



Who are the Koch brothers and how did David Koch help shape conservatism in America?

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The Koch family announced on Friday morning that David Koch, the 79-year-old former Koch Industries executive and conservative political activist, passed away. The billionaire had been dealing with declining health and stepped down from his role in the family's operations in 2018.

David and older brother Charles, 83, together used millions of dollars to co-pilot a massive movement that has shaped conservative politics. Their brand of limited government and free-market capitalism is a staple of how they have shaped contemporary conservatism, according to author Christopher Leonard.

Leonard's recently released book "Kochland: The Secret History of Koch Industries and Corporate Power in America" details the Koch brothers' hand in stirring climate change denial, bolstering corporate influence on politics and overall pushing the Republican Party to be more conservative.

"David and Charles Koch have been patiently reshaping the Republican Party and conservatism in America since at least the 1970s," Leonard told USA TODAY. "To do that, they've built a political influence machine that is unrivaled in America."

Koch Industries

The Koch brothers took what started as an oil company founded by their father Fred Koch, who himself was anti-Communist right-wing figure, and multiplied its already established wealth and international reach into the multi-billion dollar conglomerate it is today.

In the '80s and '90s, a feud between the four sons of Fred Koch over control of the company ended in an alliance between Charles and David to buy out the other two, leaving them with a majority share of the oil, chemical and textile conglomerate.

It was the second-largest privately held company in the country as of 2018, making David before his death and Charles worth about \$60 billion each, Forbes estimated in 2018.

The massive wealth generated from the company is what allowed the Koch brothers to build their network of conservative donors.

The conservative empire

The Koch brothers are responsible for the creation and funding of right-wing policy efforts and a range of foundations.

Among them is the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, which mobilizes over 700 donors, who each give at least \$100,000 per year to moving voters and policymakers on issues such as tax cuts and the appointing of conservative judges in federal courts and the U.S. Supreme Court.

Among many other conservative groups, the Koch brothers were once shareholders in the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank that advocates for limited government.

In 1980, David Koch unsuccessfully ran as the Libertarian Party's vice presidential nominee.

The Kochs and the Republican Party

The Kochs are among the biggest influencers of American conservatism along with the Republican Party itself. Yet the Kochs have been vocal against the presidency of President Donald Trump.

The Republican Party came down hard on Charles Koch last year after he showed signs he was drifting from the GOP.

"Some groups who claim to support conservatives forgo their commitment when they decide their business interests are more important than those of the country or Party," RNC chair Ronna Romney McDaniel said.

A Koch network spokesperson said "Just as we have in the past, we will work together with the president, elected officials and others where we agree. And, where we disagree, we will do so in a civil way."

Charles Koch later signaled he wanted independence from the party altogether.

Leonard explained the rift between the Kochs and Trump:

"The Koch network is seeking to maintain this idea that Republicans stand for limited government, free markets and open trade, whereas Trump is trying to push it toward America first, nationalism, pro-middle class interventions in the market," he said.

Yet some Trump policies and positions have been wins for the Kochs. For example, Leonard writes in his book that the Koch network was instrumental in the growth of climate change denial that continues to shape conservative policy.

Life and Legacy

David and Charles Koch became two of the most powerful men in U.S. politics and business.

"When you put all of these components into action on Kochs' chosen priority, you can see why this company not only influences our public policy but in some cases writes our public policy," Leonard said.

But David Koch stepped down from the Koch Foundation and its associated political arms in 2018 due to his declining health. The fact is, Leonard said, Charles Koch was always the driver behind it all, the brain behind the operation, while David was more inclined to be the public face of their movement.

It is "such a sad day" for those in the Koch family that remain after David's death, Leonard said.

"But I think the fact is David Koch's passing will have very extremely limited operational or strategic impact on Koch's political activities or the company," he said. "The Koch network is going to continue pursuing the course that Charles Koch lays out for it."