

# It Makes No Sense to Vilify the Kochs While Venerating FDR

The Koch Brothers [recently announced](#) a \$21 million anti-poverty program in Dallas, designed to reduce gang violence and encourage young entrepreneurs. But their efforts to end poverty are unlikely to earn credit from progressives, who frequently demonize the family. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid routinely blasts them for “[crooked works](#)” and “[nefarious actions](#).” And when Charles and David Koch donated \$100 million to New York-Presbyterian Hospital, leftists [demanded](#) (unsuccessfully) that the hospital return the gift.

## Unlikely Alliances

The Koch brothers have spent at least \$1.5 billion [working to advance](#) traditionally progressive causes. They have funded public television, museums, and hospitals. They [contributed](#) \$25 million to the United Negro College Fund, the nation’s largest minority education group. The donation offers scholarships and support for historically black universities.

Politically, the Kochs have pushed for criminal justice reform. The brothers worked with Van Jones on his [Cut50 project](#), which aims to cut America’s incarcerated population in half over the next ten years. The Kochs have [partnered](#) with the American Civil Liberties Union and the Center for American Progress to reduce prison populations and enact more humane criminal sentencing. And in 2011, the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers [gave](#) Charles Koch its annual Defender of Justice award.

But criminal justice reform is far from the only progressive

cause the Kochs have embraced. They publicly oppose [corporate tax breaks](#) and subsidies—including the ethanol subsidies that boost their bottom line.

In spite of this, many progressives disdain the Kochs as far-right extremists. On his Senate website, Bernie Sanders [claims](#) that the goal of these “right wing billionaires” is to “repeal every major piece of legislation...that has protected the middle class, the elderly, the children, the sick, and the most vulnerable in this country.” The Koch’s high-profile efforts to help the most vulnerable population in the nation, those victimized by the criminal justice system, receives no mention.

### **The Left’s FDR Problem**

But while many progressives lambast the Kochs, they turn a blind eye to actions perpetrated by fellow Democrats. Nowhere is this more evident than in their veneration of the most famous Democratic president of the 20th century, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

FDR consistently perpetrated human rights abuses. His administration herded 122,000 Japanese citizens into internment camps. While defenders claim that he was motivated by a desire for public safety, he was equally driven by [basic distrust](#) of those with Japanese blood. As Hitler rose to power, FDR’s State Department [cut refugee migration](#) to the United States by 75 percent and barred Jewish refugees who still had close relatives in Europe. This is as ruthless a treatment of refugees as anything ordered by President Trump.

The 32nd president also used the [FBI to spy on](#) his political opponents, ensuring that he remained in power. When the Supreme Court struck down his policies, he threatened to [flood the Court](#) with six new justices more amenable to his will. These undemocratic tendencies were symptomatic of an autarchic personality; as Timemagazine [notes](#), FDR was, “intrigued by

Stalin's autocratic style and admired him as a man who, to lift up his nation, was not afraid to knock heads."

FDR may have been progressive economically, but his social policies were ruthless. In many ways, he was less of a "leftist" than the Kochs.

## **Black and White Thinking**

Progressives vilify the Kochs for the same reason that many venerate FDR: politics encourages black and white formulations. Prominent Democrats [lambast](#) the Kochs as ill-intentioned billionaires, and the specter of the Kochs has [played heavily](#) in Democratic fundraising attempts. Fear motivates, and boogeymen inspire fiercer opposition than the complicated reality of the Koch brothers.

Similarly, Democrats may turn a blind eye to FDR's anti-progressive actions because they don't wish to tarnish one of their own. FDR's economic policies owe much to fascism: Roosevelt [admitted](#) that he was, "deeply impressed by what [Mussolini] has accomplished." Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration [stated it more directly](#): "The Fascist Principles are very similar to those we have been evolving here in America."

This similarity is easy to brush off if FDR is perceived as a leftist titan, because in the public eye progressives and fascists are diametrically opposed. It is harder to ignore when one accepts that FDR's record on human rights was only a few degrees better than Mussolini's.

This level of partisanship—demonizing those who donate to political opponents, while whitewashing political allies—is dangerous.

When Democrats scorn civil libertarian allies, they reduce the possibility of a cross-party partnership. The Kochs have worked successfully with the ACLU to publicize America's

overcriminalization and help those most in need. Future partnerships could accomplish bigger gains, but only if Democrats are willing to see the Kochs as potential comrades in arms.

Similarly, when Democrats embrace a president with a checkered human rights record, they suggest a lack of concern with civil liberties. The Obama administration [supported](#) civil asset forfeiture, the NSA's dragnet surveillance program, and the continued operation of Guantanamo Bay. His would-be successor championed tough-on-crime laws in the 1990s and [suggested](#) that many minority teens were "superpredators."

Democratic politicians are in danger of discarding the party's support for civil rights. The connection isn't causal. Idealizing FDR didn't cause Clinton to champion harsh sentencing. But repudiating FDR would be a symbolic reclamation of the Democratic Party's civil libertarian roots. If the Democratic Party refocused on civil rights, they could help millions who have been victimized by the government.

Many Democrats are enthusiastic about civil liberties and abhor partisanship. They should clarify their passion for helping those most in need by giving both FDR and the Koch Brothers the reputations they deserve.

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