

Koch network endorses Nikki Haley for president as it looks to stop Trump

By Dylan Wells and Hannah Knowles
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The powerful political network led by conservative billionaire Charles Koch endorsed Nikki Haley for president on Tuesday, as it looks to stop Donald Trump from being the Republican nominee.

Americans for Prosperity Action, the network's flagship political group, announced the group's first endorsement of its type in a presidential race. In 2015, the Koch network identified five approved presidential candidates, all of whom fell to Trump.

"AFP Action is proud to throw our full support behind Nikki Haley, who offers America the opportunity to turn the page on the current political era, to win the Republican primary and defeat Joe Biden next November," Emily Seidel, senior adviser for the group, wrote in a memo. "Haley will have the full weight and scope of AFP Action's unmatched grassroots army and resources to help her earn the support of Americans to become the next President of the United States of America."

The endorsement comes just under seven weeks before the first nominating contest in Iowa, with Trump in command of the race there and in other early states. Haley, the former U.N. ambassador and governor of South Carolina, has gained momentum in the Republican primary and has in many ways surpassed Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis as the top alternative to Trump. She is pitching herself as the most capable general election candidate, with some polls showing her outperforming rivals against President Biden.

But Trump is still far ahead in polls of the Republican race, leaving questions about how effective the move will be by the Koch network and other anti-Trump

entities entering the fray late in the race. Other influential Republicans seeking to stop Trump have weighed in on the race this fall, including Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, who endorsed DeSantis in recent weeks and has since appeared with him on the trail in support of his bid. New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu, another Trump critic, has suggested he will soon make an endorsement of either Haley, DeSantis or former New Jersey governor Chris Christie.

The Koch network endorsement comes after a splintering of the anti-Trump wing of the party, and acknowledgments by some of the most prominent groups in that space that few of their attacks against the former president have been effective.

While Haley has been ascendant in the Republican race, there are some doubts in the party about the strength of her ground operation, particularly in Iowa, where organizing for the Jan. 15 caucuses is seen as key.

Iowa Republican strategists said that AFP's sophisticated ground operation and political network could help close the gap and ease concerns around the campaign's capacity to build off her momentum in the state, but noted that DeSantis also has recently gained the endorsements of influential state surrogates.

The group promised to employ "the largest grassroots operation in the country and a presence in all fifty states," in support of Haley. While it declined to answer how much it will spend to help Haley, the super PAC spent more than \$69 million in the 2022 cycle, according to Federal Election Commission disclosures.

"AFP Action's endorsement will put thousands of AFP Action activists and grassroots leaders into the field — with a focus on the early primary states — knocking on doors and urging voters to support Nikki Haley," the memo said. "Additionally, in the coming days, we'll launch extensive mail, digital, and connected television campaigns to supplement those on-the-ground efforts."

Some AFP leaders had initially planned to make an endorsement by the end of the summer, and the presumptive candidate was DeSantis, according to people familiar with the decision-making process. But an opportune moment never came

as DeSantis's campaign struggled, said the people, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe private talks. The organization declined to comment on the deliberations.

Its decision is another blow to the Florida governor, who has been struggling to gain traction in recent months.

"Every dollar spent on Nikki Haley's candidacy should be reported as an in-kind to the Trump campaign. No one has a stronger record of beating the establishment than Ron DeSantis, and this time will be no different," DeSantis spokesman Andrew Romeo said in a statement.

Haley is out of step with the Koch network on some issues, including foreign policy. Seidel emphasized that no candidate would be 100 percent aligned and focused on its shared economic goals. She also praised Haley's "courage" in advocating for changes to entitlement programs, something that separates her from some rivals and especially Trump.

In a one-pager about Haley's policies, the group highlighted her focus on fiscal responsibility, tax reform and other economic policies, but did not mention her approach to foreign affairs. Haley has advocated traditional hawkish Republican positions, including support for continued U.S. military aid to Ukraine. Her overall approach has put her out of step with the Koch network, which in recent years has pushed for a less interventionist and expensive approach.

AFP Action framed its support as an effort to move on past the current political era, a message that aligns with Haley's calls for a new generational leader. Haley frequently points to the Republican Party losing the popular vote in seven of the last eight presidential elections as part of her call to leave behind baggage and negativity and focus on winning and electability.

The Koch network declined to endorse Trump as a presidential candidate in 2016 and stayed on the sidelines in 2020, in part due to frustration with his rhetoric and trade policies. The Tuesday memo referenced the "negative baggage" of Trump, said that the group's internal polling has Trump losing to Biden in a

general election and urged the field to consolidate so Trump does not win “because of a divided primary field” like he did in 2016.

Trump campaign spokesman Steven Cheung was critical of the endorsement and Haley. He wrote on X, formerly Twitter, that no amount of money will “stop the MAGA movement or President Trump from being the Republican nominee.”

Haley will now have greater access to the network’s influential donors, in addition to its organizational heft.

“AFP Action’s members know that there is too much at stake in this election to sit on the sidelines. This is a choice between freedom and socialism, individual liberty and big government, fiscal responsibility and spiraling debt. We have a country to save, and I’m grateful to have AFP Action by our side,” Haley said in a statement.

Seidel said in a Tuesday conference call with reporters that AFP made its endorsement decision late Monday night. The group is announcing its pick later than initially planned, underscoring the uncertainty that has hung over the race to become Trump’s main challenger — with DeSantis starting the year in the strongest position and Sen. Tim Scott (R-S.C.) at one point capturing growing attention from donors.

Seidel said that “up until this point there have been several candidates that could lead the country forward,” but that their data has now pointed toward Haley as someone who could both lead and win.

Michael Palmer, another senior adviser for AFP Action, noted Haley’s momentum in recent months in the polls and also pushed back on the DeSantis team’s longtime argument that he poses the greatest threat to Trump, in part because most of his supporters would otherwise drift to Trump.

Isaac Arnsdorf contributed to this report.