



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on December 2, 2013

Wisconsin Conservatives Targeted in Secret Probe

With the Obama administration still under fire for [scandalously abusing the IRS to target conservative and Tea Party organizations](#), a Democrat-led District Attorney's office in Wisconsin is making [headlines nationwide](#) for a controversial secret investigation — a so-called “fishing expedition,” according to some critics — of political forces that supported GOP Gov. Scott Walker. While details of the shadowy “John Doe” probe remain murky, multiple conservative political organizations and figures have reportedly been subjected to raids and subpoenas searching for evidence of potential campaign-law violations. Sources quoted in media reports said they did not know of any liberal groups or Democrat candidates contacted in the probe.



According to news reports, dozens of conservative groups that backed Gov. Walker in his efforts to rein in government-employee unions and his subsequent recall election have been subpoenaed so far. Among other demands, a special prosecutor working for the Democrat-controlled Milwaukee District Attorney's office has sought donor lists, e-mail communications, records, and more from the conservative-leaning organizations. The groups being targeted in the probe reportedly include heavy-hitting national and state outfits such as the Republican Governors Association, Americans for Prosperity, Club for Growth, the Republican Party of Wisconsin, and more.

Unsurprisingly, Republicans and conservatives are crying foul over the secret investigations, with more than a few arguing that the probe is aimed at silencing, punishing, and neutering pro-taxpayer forces in the state. Several sources have also suggested that the scheme is really an effort to bring down Gov. Walker, who rose to national prominence with his [successful bid to balance the budget and curb the stranglehold](#) of Big Labor over taxpayers' wallets. That campaign led to [bitter political disputes with nationwide implications](#), as well as [multiple recall elections](#) targeting both Republicans and Democrats in the state.

Walker faces a key election next year, and if his supporters are embroiled in political investigations — legitimate or not — succeeding at the polls may prove harder. Targets of the current inquiry say it is already having a “chilling effect” on conservative activists. Meanwhile, the same Democrat-controlled District Attorney's office involved in the ongoing “dragnet” probe also spent three years, starting in 2010, investigating Gov. Walker and his staff in a similar probe covering the time-period during which the current governor served as county executive. The investigation, which ended earlier this year, found that a staffer sent campaign e-mail while being paid by taxpayers. No charges were ever filed against Walker.

Known as a “John Doe” probe, the ongoing investigation, initiated by the office of Milwaukee County



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Assistant District Attorney Bruce Landgraf, allows prosecutors to conduct searches, issue subpoenas, hear witness testimony, and more — all in secret. Targets of the probe are prohibited from revealing anything publicly. Because of the secret nature of the investigations, most of the information that is publicly available so far came from anonymous sources cited in media reports. The investigations are being led by special prosecutor Francis Schmitz, and have reportedly drawn into the fray top First Amendment and campaign-finance attorneys from around the country.

The precise nature, goals, or cause of the ongoing probe remain unclear. Sources and leaked documents, however, have suggested that prosecutors are supposedly trying to determine whether conservative organizations “coordinated” their operations with candidates, which is apparently illegal. One source with knowledge of the investigation, launched early last year, [told](#) the *Wisconsin Reporter* that the “ultimate goal is to bring down Walker, the bane of Wisconsin liberals,” the media outlet reported as part of an investigative series on the probe. Labor unions across America have also expressed hysterical rage about the governor.

In a recent opinion piece about the machinations for the *Wall Street Journal*, “[Wisconsin Political Speech Raid](#),” the newspaper reported that over 100 subpoenas have been issued so far. Citing two of the documents seen by the writer of the editorial, the *Journal* said prosecutors were demanding “all memoranda, email ... correspondence, and communications,” including internal messages and communications with the 29 groups targeted in the probe. One of the subpoenas also calls for “all records of income received, including fundraising information and the identity of persons contributing to the corporation,” the paper reported.

Due to the restrictions imposed on targets of the investigation and those receiving subpoenas under state laws, few people have come forward to publicly discuss the investigation. One man, however, has decided to go on the record despite acknowledging the risks, because he “wants the public to know what is going on.” Wisconsin Club for Growth Director Eric O’Keefe, a veteran of conservative and libertarian politics, told the *Journal* that he received a subpoena letter in early October.

At least three targets have had their homes “raided at dawn, with law-enforcement officers turning over belongings to seize computers and files,” the paper noted, citing comments from O’Keefe. The political activist leader told the *Journal* that the flurry of subpoenas “froze my communications and frightened many allies and vendors of the pro-taxpayer political movement in Wisconsin and across the country.” Even if no one is ever convicted of a crime, “the process is the punishment,” O’Keefe added.

“Americans learned in the IRS political targeting scandal that government enforcement power can be used to stifle political speech,” the *Journal* noted in its opinion piece about the John Doe probe, which it suggests might be politically motivated. “Something similar may be unfolding in Wisconsin.... The kitchen-sink subpoenas deserve skepticism considering their subject and targets. The disclosure of conservative political donors has become a preoccupation of the political left across the country.”

Especially troubling, the newspaper continued, is that the subpoenas are asking for the names of donors to non-profit organizations, which are not legally required to disclose them — a fact made even more alarming in the wake of recent IRS scandals. Also cause for concern is the timing of the probes, the paper noted; just in time for the 2014 election, when Walker will be seeking another term in office.

“Perhaps the probe will turn up some nefarious activity that warrants this subpoena monsoon and home raids,” the editorial concluded. “But in the meantime the effect is to limit political speech by intimidating these groups from participating in the 2014 campaign. Stifling allies of Mr. Walker would



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be an enormous in-kind contribution to Democrats. Even if no charges are filed, the subpoenas will have served as a form of speech suppression.”

Top lawmen in the area also said they are suspicious. “As for the smell test, this thing reeks of politics, it reeks of being a political witch hunt,” [said](#) Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke, a liberty-minded Democrat who has attracted national applause for his public support of the Second Amendment and self-defense rights. “When you start to use power like that, in that fashion, that’s scary to me because that could happen to you, and that could happen to me. The unchecked, unbridled scope of these investigations, to me, they’re dangerous.” In an [interview](#) with the *Wisconsin Reporter*, Clarke also suggested that the entire probe should be shut down.

Wisconsin Democrat leadership, on the other hand, has been celebrating the ongoing investigations, suggesting that conservatives are only speaking out because they want to stop prosecutors from “digging too deeply” into their spending. “You can assume they’re finding serious acts of wrongdoing,” state Democratic Party Chairman Mike Tate was [quoted as telling](#) Daniel Bice with the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, referring to the law enforcement raids on conservatives. Analysts [noted](#) that Democrats in the state had previously complained of politically motivated investigations and prosecutions when liberals were the alleged victims.

The New American contacted multiple sources in Wisconsin politics for comment on this story. None was willing to go on the record with his thoughts. For now, though, what is clear is that public suspicions surrounding the case are growing, and more than a few conservative political players feel that the secret machinations are unjustified. Some have even suggested that the case represents an abuse of prosecutorial powers for partisan purposes. What the investigation will turn up, if anything, remains to be seen.

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