

Brown: Private Benefactors Should Have No Say in University Research or Academia

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In 2017, the Charles Koch Foundation one-to-one matched a \$10 million donation made by the Eccles Foundation to establish the Marriner S. Eccles Institute for Economics and Quantitative Analysis. The new institute's mission was to "push the frontiers of knowledge through academic research and provide university students access to education in economics, game theory and econometric analysis."

Charles Koch and David Koch, colloquially referred to as the Koch brothers, are well known for their passionate lobbying of libertarian policies on every rung of the American political ladder. No locality is too small for the Koch brothers to invest their vast monetary and political resources into targeting. One such policy campaign was the strategic and well-funded dismantling of public transit projects all across the country, orchestrated by the Americans for Prosperity, an advocacy group funded by the Koch brothers. As reported by The New York Times, the organizers of Americans for Prosperity were armed with proprietary data analytics services and trained to efficiently cultivate anti-public transportation sentiment in cities where lawmakers were proposing public transportation initiatives. In 2015, they gave out \$50 gift cards at grocery stores around Salt Lake County in an attempt to change public sentiment surrounding a proposed 0.25% sales tax increase which would in part fund an expansion of UTA. Americans for Prosperity claimed that the 0.25% sales tax would cost each SLC resident 50 dollars a year in taxes, hence the \$50 gift cards.

The massively wealthy Koch brothers have spent tens of millions of dollars funding think tanks such as the Cato Institute, GOP super-PACs and million-dollar ad campaigns against Obamacare. In recent years, the Koch brothers have ramped up spending on higher education in an attempt to spread free-market principles throughout American academia. Some universities have even gone so far as to give the Charles Koch Foundation control over the faculty hiring in exchange for sizable grants.

In 2017, they decided to bet big on Utah universities by pledging to donate 25 million dollars to Utah State and 10 million dollars to the University of Utah. As reported by The Daily Utah Chronicle in August 2017, over 100 faculty, staff, students and alumni signed a letter opposing the grant. The letter claimed that there was "clear evidence that the foundation's explicit, strategic purpose is to build a 'network' of professors who will produce research that serves the ideological and policy aims of the Koch Foundation and to build a 'talent pipeline' of students supported by Koch-funded professors, institutes and research centers who will help advance the foundation's public policy and electoral goals." Mark Button, the chair of the U's Political Science Department and author of the letter, cited transcripts from a Charles Koch Foundation Donor Summit Meeting in 2014, "Leaders of the Koch Foundation... have made it clear that the aim of the Koch Foundation's widespread investments in higher education is to 'leverage science

and universities' for their specific public policy agenda." The letter was a serious indictment of the underlying purpose of the Koch grant, but to much disappointment, U officials responded by denying that any special privileges would be given to the benefactors.

Should Benefactors Dictate the Future of The U?

With the Koch brothers' pushing such an explicitly biased ideology, there is a real question as to why the U conceded to give the Kochs so much financial control over its grant.

The Los Angeles Times columnist Michael Hiltzik made the case that the "purchase" was to "balance a Marxist faculty [at the University of Utah]." The officials at the U claim that they are not on the hook of the Koch brothers because the agreement made an explicit call for academic freedom and allowed the budget and faculty to be controlled by the university.

It may not be explicit, but the Koch brothers still have influence over the new economic department. The 10 million dollar donation was split into eight annual payments, and contractually, future payments can be revoked at any point in time as per the agreement. Hiltzik pointed out that this will allow the Koch brothers to tacitly influence and pressure the department if they do not like the policies or faculty appointments that the department makes. If something strays too far from the agenda, all they have to do is threaten to pull funding.

Endowments, grants and donations power the U. Last year, the endowment pool was \$1.02 billion in assets. It is clear that the biggest benefactors at the U — such as Jon Huntsman Jr., The Eccles Foundation and the Koch brothers — have a massive influence on the university's future. Just how much influence they wield is unknown to the public. If departments and construction projects can be created or destroyed at the drop of a hat based on how the private donors feel about the direction of the project, there is little stopping them from extending their influence over how departments are formed, which faculty are employed, what is taught and what research is able to move forward.