

# Ideological Conflicts of Interest Are Worse than Financial Ones



By Alex Berezow, PhD — May 31, 2017



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"Follow the money!" activists shout. The money trail, according to this logic, always leads to lies and deception.

This puerile fallacy, [argumentum ad aurum](#) [2], is just a thinly disguised *ad hominem* attack commonly used against scientists. Instead of criticizing the quality or conclusions of the research, activists instead assault the integrity of the scientist.

For certain, money *can* be a corrupting influence. That's why journals require scientists to disclose financial ties to industry. But money isn't the only source of corruption. Indeed, *anything* that causes a person to reject evidence-based science should be considered a conflict of interest. By that definition, ideology and politics would qualify as conflicts of interest, as well. And that would make some people very uncomfortable.

## **Ideology as a Conflict of Interest**

In 2015, the *New England Journal of Medicine* ran an [article](#) [3] by Lisa Rosenbaum on bias as a conflict of interest. Many academics and even doctors are ideologically opposed to industry, no matter what. As the author writes, this stigma results in a "stifling of honest discourse and potential discouragement of productive collaborations." She then poses a damning question:

*When we study whether people with financial ties are more likely to vote in favor of a product, shouldn't we also ask whether those without such ties are more likely to*

*vote against it?*

In other words, if scientists with ties to industry are assumed to be corrupted by money, shouldn't we assume that anti-industry zealots are corrupted by their ideology?

Last year, obesity researcher Arya Sharma made a [similar argument](#) [4]. Dr. Sharma recalls the story of Ancel Keys, a researcher who believed that heart disease was linked to consuming saturated fats. Dr. Keys's team completed a large, randomized controlled trial in 1973 to test the hypothesis but hid the results, which weren't published until 2016. Why? Because the data contradicted his hypothesis. Consequently, we have had more than 40 years of bad dietary advice because, as Dr. Sharma says, "making these findings public would have done severe damage to their 'pet hypothesis.'"

Dr. Sharma ends his article with a stinging critique:

*When someone has "no financial conflicts to declare" I often ask my self, "what are the authors really hiding?"*

### **Environmentalists' Conflict of Interest**

Modern environmentalism is a religion. Its most devoted followers swear by the benefits of organic food, oppose GMOs and nuclear power (and often vaccines, too), and believe that the Earth is overpopulated by a destructive force called humanity. They offer tithes to an alphabet soup of organizations ideologically opposed to technological progress: EWG, UCS, CSPI, NRDC, and PETA\*.

Never mind that science has definitively shown that organic food is no healthier, safer, or tastier than conventional food. Never mind that GMOs have not been shown to harm humans, animals, or the environment. Never mind that nuclear power plants have been re-engineered to be meltdown-proof. And never mind that demographers believe the planet is not overpopulated. Hard data simply do not matter to environmentalists and activists.

An easy way to determine if a person has an indefatigable ideological conflict of interest is to ask, "What evidence would make you change your mind?" If he can't answer that question, then there is little point in continuing the dialogue.

*\*Note: That would be Environmental Working Group, Union of Concerned Scientists, Center for Science in the Public Interest, National Resources Defense Council, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. We can throw in Greenpeace, too, for good measure.*

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[1] <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/general-image-unidentified-people-protesting-125763227>

[2] <http://www.acsh.org/news/2016/09/08/argumentum-ad-aurum-follow-money-fallacy-10133>

[3] <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMms1502497>

[4] <http://www.drsharma.ca/ideological-conflicts-of-interest-worry-me-more-than-financial-conflicts>