

Lobbyists, Guns and Money

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Florida's now-infamous Stand Your Ground law, which lets you shoot someone you consider threatening without facing arrest, let alone prosecution, sounds crazy — and it is. And it's tempting to dismiss this law as the work of ignorant yahoos. But similar laws have been pushed across the nation, not by ignorant yahoos but by big corporations.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Paul Krugman

Specifically, language virtually identical to Florida's law is featured in a template supplied to legislators in other states by the American Legislative Exchange Council, a corporate-backed organization that has managed to keep a low profile even as it exerts vast influence (only recently, thanks to yeoman work by the Center for Media and Democracy, has a clear picture of ALEC's activities emerged). And if there is any silver lining to Trayvon Martin's killing, it is that it might finally place a spotlight on what ALEC is doing to our society — and our democracy.

What is ALEC? Despite claims that it's nonpartisan, it's very much a movement-conservative organization, funded by the usual suspects: the Kochs, Exxon Mobil, and so on. Unlike other such groups, however, it doesn't just influence laws, it literally writes them, supplying fully drafted bills to state legislators. In Virginia, for example, [more than 50 ALEC-written bills](#) have been introduced, many almost word for word. And these bills often become law.

Many ALEC-drafted bills pursue standard conservative goals: union-busting, undermining environmental protection, tax breaks for corporations and the wealthy. ALEC seems,

however, to have a special interest in privatization — that is, on turning the provision of public services, from schools to prisons, over to for-profit corporations. And some of the most prominent beneficiaries of privatization, such as the online education company K12 Inc. and the prison operator Corrections Corporation of America, are, not surprisingly, very much involved with the organization.

What this tells us, in turn, is that ALEC's claim to stand for limited government and free markets is deeply misleading. To a large extent the organization seeks not limited government but privatized government, in which corporations get their profits from taxpayer dollars, dollars steered their way by friendly politicians. In short, ALEC isn't so much about promoting free markets as it is about expanding crony capitalism.

And in case you were wondering, no, the kind of privatization ALEC promotes isn't in the public interest; instead of success stories, what we're getting is a series of scandals. Private charter schools, for example, appear to deliver a lot of profits but little in the way of educational achievement.

But where does the encouragement of vigilante (in)justice fit into this picture? In part it's the same old story — the long-standing exploitation of public fears, especially those associated with racial tension, to promote a pro-corporate, pro-wealthy agenda. It's neither an accident nor a surprise that the National Rifle Association and ALEC have been close allies all along.

And ALEC, even more than other movement-conservative organizations, is clearly playing a long game. Its legislative templates aren't just about generating immediate benefits to the organization's corporate sponsors; they're about creating a political climate that will favor even more corporation-friendly legislation in the future.

Did I mention that ALEC has played a key role in promoting bills that make it hard for the poor and ethnic minorities to vote?

Yet that's not all; you have to think about the interests of the penal-industrial complex — prison operators, bail-bond companies and more. (The American Bail Coalition has publicly described ALEC as its "life preserver.") This complex has a financial stake in anything that sends more people into the courts and the prisons, whether it's exaggerated fear of racial minorities or Arizona's draconian immigration law, a law that followed an ALEC template almost verbatim.

Think about that: we seem to be turning into a country where crony capitalism doesn't just waste taxpayer money but warps criminal justice, in which growing incarceration reflects not the need to protect law-abiding citizens but the profits corporations can reap from a larger prison population.

Now, ALEC isn't single-handedly responsible for the corporatization of our political life; its influence is as much a symptom as a cause. But shining a light on ALEC and its supporters — a roster that includes many companies, from [AT&T and Coca-Cola to UPS](#), that have so far managed to avoid being publicly associated with the hard-right agenda — is one good way to highlight what's going on. And that kind of knowledge is what we need to start taking our country back.