optometrists before selling their products. And he has lambasted the Obama administration for “banning payday loans despite the fact that there is an overwhelming need and positive reception for them”.

Stewart’s protean efforts have been erased from the internet. But the online attacks on Musk continue. A website, stopelonfromfailingagain.com, regularly publishes negative stories about him. The site is similar to another anti-Musk site, whoisonmusk.com created by an organisation called The Center for Business and Responsible Government (CBRG), which describes itself as a “non-partisan organisation dedicated to highlighting cronyism and its effect on American taxpayers and policy” and seems not to exist anywhere but cyberspace. Both sites were set up around the same time this summer and are registered to a domain-name allocation company in Arizona.

Whoisonmusk carries stories from the Daily Signal, the news arm of the Heritage Foundation, a powerful rightwing thinktank whose mission statement is to promote “free enterprise” and “limited government”. It also republishes items from the Washington Examiner and the Daily Caller – online titles that have both published articles by Stewart.

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David Koch of Koch Industries: one of his executives is now the head of a pro-petroleum lobbying group. Photograph: Carlo Allegri/Reuters

Closer inspection of stopelonfromfailingagain.com reveals that it was established by Citizens for the Republic, a political action committee (Pac) set up in the 70s by Ronald Reagan. Dormant for years, CFTR resurfaced in 2008 under Craig Shirley, a biographer of Reagan, whose lobbying firm, Shirley & Banister, claims to have played a key role helping [the “Tea Party Patriots in its rise to prominence as the premiere grassroots group in the country”](#).

Announcing its campaign against Musk, CFTR’s executive director, Diana Banister, the other half of Shirley & Banister, said they would mobilise “public opinion, advertising, grassroots advocacy, testimony and legislation” in their attack on federal solar subsidies, of which Musk has been a major beneficiary. But how and why did CFTR spring back to life? Reports at the time suggested it was revived due to widespread dissatisfaction with the direction of the Republican party. [One stated: “The revitalized Citizens for the Republic has already secured \\$17m in solid financial commitments, according to an official involved in raising money for the organisation.”](#) Whether CFTR really secured this sort of money cannot be verified. But documents filed with the US Internal Revenue Service reveal that two linked organisations – the Wellspring Committee and the Annual Fund – [donated the best part of \\$1m between 2010 and 2011](#).

Few people in the UK will have heard of these two organisations, but they are part of a powerful conservative political network whose influence has global consequences. An investigation by the

[Center for Responsive Politics](#) found that Wellspring was one of many organisations that in the past was used as a “dark money conduit” by the billionaire industrialist Koch brothers, David and Charles, to channel money to their favoured causes, which have included climate change denial scientists, Tea Party activists and a host of other rightwing groups, including the Heritage Foundation. While Wellspring has reportedly distanced itself from the Kochs, it continues to draw donations from the brothers’ network of like-minded supporters.

One of the Kochs’ latest campaigns emerged in February when it was announced that James Mahoney, a vice-president at Koch Industries, had teamed up with a former lobbyist for American Fuel and Petrochemical Manufacturers to launch a group promoting petroleum. The group is spending [\\$10m a year talking up petrol while attacking government subsidies for](#) electric vehicles, according to sources who spoke to the Huffington Post.

The announcement followed a pledge made last December by the [Koch brothers](#) that they and their supporters intended to spend nearly \$900m this year helping favoured conservative candidates get elected to Congress, the presidency, and state legislatures. This was double what they spent in the last election cycle and almost as much as was expended by the two presidential campaigns.

Koch Industries did not respond to requests for comment. The *Observer* attempted to talk to Craig Shirley about CFTR’s relationship with the Wellspring Committee and its campaign against Musk. A spokesman for Shirley & Banister declined to comment on specific questions but said: “The *Observer* may not be familiar with our laws, and therefore we feel a duty to inform you that conservative philosophy is perfectly legal in the United States. While our hearts go out to the liberal groups who may be ‘upset’, Citizens for the Republic will continue to fight back against cronyism and corruption at all levels of government. If liberals can’t understand that, then that is further proof they have learned nothing from this election.”



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A Tesla Model S saloon recharging. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs for the Guardian

Ironically, given the money they spent, the Kochs’ preferred presidential candidate – Scott Walker, the Republican governor of Wisconsin and a darling of many in the Tea Party movement – crashed and burned. Walker’s links to the Kochs may actually have hindered his chances, as they gave plenty of ammunition to his rivals. Hillary Clinton joked that Walker received “his marching orders from the

Koch brothers and just goes down the list”. Trump derided Republicans who took Koch money as “puppets”.

Walker’s failure to secure the nomination was a blow for Shirley & Banister, which [ran the communications operation for his super-Pac, The Unintimidated Pac](#), positioning their candidate as an opponent of the Washington elite “unintimidated by powerful political forces”.

And yet, despite the ostensible setback, Christmas has come early for the Kochs. The incoming vice-president, Mike Pence, has acknowledged the support of David Koch. Myron Ebell, the chair of the Koch-backed Cooler Heads Coalition, which questions “global warming alarmism”, will lead Trump’s transition team for the Environmental Protection Agency. Another Trump appointment to that team, David Schnare, is a former member of the Heartland Institute, which denies the scientific evidence for man-made climate change and is a member of the American Legislative Exchange Council (Alec), another organisation funded by the Kochs.

Meanwhile Thomas Pyle, of the Koch-backed American Energy Alliance, is off to the energy department, while Doug Domenech of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which has received millions in Koch funds, is joining the Department of the Interior.

As the campaigning website [kochvsclean.com put it](#): Are The Koch Brothers Controlling Trump Through Appointees?

If the answer is yes, then Musk and other evangelists for the green economy will soon have a lot more to worry about than fake news. It’s the real news they should fear now.