

MEMORANDUM

TO: American Bridge 21st Century
FROM: Garin-Hart-Yang Research Group
DATE: September 4, 2015
RE: Focus Groups on the Koch Brothers and the 2016 Election

From August 13 to 19, 2015, Garin-Hart-Yang conducted six focus groups among the following:

- **Des Moines, IA:** Non-college-educated white swing voters, age 40 and over and 21- to 34-year-old swing voters
- **Tampa, FL:** College-educated white swing voters, age 40 and over and 21- to 34-year-old swing voters
- **Las Vegas, NV:** 36- to 50-year-old and 21- to 34-year-old Latino voters

Key Takeaways

- A significant portion of voters we spoke to are largely unfamiliar with the Koch brothers. However, those that do know who they are tend to believe they are self-interested—and when provided with only a bit of information, those who previously were unfamiliar with them say the same.
- The concept of a candidate seeking funding from the Koch brothers and their affiliates is an immediate turnoff—the prevailing perception being that these candidates are “bought and paid for” by the Kochs and that, if elected, they inevitably would return the favor somehow.
- Specific elements of the Koch ideological agenda are highly concerning, and associating candidates with the Koch brothers raises concerns about each candidate’s own character.
- Koch-backed efforts such as Generation Opportunity and the LIBRE Initiative (to bring millennial and Latino voters, respectively, into their fold) are easy to discredit, as younger voters and Latinos generally view them as fraudulent once they discover who is behind them.

Summary of Findings

It is evident from our six focus groups that the Koch brothers can be an effective tool not simply due to their own positions—which are largely perceived as egregious—but because they fit easily into a larger narrative of complaints and anxieties about our political system that is already deeply engrained. We heard at the outset of our groups that voters by and large think the political system is broken. When asked to rate how well the political system works for “people like you” (on a scale of zero to 100), the vast majority place their rating below a 50, with the average rating hovering around a 36. Voters express the feeling that the system is rigged on behalf of special interests and the wealthy—putting hardworking, middle-class people like themselves at a distinct disadvantage.

While many voters have never heard of the Koch brothers—or know the name vaguely, but do not know many specifics—it is clear that to know them is to dislike them. Among those who initially know enough about the Koch brothers to rate them, the majority say their feelings toward them are somewhat or very negative. When asked why, the reasons are not so much about their ideology or political agenda, as they are around the idea that they are associated with big business and oil, that they are “selfish,” or that they have been known to “buy” elections. And when provided with a succinct description of who the Koch brothers are and what they stand for—not dissimilar to what can be found easily in the public domain—nearly every respondent across the six focus groups assigned them a favorability rating of -4 or -5 (on a scale from -5 to +5), calling them “bullies” and “elitists” who are out to line their own pockets. The immediate perception is that they support policies that make their own lives easier, such as tax breaks for corporations and the wealthy, but that directly hurt everyday Americans, such as cutting Pell Grants and entitlement programs.

When asked about a hypothetical candidate who is funded by the Koch brothers—even before we handed out a news article detailing one of this cycle’s Koch-sponsored confabs, or showed a clip from the *Daily Show* in which John Stewart mocks the practice—participants had a clear sense that there is a transactional nature to accepting Koch money. Most feel that the Kochs and their allies would not donate such tremendous sums to a candidate without at least the expectation of something in return; phrases such as “*you scratch my back...*” came up frequently. A handful of participants view the chase for Koch money more as an unfortunate side effect of a broken system; they surmise that certain candidates may not actually buy into the Koch ideology, but feel forced to pander to them to secure the level of funding necessary to survive in our outrageously expensive national elections. However, most participants feel that these candidates, if elected, actually *would* follow through with implementing at least some of the Kochs’ wish list, calling them “corrupt,” “bought,” and “beholden.” They provided a host of colorful, telling images to describe a candidate who takes Koch money, the most common of

which was that of a malleable puppet, its strings being pulled by the Kochs. (We also heard words such as “programmed” and “groomed,” and Latino participants offered the Spanish words for “beggar” and “sell-out.”) There is a pervasive sense that the usual paradigm of people donating money to candidates they like has been flipped on its head; instead, these candidates are willing to *become* whatever the Kochs want in exchange for money. And whether voters think the candidates actually buy into the Koch agenda or think they are just doing it for the money, the act of going before them and “auditioning” is viewed as a rather deplorable spectacle, eliciting responses ranging from concern to outright mockery.

Participants also were given a wide-ranging list of issue positions taken by the Kochs and their affiliated organizations, based largely on legislation they have lobbied for or against in the past. Nearly every item tested was met with very negative reactions, some with outright disbelief (pointing to a need to ensure that any attack on them seems credible). In fact, on a zero-to-10 scale, with a 10 meaning that the item raises “very major concerns,” only two items out of the 15 tested scored below an average of 8.5 (those on immigration and guns). The top-testing item overall was about healthcare; participants reacted harshly to proposals such as eliminating cost controls for prescription drugs, which would hit their own pocketbooks directly, while older participants were especially cool to the idea of curtailing or privatizing Medicare (and Social Security).

Throughout the groups, two of the items that generated the most discussion are those on the environment and on women’s rights, both of which were especially potent among millennials. On the former, participants readily made the connection back to Koch Industries, pointing out that their positions on the environment (e.g., rolling back environmental standards and giving tax breaks to oil companies) would boost the Kochs’ own bottom line while sacrificing the greater good, thus reinforcing the perception that they are self-serving. However, on issues such as veterans or women’s rights—where any direct benefit to the Kochs is less clear—it will be important to highlight their extreme, right-wing ideology or to tie them to schools of thought outside the mainstream. In fact, even participants who came in telling us they believe in limited government reacted adversely to many of these items, saying that government is necessary in certain cases (e.g., in providing disaster relief or supporting public safety), and that the Kochs had taken their small-government ethos too far. Finally, Latinos put a lot of emphasis on the issue of education, as participants framed cutting college loans and shifting money from public to private schools as part of a wider socioeconomic divide that they find especially troubling.

Additionally, we found that using localized examples as proof points helped heighten the salience of these broader ideological issues, making them more tangible for people. For example, a hit related to public education specifically in Nevada helped deepen the education attack for our Las Vegas participants, while an

item related to Georgia-Pacific's actions in Florida bolstered the perception that the Kochs are out for themselves and bad for the environment—especially given that many Tampa participants had not known that the ubiquitous paper company is owned by Koch Industries.

Furthermore, while voters already suspect that any candidate who takes Koch money will be in their pocket or indebted to them in some way, the specific attacks we tested on Republican presidential candidates—Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, and Scott Walker—provided valuable evidence to confirm their suspicions. While participants were turned off by some of Rubio's issue stances, specifically his opposition to renewables and support for swapping property taxes with sales taxes, the hits we presented on Bush and Walker that tied them specifically to the Kochs (Bush on Georgia-Pacific, Walker on a Koch-backed asbestos bill) were especially effective. While it was already clear that the Koch brothers' own image is easily tarnished, this section confirmed the notion that Koch-centered messages are effective in a more relevant task: raising concerns about the candidates themselves. Our power to show that these candidates *already* have chased after Koch money or toed the Koch line in other ways says a lot to voters about their character and priorities, and suggests that they will be willing to continue doing so in the future. (By contrast, the fact that the Kochs already oppose Hillary Clinton was a positive, suggesting to voters that they see her as a legitimate threat to their agenda.)

Finally, we found that it was relatively easy to pull back the curtain and call the Kochs' bluff on Generation Opportunity and the LIBRE Initiative. While some in the groups were at least curious about the vague, innocuous-seeming Facebook ads we showed them, the knowledge that the groups sponsoring the ads are Koch-funded was enough to discredit them. Both millennials and Latinos saw these efforts as a disingenuous, even duplicitous way to get their support. And when presented with the positions that these organizations actually take, it was clear that they are not in line with the constituencies they are trying to attract. Younger voters were especially turned off by opposition to student loans and federal aid for college, while Latino voters were angered by LIBRE's position on DACA and by Koch-backed efforts to take money away from community colleges.