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How the Leading Republican Candidate for Missouri Senate Seat Lost Koch Support

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WHEN HUNDREDS OF billionaire Charles Koch’s allies gathered for an elite summit at a luxury Colorado Springs, Colorado, resort in June 2017, one of the few Republican governors invited to court the high-net donors was a rising star from Missouri: Eric Greitens. A friend of then-Vice President Mike Pence, the new governor had proved himself as a champion of the national anti-union drive, signing a “right-to-work” law earlier in the year that Koch’s political arm, Americans for Prosperity, or AFP, had long advocated for. Before Greitens, Republicans couldn’t muster enough support to overcome a veto from former Democratic Gov. Jay Nixon, but Greitens delivered within one month of taking the oath of office. A charismatic former Navy SEAL and founder of a successful veterans charity who had never held political office before, he was making waves as a strong contender for future federal roles.

But Greitens soon fell from grace after facing investigations into two distinct crimes that he allegedly committed before becoming governor. He was accused of stealing a donor list from his veterans charity in 2015 as well as taking a nonconsensual, semi-nude photograph of a woman while she was restrained in his basement in order to blackmail her and coercing her into performing oral sex during the same year. Greitens acknowledged having an extramarital affair but denied all the accusations, though he ultimately resigned in May 2018 after making a deal with a local prosecutor to dismiss a felony charge against him. The GOP-led Missouri General Assembly also dropped impeachment proceedings it had begun.

After a couple of years out of the limelight, Greitens is now trying to reenter politics, running for the Senate seat being vacated by retiring Missouri Republican Roy Blunt. He’s portraying himself as a political witch hunt survivor like former President Donald Trump, dubiously claiming that he’s been fully exonerated, and polls show that Greitens is the leading candidate running in the crowded GOP primary. (Greitens points to evidence that the prosecutor engaged in some ethical misconduct and that his political enemies sought to engineer his downfall.) Most of Trump’s strongest allies, including Kimberly Guilfoyle, Steve Bannon, and Rudy Giuliani, have coalesced around Greitens, whose campaign has emphasized contesting the 2020 presidential election results and pledging to drive out Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., as Republican leader.

But this time, he's lacking the support of many of the right-wing megadonors he once had. For some powerful Republicans, like talk show host Hugh Hewitt, he could be a vulnerability during the general election for what otherwise should be a safe red seat. "I'm afraid you'll be Todd Akin 2.0," Hewitt said in a scathing interview with Greitens last March, referring to the late Republican legislator who lost Missouri's 2012 Senate race to Democrat Claire McCaskill. (When a TV host asked Akin his position on abortion in cases of rape, the candidate bizarrely said: "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down.") McCaskill blasted him in campaign ads, winning the Senate seat handily. Hewitt questioned Greitens about his own scandals: "What are you going to do when the ads attack you of half-rape?")

Those who've wavered on Trump are hoping to unseat Greitens as the top contender by propping up the second-ranked GOP candidate, Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt. In Schmitt, they've found an experienced lawmaker who can keep up with both the growing anti-establishment instincts of Republican voters and shifting concerns of "free market" donors. So far, having learned from 2016, megacontributors dead set against Greitens have bucked Washington insiders like Missouri GOP Reps. Vicky Hartzler, an anti-abortion Christian, and Billy Long, who has Kellyanne Conway on his team and is friends with Trump but ranks fourth in the polls.

A PREVIOUS CHAMPION of Greitens, the Koch-led AFP is spending more money than any other candidate in the 2022 midterms to make sure that Schmitt is the Republican nominee. He is the only nonincumbent endorsed by the group's super PAC, AFP Action, which has doled out more than \$600,000 in independent expenditures to promote Schmitt since backing him in November, according to recent Federal Election Commission records reviewed by The Intercept. The group has spent only a few thousand dollars on other candidates, like Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah.

In some ways, AFP's embrace of Schmitt is not surprising given their shared policy goals. As a state senator from 2009 to 2017, Schmitt pushed to cut franchise and corporate income taxes and leveraged a rare alliance between criminal justice reformers and tax cut enthusiasts to pass legislation limiting traffic fines following the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson. He also showed a commitment to the free trade policies sought by AFP when he supported a failed plan for a St. Louis cargo hub to support trade with China. Now, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Schmitt's core issue is fighting mandates; he sued over the federal government's vaccine requirements for large businesses and contractors. It's a core issue for Koch too: AFP has lobbied to reverse the requirements, and the billionaire has sponsored an academic campaign against vaccine and mask mandates and shutdowns.

The fight over mandates allows Schmitt to defend the AFP agenda while also gaining credit as a radicalized crusader channeling the frustrations of GOP voters. He has used his state office to take legal action against local municipalities and schools for taking their own steps to curb the pandemic. His continued threats to inundate authorities with lawsuits led two counties to accuse him of unleashing a "campaign of litigation terror." Schmitt also tapped into Americans' heightened antagonism toward China when he filed a lawsuit in 2020 against the Chinese Communist Party, under dubious jurisdiction, for allegedly failing to contain the

spread of Covid-19. On Fox News, Tucker Carlson called him “one of so few officeholders who are standing up for the citizens of this country.”

AFP also appears willing to overlook key differences with Schmitt. Whereas the group urged Congress to certify the 2020 election for President Joe Biden, Schmitt joined Texas’s lawsuit challenging the results. He has also supported antitrust lawsuits against Google, while AFP has defended Big Tech. Although Schmitt voted with the group as a state senator in favor of the prized “right-to-work” law, he did have a reputation as being friendlier to the labor movement, David Cook, president of United Food and Commercial Workers’ Missouri chapter, told The Intercept.

AFP’s dedication to Schmitt is all the more stinging due to Koch’s past support for Greitens. In addition to their alignment on anti-union policies, the billionaire propped him up with cash. A Koch-linked nonprofit, the Seminar Network, funneled \$50,000 to a Greitens-tied dark-money group, A New Missouri. The secretive group, which collected more than \$6 million in 2017, drew much criticism from Greitens’s colleagues, especially after he notoriously blasted Jefferson City politicians for alleged corruption. In 2020, the Missouri Ethics Commission fined A New Missouri for campaign finance violations but did not find Greitens personally responsible.

BEYOND AFP ACTION, Schmitt has the backing of a super PAC called Save Missouri Values that’s dedicated specifically to promoting his candidacy. The group has gotten hundreds of thousands of dollars from high-net Missouri donors like Rex Sinquefield and the Keinath family, both of whom have, like Koch, shown an allegiance to the big business faction of the Republican Party establishment. They sponsored former Speaker of the Missouri House Catherine Hanaway, a “right-to-work” advocate, against Greitens in the 2016 primary for governor and backed experienced politicians against Trump in the presidential race. Sinquefield was willing to get on board with the “drain the swamp” candidate on the national level once he became the GOP nominee but not the outsider railing against corrupt legislators in Missouri’s capital, where Sinquefield seeks to influence tax and school choice policies.

August Busch III, another high-net Missourian, was similarly willing to eventually get behind Trump despite falling into the group that now wants the more experienced, AFP-aligned candidate in Washington. In 2016, he did not donate to Trump in the primary or general election, though he gave the newcomer in Missouri a chance after he won the Republican nomination. Now Busch has switched, donating hundreds of thousands to Trump’s 2020 reelection campaign but ditching the candidate most tied to the former president’s network and brand. He gave \$250,000 to the Schmitt-linked Save Missouri Values.

In a twist, Schmitt is also the preferred candidate of Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel, who otherwise was a fervent proponent of the Trumpian takeover of the Republican Party in 2016. Thiel’s decision to give \$250,000 to Save Missouri Values may have less to do with the ideological direction of the GOP and more about his close ties to Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., who has bad blood with Greitens. As Missouri’s attorney general in 2018, Hawley called on the ex-governor to resign and referred to the assault allegations against him as “impeachable.”

Missouri businessperson David Humphreys previously gave millions of dollars to Hawley too but has withdrawn from all campaign donations, including in the primary for Missouri's Senate seat, amid far-right shifts in the Trump era. An activist on the libertarian Cato Institute's board who cheered the "right-to-work" law, Humphreys backed Greitens in the 2016 general election but called on him to resign when the criminal allegations arose. He also ended contributions to in-state candidates after the General Assembly passed a law in 2019 banning abortion at eight weeks of pregnancy and broke his sponsorship of Hawley after the January 6, 2021, riots during the certification of the presidential election. Unlike Koch and Sinquefield, he's no longer invested in political campaigns to shape the Republican Party's direction.

THE MOST ARDENT promoters of Trump's GOP takeover have stayed loyal to Greitens. Billionaires Richard Uihlein and Bernie Marcus each spent tens of millions of dollars to help Trump's presidential campaigns. Ahead of the 2022 primary, Uihlein has given \$2.6 million to TEAM PAC and Marcus has contributed \$1 million to Missouri First Action, two independent expenditure groups fighting to deliver Blunt's seat to Greitens.

The two megadonors are longtime supporters of Greitens; they spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to back his primary and general election campaigns for governor. When Missouri held a referendum on the "right-to-work" law in 2018, Uihlein contributed more than \$500,000 to Freedom to Work, which sought to safeguard Greitens's signature policy.

More recently, Uihlein and Marcus have found a shared agenda with Greitens in a crucial issue for Trump: contesting the 2020 presidential election outcome. Since announcing his run for Senate, Greitens has traveled to Arizona twice to call on elected officials to decertify the results. Meanwhile, Uihlein reportedly donated nearly \$4.3 million to the Tea Party Patriots' PAC; the conservative group took part in the January 6, 2021, "March to Save America" rally before the storming of the U.S. Capitol that day. Marcus also has given to Turning Point USA, which helped organize the rally, though he acknowledged Biden's victory.

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The two megadonors have also funded another 2020 election-denying Trump loyalist in the GOP primaries for Senate: Ohio's Josh Mandel, the state's former treasurer who has consistently ranked first in the polls. In the competition to succeed retiring Republican Sen. Rob Portman, Uihlein and Marcus again are divided from Thiel, who's backing author J.D. Vance, previously a Trump critic who's now trying to prove his loyalty to the ex-president. Neither candidate has been willing to pledge opposition to McConnell, though.

By backing Greitens in Missouri, Uihlein and Marcus are signaling a willingness to go to bat with the McConnell-driven Republican Party. Marcus previously indicated his frustration with the leader's failure to deliver GOP priorities in the Senate when he met in 2017 with Bannon, a longtime foe of McConnell who urged the billionaire to sponsor primary challenges against incumbents. Still, they're not all-in with Bannon, who favors former Ohio Republican Party Chair Jane Timken in that state's primary. And neither has gotten involved in Alaska, where Trump has endorsed the election-denying, McConnell-opposing Kelly Tshibaka's primary challenge against Sen. Lisa Murkowski, who voted to convict Trump during his second impeachment hearing.

Although Greitens has millions of dollars from Uihlein and Marcus's super PACs, his campaign has raised about half of the nearly \$2 million Schmitt's campaign took in during the first nine months of 2021. Both candidates have received a greater share of large-dollar donations, though most of Schmitt's contributors live in Missouri whereas Greitens's mostly come from out of state. Greitens's coffers may also suffer depending on the outcome of a recent FEC complaint from the Campaign Legal Center, which alleges that his Senate campaign has unlawfully spent more than \$100,000 from Greitens's gubernatorial campaign account. And neither Schmitt nor Greitens has as much in the bank as Hartzler, though a chunk of her money on hand comes from her House campaign account.

The question now is how forgiving Missouri voters will be of their charismatic former governor, who briefly brought the state's conservatives national stardom. Despite the fact that the "intelligentsia of Jefferson City was willing to throw fuel on the fire" when the allegations arose, as former Missouri House Speaker Tim Jones put it, Greitens kept his core supporters. There were people who "absolutely enjoyed his style and, frankly, the policies he was pursuing." Greitens first came onto the political scene "like a phoenix," Jones said. He may well rise from the ashes again.

Correction: January 21, 2022

Josh Mandel was formerly treasurer, not attorney general, of Ohio.