

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

## Why David Brock Will Never Be as Successful as the Koch Brothers

Say what you will about the Kochs—at least they believe in what they preach.

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There is a leadership void on the left. And David Brock has wasted no time since the election trying to fill it.

A staunch ally of Bill and Hillary Clinton since his dubious conversion to liberalism in the early 2000s, Brock has spent the past few years running a host of Clinton-affiliated super PACs and nonprofits, including the purported media watchdog Media Matters. As the *New Republic* reported late last year, the conventional wisdom inside and outside of these organizations was that Brock expected that he would be rewarded when Hillary Clinton was elected president.

Her presidency was the *raison d'être* of these organizations, but her loss has not deterred Brock. Instead, he's spent the past two months in a flurry of activity. Brock has pledged to turn his site *ShareBlue* into the "Breitbart of the left." He has bragged about his archive of Trump opposition research, and claimed that his American Bridge PAC will "use everything at its disposal to hold [the Trump administration] accountable." He ostentatiously tried to make peace with Bernie Sanders and, by extension, the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. All of these efforts will culminate the weekend following the inauguration, when Brock will host more than 100 donors for panel discussions and strategy sessions about how to stop Trump.

If that sounds familiar, that's because it's self-consciously modeled after the summit Charles Koch held the weekend after Barack Obama was inaugurated in 2009. That summit, chronicled by Jane Mayer in the opening chapter of *Dark Money*, was enormously influential in setting the agenda for the next several years, resulting in pushback against Obama's stimulus package and the birth of the Tea Party movement. At that meeting, the Kochs and their incredibly wealthy buddies hashed out a strategy not just for defeating Barack Obama, but for achieving their own animating goals: Deregulation, privatization, and drastically lower taxes for corporations and the super-rich.

“We really aspire to be like the Kochs,” Brock told *BuzzFeed*, who first broke the story of the summit, which is called Democracy Matters 17. Brock acknowledged that another group of wealthy Democratic donors already exists—Democracy Alliance, whose donors include the billionaires George Soros and Tom Steyer—but Brock thinks that the DA has shirked its duty. The Kochs have been instrumental in building the GOP’s overwhelming advantages at the state and local level, and Brock likes what he sees. “The DA has veered away from politics,” he said. “This conference is openly political.”

Brock is clearly trying to rebrand a set of distressed assets—to make sure that the money spigot stays on now that he has failed in his primary goal of getting Clinton elected. Perhaps this wouldn’t matter so much if Brock could prove himself to be an effective string-puller and put Democrats back in power. Unfortunately for Democrats, Brock fundamentally misunderstands what the Koch network is and why it works. The program for the Democracy Matters 17 summit, obtained by the *New Republic*, shows that his budding Koch imitation is being built on a shoddy foundation.

For the past 35 years, the Kochs and their billionaire allies have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on elections, pushing candidates who push policies that will disempower unions, cut taxes and regulations for corporations, and other far-right, libertarian goals. They were instrumental in the Reagan Revolution, the Republican Revolution that swept into Congress in 1994, and the Tea Party wave that has shaped American politics since 2010.

But for the Koch network, elections are not the only thing. One word that has come up in a number of conversations about the Kochs I’ve had with Democratic organizers and others focused on GOTV efforts is “disciplined.” As Jane Mayer writes in *Dark Money*, their plan to remake America in their plutocratic image has taken decades, and it has involved the funding of a host of institutions that are not directly associated with political parties. Their movement—if you can call something led by a handful of billionaires as such—has been, above all, ideologically motivated.

The Kochs have funded an array of think tanks and organizations to advance their ideological agenda, including the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the libertarian magazine *Reason*, and the clickbait site *The Daily Caller*. They have also funded college institutes, lobbyists, and judicial activists.

For the Kochs, that agenda comes first and elections come second. Although they’ve made compromises with the political establishment in the past, they have been incredibly successful by maintaining discipline on the ideological front. As Mayer writes, the Kochs had a three-prong plan:

“The first phase required an ‘investment’ in intellectuals whose ideas would serve as the ‘raw products.’ The second required an investment in think tanks that would turn the ideas into marketable policies. And the third phase required the subsidization of ‘citizens’ groups that would, along with ‘special interests’ pressure elected officials to implement the policies. It was in essence a libertarian production line, waiting only to be bought, assembled and switched on.”

Judging by the agenda for the Democracy Matters 17 summit, which you can read below, Brock has no similar plan. As my colleague Clio Chang wrote last week, he certainly does not approach the level of ideological commitment that drives the success of the Kochs.

Instead, Democracy Matters 17 seems largely devoted to perpetuating the Clintonian brand of Democratic politics. There are panels devoted to assessing what happened in 2016, but they are staffed by old hands and political centrists. No one speaking on any of the panels worked with the Bernie Sanders campaign, whose wing of the party is conspicuously absent from the gathering. Instead, the path forward will be analyzed by Clinton veteran (and close Brock ally) James Carville; the flagrant opportunist and rumored Trump appointee Harold Ford Jr.; and Jon Cowan, the president of the centrist neoliberal think tank Third Way, which has pushed for deregulation and embraced Wall Street. Other speakers at the summit include Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel (under fire for his horrible handling of a police brutality controversy in his city), LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman, and Pizzagate victim James Alefantis.

Bernie Sanders's campaign is not entirely absent. Rep. Keith Ellison of Minnesota, who endorsed Sanders in the primary, will be there, but he'll be discussing the race to lead the Democratic National Committee with his opponent Tom Perez, in a panel moderated by Brock. Reading the agenda for Democracy Matters 17, you get the sense that the conclusion being drawn from the 2016 campaign is that we need more candidates like Hillary Clinton and that Democrats should embrace more conservative policies. This is not so much an ideology but a general election strategy. Where are the discussions of minimum wage, criminal justice reform, and universal health care?

Building a political action network based around elections rather than ideology is difficult. Elections have definitive end dates and are candidate-dependent, which means that it is hard to do consistent and sustained work. Being election-focused can also make candidates and parties appear untrustworthy in the eyes of voters, as they shift on issues and ideas based on public polling, rather than a desired set of outcomes. (Hillary Clinton's political career is evidence for this point.)

As the Koch network has shown, emphasizing certain ideological positions can also have the side-effect of helping you at the polls. The Kochs and their allies have been fixated on passing right-to-work laws in states in the Upper Midwest for decades, weakening the power of unions. Donald Trump's victory in states like Michigan and Wisconsin can be read as being tied to the passage of those laws.

But the Democracy 17 summit is not set up to push policies that will help Democrats win elections at the state and national level. Instead it's set up to raise money for Brock's groups, which will continue to operate as loosely defined political entities that push establishment Democrats at the cost of progressive policy that can benefit the lives of voters—and can win elections, given the proper infrastructure. Saying Democrats need a Breitbart or a Koch network is an elevator pitch to donors—it's venture capitalist shorthand. There's much at the summit to attract the interest of millionaires, but nothing to build a movement with.