**Betsy DeVos, Trumps Education Pick, Plays Hardball With Her Wealth - The New York Times**

After Tom Casperson, a Republican state senator from Michigans Upper Peninsula, began running for Congress in 2016, he assumed the family of Betsy DeVos, Donald J. Trumps nominee to be education secretary, would not oppose him. The DeVoses, a dominant force in Michigan politics for decades with a fortune in the billions, had contributed to one of Mr. Caspersons earlier campaigns. But a week before his primary, family members sent $24, 000 to one of his opponents, then poured $125, 000 into a super PAC, Concerned Taxpayers of America, that ran ads attacking him. The reason, an intermediary told Mr. Casperson: his support from organized labor. Deceitful, dishonest and cowardly, was how Mr. Caspersons campaign described the ads, complaining that the groups running them wont say who they are or where their money is coming from. On Primary Day, Mr. Casperson went down to defeat. In announcing his intention to nominate Ms. DeVos, Mr. Trump described her as a brilliant and passionate education advocate. Even critics characterized her as a dedicated, if misguided, activist for school reform. But that description understates both the breadth of Ms. DeVoss political interests and the influence she wields as part of her powerful family. More than anyone else who has joined the incoming Trump administration, she represents the combination of wealth, ideology and political hardball associated with a family of billionaires: Charles and David Koch. They have this moralized sense of the free market that leads to this total program to turn back the ideas of the New Deal, the welfare state, Kim a historian who has written extensively about the conservative movement, said, describing the DeVoses. Ms. DeVos declined to be interviewed for this article. Like the Kochs, the DeVoses are generous supporters of think tanks that evangelize for unrestrained capitalism, like Michigans Acton Institute, and that rail against unions and back privatizing public services, like the Mackinac Center. They have also funded national groups dedicated to cutting back the role of government, including the National Center for Policy Analysis (which has pushed for Social Security privatization and against environmental regulation) and the Institute for Justice (which challenges regulations in court and defends school vouchers). Both organizations have also received money from the Koch family. Indeed, the DeVoses education activism, which favors alternatives to traditional public schools, appears to derive from the same views that inform their suspicion of government. And perhaps more than other billionaires, the DeVoses couple their seeding of ideological causes with an aggressive brand of political spending. Half a dozen or more extended family members frequently coordinate contributions to maximize their impact. In the 2016 cycle alone, according to the Michigan Campaign Finance Network, the family spent roughly $14 million on political contributions to state and national candidates, parties, PACs and super PACs. All of this would make Ms. DeVos ” whose confirmation hearing has been delayed until next week amid mounting pressure that her government ethics review be completed beforehand ” very different from past education secretaries. She is the most emblematic kind of oligarchic figure you can put in a cabinet position, said Jeffrey Winters, a political scientist at Northwestern University who studies economic elites. What she and the Kochs have in common is the unbridled use of wealth power to achieve whatever political goals they have. Ms. DeVos, 59, grew up in Holland, Mich. the daughter of a conservative auto parts magnate who was an early funder of the Family Research Council, a conservative Christian group. When she married Dick DeVos in 1979, it was akin to a merger between two royal houses of western Michigan. Her husbands father, Richard Sr. of the multilevel marketing company Amway, was an active member of the Christian Reformed Church that preached a mix of social conservatism and . He once told the churchs official magazine that Chicagos poor dwelled in slums because that was the way they choose to live, according to a Washington Post story from the 1980s. A fan of and pinkie rings, Richard Sr. wrote books with titles like Ten Powerful Phrases for Positive People. A similar air hung over his business. Amway sales representatives, which the company calls independent business owners, make money both by selling the companys products ” everything from perfume to toilet bowl cleaner ” and by recruiting other sales representatives. The Federal Trade Commission once investigated the company for running a pyramid scheme before concluding that it had misled potential recruits about how much they could expect to earn. The flip side of the familys proselytizing for capitalism, according to Professor has been an effort to dismantle much that would counterbalance the power of economic elites. Amway funded a nationwide ad campaign in the early 1980s, protesting high taxes and regulations. Not long after, the company pleaded guilty to cheating the Canadian government out of more than $20 million in revenue. The family had a more winning public face in Dick DeVos, who combined the practiced empathy of a pitchman with the entitlement of an heir, spending over $30 million on an unsuccessful run for governor of Michigan in 2006. The Detroit Free Press described him that year as the wealthiest man to seek office in the states modern history. Betsy DeVos, who served as chairwoman of the Michigan Republican Party for most of the decade between 1996 and 2005, has often played the role of strategist in the relationship. She was a key adviser in her husbands run for governor and publicly brooded that he had been too gentlemanly in his first debate against the incumbent. Hes very good with people, a retail politician who looks you in the eye, shakes your hand, listens to what you say, said Randy Richardville, a former Republican leader of the Michigan Senate, describing the couples strengths. I would never underestimate Betsy DeVos in a knife fight. Ms. DeVos has sometimes lacked her husbands finesse, once famously blaming many of the states economic woes on high wages. She has won detractors, by their account, by browbeating legislators into voting her way. Betsy DeVos was like my granddaughter at the time, said Mike Pumford, a former Republican state representative who once clashed with her. They were both sweet ladies as long as they kept hearing the word ˜yes. They turned into spoiled little brats when they were told ˜no. But Ms. DeVos has often made up for what she lacks in tact through sheer force of will. Mr. Richardville said he and Ms. DeVos disagreed over term limits, which she supported as party chairwoman and he opposed: I said, ˜I dont think you should be setting policy. You should be supporting those of us who do make policy. But she never backed down. While Dick and Betsy DeVos appear to practice a more tolerant form of Christianity than their parents ” Ms. DeVos has spoken out against bigotry ” as recently as the early 2000s they funded some groups like Focus on the Family, a large ministry that helps set the political agenda for conservative evangelicals. They have also backed groups that promote conservative values to students and Christian education, including one with ties to the Christian Reformed Church. Their economic views are strikingly similar to the elder Mr. DeVoss. According to federal disclosures, Amway, which Dick DeVos ran between 1993 and 2002, has lobbied frequently over the last 20 years to reduce or repeal the estate tax. Only the top 0. 2 percent wealthiest estates paid the tax in 2015. The company has also opposed crackdowns on tax shelters. Ms. DeVos has been an outspoken defender of unlimited contributions known as soft money, which she described in a 1997 editorial as American dollars that Big Brother has yet to find a way to control. After Congress later passed a major campaign finance reform bill, a nonprofit that Ms. DeVos helped to create and fund masterminded the strategy that produced Citizens United, the 2010 Supreme Court decision laying the groundwork for super PACs funded by corporations, unions and individuals to raise and spend unlimited amounts in elections. And then there are the familys efforts to rein in the labor movement. Through their contributions to think tanks like the Mackinac Center, as well as Mr. DeVoss direct prodding of Republican legislators, the family played a key role in helping pass Michigans legislation in 2012. The legislation largely ended the requirement that workers pay fees to unions as a condition of employment. Unions in the state bled members in 2014, the first full year the measure was in effect. Allies say the DeVoses fight for their beliefs. Betsy and Dick see themselves as principled conservatives, said Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute. It kind of seems healthy and admirable to give resources to folks who are going to fight for causes you believe in. But the fights can appear to be as much about consolidating power as ideology. Unions were arguably the familys most formidable political opponent in Michigan, one of labors traditional strongholds. The DeVos familys roots as education activists date back at least to when Richard DeVos Sr. was running Amway and an institute based at the companys headquarters trained teachers to inject principles into their curriculum. According to an interview Ms. DeVos gave to Philanthropy magazine, she and her husband became interested in education causes when they began visiting a Christian school that served children in Grand Rapids in the 1980s. If we could choose the right school for our kids ” by which she appeared to mean primarily private schools ” it only seemed fair that they could do the same for theirs, she told the magazine. The family spent millions of dollars on a ballot proposal in 2000 asking if Michigan should legalize vouchers, in which students can use taxpayer money to attend private schools. Many critics, like the education historian Diane Ravitch, argue that the point of vouchers is to destroy public education and teachers unions. The group Americans United for Separation of Church and State has documented how conservative Christians have long supported vouchers, which could fund religious schools. After voters objected by more than a ratio, Dick DeVos gave a speech at the Heritage Foundation saying such efforts would have to shift to state legislatures, where groups backed by donors could offer a political consequence for opposition, and political reward for support of education reform issues. It is not unusual for the wealthy ” who devote nearly 50 percent of their philanthropic dollars to education, according to the group ” to spend aggressively in the political realm to impose their preferred reforms. Even by these standards, however, the DeVoses stand out for the amount of money they spend trying to advance their goals through politics rather than philanthropy, such as research into reforms or subsidizing schools. As Sarah Reckhow, an expert on education philanthropy at Michigan State University, put it: The DeVoses are like: ˜No, we know what we want. We dont need to have all this window dressing. Ms. DeVos has led two nonprofits that have spent millions of dollars electing governors and legislators sympathetic to school vouchers around the country. Matt Frendewey, a spokesman for one of the groups, said the efforts had frequently been bipartisan, and that the amount of money they had spent has been dwarfed by contributions from teachers unions opposed to reform. Yet in Michigan, at least, the familys political strategy has not been subtle. After he defied Ms. DeVos on a key charter school vote, Mr. Pumford, the former Republican legislator, survived an effort by the Great Lakes Education Project, a nonprofit the DeVoses bankrolled, to defeat him in his 2002 primary. But shortly after, the House speaker told him the Education Committee chairmanship he coveted would not be forthcoming. I said, ˜Why? Mr. Pumford recalled. He said: ˜You know why. The DeVoses will walk away from us. Mr. Pumford added: She told me that was going to happen. (Rick Johnson, the House speaker, said he did not recall the conversation but also that he had not promised Mr. Pumford the chairmanship and would not have explained his reasons for withholding it.) Over time, the Great Lakes Education Project helped elect Republican majorities sympathetic to the DeVoses agenda. But the DeVoses lobbyists and operatives also discovered less messy ways to advance legislation. Late one night of their last workweek in 2015, the Michigan House and Senate were about to approve some uncontroversial changes to campaign finance law, when the bill abruptly grew by more than 40 pages. After the legislators discovered what they had voted for, many said they were horrified. Tucked away in the new pages was a provision that would have made it much harder for local bodies like school boards to raise money through property tax increases. Michigan schools will likely suffer the brunt of the impact because the vast majority rely on periodic voter approval of local operating levy renewals for property taxes, the ratings agency Moodys wrote of the measure the following month. I was fooled into voting for something I opposed, said Dave Pagel, a Republican representative. I consider it the worst vote Ive made. The chief culprits, according to Mr. Pagel and others at the state Capitol when the bill passed, were lobbyists closely tied to the DeVoses. Tony Daunt, a spokesman for the Michigan Freedom Fund, a nonprofit headed by the DeVoses longtime political aide, and whose political spending arm they have funded generously, said the group was part of the discussion process with people in the legislature about the proposal and had consistently expressed support for the policy. The law was later blocked by a federal judge, but the group has vowed to try again. Ms. DeVoss advocates see in these fights the toughness to take on entrenched opponents of expanding reforms like charter schools and vouchers. In promoting Ms. DeVos in The Washington Post, Mitt Romney, the Republican Partys 2012 presidential nominee, emphasized that her wealth gave her the independence to be someone who isnt financially biased shaping education. He added, DeVos doesnt need the job now, nor will she be looking for an education job later. But critics see someone with an unmistakable agenda. The signs are there that she will do something radical, said Jack Jennings, a former general counsel for the House education committee. Trump wouldnt have appointed this woman for this position if he didnt intend something radical.

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