

You can't just decide that you and your rich friends are a social movement

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

August 3, 2015

Look at the American revolution, the anti-slavery movement, the women's suffrage movement, the civil rights movement... All of these struck a moral chord with the American people. They all sought to overcome an injustice. And we, too, are seeking to right injustices that are holding our country back.

That's none other than Charles Koch, speaking at the Freedom Partners retreat this weekend, which gathered GOP donors, presidential candidates, and elected officials at an oceanfront resort in California. The Koch brothers have grown wary of being perceived as a pro-rich people lobby, so they're working on it. [Matea Gold and James Hohmann report](#) that "the theme of helping the lower class was echoed throughout the weekend conference."

"The theme of helping the lower class"—that's a well-worded summary, because whatever shifts in tone or even substance exist here, it's important to recognize that the subject of the sentence remains: uncommonly rich, powerful people. Helping the lower class or whatever else they're doing, the only actors here are members of the elite GOP donor class—a rather odd thing to compare to a grassroots social movement.

This doesn't mean they're automatically wrong about everything, of course. The Freedom Partners event included an in-depth session on criminal justice reform. This is a positive sign, part of a groundswell of conservative interest in the issue. [Congress is pursuing bipartisan legislation](#). The days of inviolable "tough on crime" GOP orthodoxy may be behind us.

And even on core economic issues, I get that honest, legitimate differences of opinion exist about how best to get from here to there. The fact that I tend to disagree with the pro-business right about what sort of public policy might serve the common good doesn't mean that I care about the common good and they don't. We disagree, about complicated stuff. Fine.

But this kind of rhetoric from Koch—this invocation of the great social movements of American history—isn't offensive simply because his policy opinions don't match those of most of those movements' inheritors. It's offensive because social movements are created by large groups of ordinary people, not rarified groups of extraordinarily powerful ones. They're about the power of numbers—numbers of people, not dollars.

"We've got to do a much better job of understanding what matters most to people," Koch went on, "and then to demonstrate that a free society gives them the best opportunity of achieving that." Okay, but if the *we* that's demonstrating this is an elite group at a remove from the people themselves, that's not a social movement; it's just political messaging.

After all, the abolition and women's suffrage and civil rights movements didn't just "strike a moral chord with the American people." They *were* the American people. "They sought to overcome an injustice" that deeply affected them personally. That's very different from sitting at the tiptop of the socioeconomic heap and talking about how the policies you prefer for your own purposes will arguably help low-income people, too. Maybe you're right; I think you're wrong. What you definitely are not is a social movement.