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Who are the Koch brothers?

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When people talk about the "Koch brothers," they almost always are referring to Charles Koch and his younger brother, David, whose activism on behalf of Republicans has made them among the most powerful people in American politics.

However, the family, whose business dynasty began with their ultra-conservative father Fred Koch, consists of four brothers whose paths have diverged sharply. In the 1980s and 1990s, they clashed publicly in an ugly legal battle for control of the company.

Charles and David Koch prevailed in the feud — which pitted them against Bill, who is David's twin, and the oldest Koch brother, Frederick, 81 — and left Charles and David with ownership of what would become one of the country's biggest industrial empires.

The family patriarch, Fred Koch, was the son of a Dutch immigrant. He grew up in Texas, where his father ran a newspaper, and he studied chemical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. According to the family's accounts, he developed an improved method for converting heavy fuel into gasoline in his first company, but the business was imperiled by patent lawsuits.

As a result, Fred Koch sought work in the Soviet Union, where he helped Stalin's government build oil-processing units in 15 refineries. His experience in the Soviet Union, which he described as a "land of hunger, misery and terror," left him a staunch anti-communist. In 1958, Fred Koch would become one of the founders of the John Birch Society, which advocated for limited government and raised alarms about a communist infiltration of American society.

By all accounts, Frederick, also known as Freddie, was uninterested in the family's oil business. Unlike all his brothers, who all attended their father's alma mater, MIT, Frederick graduated from Harvard and the Yale School of Drama. Frederick is best known today as an art patron and collector.

Charles, the No. 2 son, was groomed from a young age to take over the company, and became chairman and CEO of Rock Island Oil and Refining in 1967. He has overseen the company ever since and renamed the firm Koch Industries in 1968 to honor his father.

Charles Koch, 79, is best known to most Americans for his heavy investments in policy and political groups that advance his free-market agenda, such as The Cato Institute, the libertarian think tank he helped found in 1977.

David and Bill Koch, the 74-year-old twins, are the youngest.

David is Koch Industries' executive vice president and Charles' close ally in political and policy ventures. In 1980, David Koch sought the vice presidency as the Libertarian Party's nominee, but today considers himself a Republican and was among the delegates to the GOP's 2012 national convention in Tampa.

He serves as board chairman of the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, the charitable arm of the network's main grass-roots advocacy organization. He's also well known for his support for the arts and cancer research, contributing \$1.3 billion to those causes.

Bill Koch founded his own energy company, Oxbow Carbon, and gained fame as a yachtsman, winning the America's Cup in 1992. He's also made news for his vocal opposition to a wind farm in the Nantucket Sound near his Cape Cod compound.

The family's business dynasty seems likely to continue. Charles' 37-year-old son, Chase, is president of Koch Agronomic Services, one of the company's fertilizer-producing divisions, and sits on Koch Industries' board of directors.