

What Washington and the Media Still Get So Wrong About the Kochs

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“The New Koch Doesn’t Like Politics,” [blares the cover](#) of Friday’s Politico Magazine edition.

It’s a good cover, in that its D.C.-centric audience is likely to pick it up and take interest, but like nearly all reporting on Charles Koch, his brother and now his son over the past eight years, it gets the family — namely, their taste for politics — wrong.

That’s because Charles Koch, the father the son is painted as departing from, doesn’t like politics either. And any time spent with him, his captains or at the seminars he hosts makes this abundantly clear.

For decades, Charles has focused his energy on industry, academia and policy. Think tanks and academic workshops such as CATO, the Institute for Humane Studies, the Reason Foundation and George Mason’s Mercatus Center — as well as policy-focused groups like Citizens for a Sound Economy (later Americans for Prosperity and Freedom Works).

Involvement with electoral politics was limited to issue-heightening campaigns, such as his brother’s run against Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter as vice president on the Libertarian ticket. Politics “tends to be a nasty, corrupting business,” left-wing reporter Jane Mayer [reports](#) Charles as saying after the Libertarian Party’s 1-percent finish in the 1980 election.

And while his Manhattan brother, David, maintained giving to Republican candidates for the three decades following his Libertarian Party run, Charles steered clear of elections, instead helping to build a vast yet loose coalition of free-market-oriented outfits. Early meetings of his fundraising Seminar Network in 2003 focused on groups like CATO and Citizens for a Sound Economy, and were not even attended by David.

President Barack Obama changed this — for a time. The president’s aggressive policies on health care, taxes and regulation — which Charles viewed as statist — combined with a free-market, low-tax, anti-regulation moment in the Republican Party, convinced Charles and close advisers, including former economics professor and CSE President Rich Fink, that resources should be put toward defeating the president and his supporters in Congress.

The very expensive experiment, which counted both wins and losses and peaked in support for Republican Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign in 2012, is now largely considered a disappointment by Charles and his closest allies, not simply because President Obama won re-election, but because when Republicans gained power many of the limited-government ideas they ran on were ignored and sometimes even actively opposed. From balanced budgets to the Export/Import Bank, elected Republicans defected from Charles’s deeply held principles.

In 2016, when faced with the choice between a progressive Democratic and a Republican populist campaigning on tougher restrictions on international trade and the border, Charles's two-year foray into presidential elections — the second since 1980 — came to an end. Shortly after, the short experiment in broad support for Republican candidates did as well, replaced with a laser focus on politicians committed to classical liberalism.

“We’re going to be much stricter on if they say they’re going to be for these principles we espouse and then they’re not,” Charles told me and other reporters covering a July meeting of the Seminar Network. “I don’t care what initials are on the front or after somebody’s name. I’d like to find many more politicians who would embrace and have the courage to run on a platform like [ours].”

“Many of you watched in disgust,” Charles Koch Foundation President Brian Hooks said the same day, as a record-breaking budget was passed “by a Republican government ... We supported some of these guys!”

“People are taking us for granted,” Hooks told a room of high-dollar attendees. “This network has got to lead.”

The strategy, philosophy and priorities of Charles and his captains were reported as shifting massively in 2016 when they didn’t spend on the Clinton-Trump presidential election.

The same again in 2017 and 2018, when they strictly narrowed their preferences to candidates who aligned with their ideals. Similar headlines will undoubtedly run in the coming new year as well.

Charles Koch has never been defined by any passion for electing politicians to office. His focus — in conversation, at his speeches, in his writing, at the seminars he convenes, and for the great majority of more than four decades in philanthropy — has been on a combination of societal change and classically liberal ideas.

In the nine presidential elections since David’s 1980 third-party run, Charles poured resources into one. In the 20 national elections since his money was instrumental in funding the CATO Institute, reporters have characterized his congressional spending by four of them. The idea that his own son’s professed lack of passion for electoral politics represents some kind of break from the focus of the Koch network’s aims fits into a Republican-boogie-man narrative reporters have built around the family, but doesn’t fit at all into the actual lives of the men it seeks to characterize.

That isn’t to suggest that reporters shouldn’t cover Chase and his father’s activism, philanthropy and efforts to affect policy in this country. Or to suggest that huge swathes of Washington readers aren’t seriously interested — and personally invested — in how millions were spent this year and will likely be spent next. But when a man has had the impact Charles has had, and when his son is setting out on his own path, we have to do our best to understand their true motivations and aims. They won’t be going away any time soon.

“I’ve invested all these years, all this money, a good part of my life, and I’m gonna slow down when we’re right on the verge of breakthroughs, of drastically helping people improve their lives?” a then-81-year-old Charles incredulously asked me and the other reporters covering his January 2017 Seminar Network meeting in Palm Springs, California.

“The answer is no!”