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Charles Koch Says His Partisanship Was a Mistake

At 85, the libertarian tycoon who spent decades funding conservative causes says he wants a final act building bridges across political divides

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Four days before this year's presidential election, Charles Koch—the voluble Kansas billionaire who has spent a fortune injecting his particular brand of prairie libertarianism into the American political debate—pauses at the other end of the line when asked if he will vote for Donald Trump or Joe Biden.

“That’s a very divisive question, because however I answer, that’s going to upset a bunch of people,” he says. “That’s why there’s a secret ballot.”

Mr. Koch, whom Forbes calls the 15th-wealthiest man in the U.S., says he isn’t interested in more division. At age 85, he says, he is turning his attention to building bridges across partisan divides to find answers to sprawling social problems such as poverty, addiction, recidivism, gang violence and homelessness. His critics are skeptical, noting that his fierce Republican partisanship over the years blew up a lot of bridges.

Mr. Koch has written (with Brian Hooks) a new book, “Believe in People: Bottom-Up Solutions for a Top-Down World,” which will be published on Nov. 17. It is part mea culpa, part self-help guide and part road map toward a libertarian America. Along the way, the book traces Mr. Koch’s life from hardheaded adolescent to student, engineer, industrialist, tycoon and political mastermind. The book suggests that he wants to add one final act: philosopher and, he hopes, unifier.

The key to successful, long-term movements? “Unite a diversity of people behind a common goal,” Mr. Koch says. “That’s our approach today.”

Mr. Koch is still overseeing Koch Industries, a multibillion-dollar conglomerate, and its 130,000 employees. He worked from home for a while when the pandemic began; he still avoids crowds and most public spaces, and wears a mask when he is around people.

His new book is the latest step in a yearslong process of rebranding (a word he doesn’t appreciate). Mr. Koch, it seems, doesn’t want to be forever known as a hard-driving partisan.

“You’ve probably seen all the names I’ve been called,” Mr. Koch says. He tells me to call him Chuckie.

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He grew up in Wichita, Kan., and was in and out of eight schools. His father, the steel-backed son of a Dutch immigrant who (according to Jane Mayer of the New Yorker) made money building Soviet oil refineries during the Stalin era, sent him to live for a year with an uncle in

rural North Texas after he was expelled from a military high school for drinking. When the young Mr. Koch wasn't in school, he was shoveling wheat in a grain elevator.

Mr. Koch attended MIT, where he learned about the second law of thermodynamics, which holds that entropy virtually always increases in a closed system. That laid the cornerstone for his brand of heterodox libertarianism, which has placed him at odds with Mr. Trump.

People are at their best when applying their specific talents to the problems they know firsthand, Mr. Koch writes. Tying people's individual strengths together can make an institution a force multiplier, but curtailing those talents in a top-down system leads to decline and disorder.

In Mr. Koch's telling, the reason for social progress and increased prosperity is simple: Billions of people have had the freedom to try to fail, invent and succeed. They have solved the problems in front of them and lifted society from the bottom up.

Mr. Koch applied that philosophy to Koch Industries, which he took over from his father when he was 31 and the company employed just 300 people. Its annual revenues today are around \$120 billion.

The problem, Mr. Koch says, is that such freedom is under constant attack by people who want to take control away from individuals and create top-down systems that stifle innovation. He rails against what he calls unnecessary licensing and government lobbying. (Koch Industries has spent more than \$100 million in lobbying over the past decade, according to federal records kept by the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan group tracking money in U.S. politics.)

Mr. Koch and his late brother David seeded the political landscape with conservative and libertarian ideas, then built an infrastructure to nurture them. Koch-aligned ventures fund more than 1,000 faculty members at more than 200 universities, helped bankroll think tanks such as the Cato Institute and the American Enterprise Institute, and supported the American Legislative Exchange Council (a nonpartisan organization of similarly minded state legislators) to write bills that were introduced and championed by Republican state lawmakers across the country.

Mr. Koch's influence increased in 2010 after the Supreme Court ruled in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* that corporations were exempt from restrictions on political spending. That controversial ruling brought a flood of new money into politics from wealthy individuals, including the Koch brothers, George Soros and Sheldon Adelson. The ruling also allowed nonprofits to more easily keep the sources of their funding secret, allowing so-called "dark money" to influence elections.

The Koch brothers' organization raised and spent billions of dollars, untethered to the limits of the campaign-finance system. The wave of money influenced policy areas from health care to environmental regulation, foreign policy and unionization. Critics warned that the Kochs were rigging the public debate to enrich their own bottom line by casting corporate self-interest as a new form of populism.

Mr. Koch disagrees and bristles at the notion that he wields too much influence. "When you look at countries that don't let everyone participate, those in power stay in power unchallenged," he says. "Instead of limiting certain people's ability to engage, we should do all we can to empower more people to get engaged."

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After President Barack Obama was elected in 2008 and the tea party (which pushed to slash federal spending) emerged, Mr. Koch threw his weight behind the new movement and its candidates. “We did not create the tea party. We shared their concern about unsustainable government spending, and we supported some tea-party groups on that issue,” Mr. Koch wrote in an email. “But it seems to me the tea party was largely unsuccessful long-term, given that we’re coming off a Republican administration with the largest government spending in history.”

Mr. Koch said he has since come to regret his partisanship, which he says badly deepened divisions. “Boy, did we screw up!” he writes in his new book. “What a mess!”

Mr. Koch is now trying to work together with Democrats and liberals on issues such as immigration, criminal-justice reform and limiting U.S. intervention abroad, where he thinks common ground can be found. He has partnered with organizations including the LeBron James Family Foundation, the American Civil Liberties Union and even a handful of Democratic state legislative campaigns. In 2019, he renamed the Koch network of about 700 donors as Stand Together.

Still, his political spending remains almost entirely partisan. Koch Industries’ PAC and employees donated \$2.8 million in the 2020 campaign cycle to Republican candidates and \$221,000 to Democratic candidates, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

Koch insiders say that it will take time to build trust with Democrats, some of whom would be happy to spurn a Koch donation and then raise funds around that rejection. Mr. Koch says he will continue to look for potential partners.

“I congratulate Joe Biden and Kamala Harris on their victory,” he wrote in an email. “I look forward to finding ways to work with them to break down the barriers holding people back, whether in the economy, criminal justice, immigration, the Covid-19 pandemic, or anywhere else. At the same time, I hope we all use this post-election period to find a better way forward. Because of partisanship, we’ve come to expect too much of politics and too little of ourselves and one another.”