

Big Tech Money Men Do Not Care About the Backlash

Meet the two political brawlers unleashing the AI industry's massive cash on the midterms.

Zac Moffatt, left, and Josh Vlasto. | Illustration by Brian Lutz for POLITICO

By [Calder McHugh](#)

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In the AI political universe, Zac Moffatt and Josh Vlasto are at the helm of the Death Star.

As the top political operatives at Leading the Future, they oversee a network of pro-AI industry super PACs and nonprofits that friends and foes alike describe as an aggressive, well-funded machine attempting to obliterate their opponents much like the Star Wars superweapon.

Their goal: to defeat candidates who support the strictest AI regulations and champion those who want to unleash the development of the industry. The PAC launched with over \$100 million in the bank from some of Silicon Valley's biggest names, including \$25 million checks from a16z's co-founder Marc Andreessen and OpenAI's president Greg Brockman.

Moffatt and Vlasto are little known to the public, but they're familiar figures in Washington and the world of political campaigns. They have decades of experience on the political battlefield and bring bipartisan bona fides; Moffatt's a Republican, Vlasto's a Democrat. And they're now guiding one of the biggest pots of money flowing into the midterms. Andreessen Horowitz, Marc Andreessen's venture capital firm, is [the biggest known donor in midterm politics](#) so far this cycle, and its single largest chunk of cash has been directed to Leading the Future.

How they choose to spend their mountain of money in the coming months and beyond is likely to have a major impact on the makeup of American government — and will determine how lawmakers grapple with a technology that has the potential to transform society and our way of life.

Their record so far is formidable.

Leading the Future's political arms — American Mission, which has operated in Republican primaries, and Think Big, which has operated in Democratic ones — have sent money to 30 candidates, and only one of their picks has lost so far. They've spent almost \$25 million and still have over \$30 million in cash on hand, according to an FEC filing through June 30. Their latest primary victories came Tuesday, when their preferred candidates won House GOP and Democratic primary races in Arizona.

Their strategy appears to include both carrots and sticks. Sometimes they wade into races with modest sums of money in a bid to build a bench of friendly lawmakers; but they've also signaled that they've got a bazooka ready to deploy against adversaries where needed.

Andreessen Horowitz, Marc Andreessen's venture capital firm, is the biggest known donor in midterm politics so far this cycle, and its single largest chunk of cash has been directed to Leading the Future. | Smith Collection/Gado Images via AP

Yet to hear Moffatt and Vlasto tell it, they're actually the little guy. If they're a political Death Star, they say, they're up not against a merry band of resistance fighters but an even bigger, more hulking ship.

"We get pointed to in a certain way — that it's David vs. Goliath," Moffatt told POLITICO Magazine earlier this month, in a rare sit-down interview with both operatives together. "I would argue we're the David in this situation."

That's because, according to Moffatt and Vlasto, they are up against a diffuse universe of nonprofits, political action committees, media outlets, lobbyists and other tech executives — a faction they spitefully referred to as "doomers." Many are associated with [effective altruism](#) and [the "AI safety" movement](#) that is an influential part of Silicon Valley; Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei is among its supporters. These AI safety advocates want stronger regulatory frameworks around AI development, and for the government to be much more involved in testing models, perhaps to the extent that Anthropic's [own success as a company](#) is key to preventing catastrophic risk scenarios around AI.

So far, Leading the Future's most high-profile political clash has been the Democratic primary for New York's 12th Congressional District, where they spent over \$8 million to defeat Alex Bores, a vocal proponent of AI safety legislation who was popular in effective altruism circles. Bores lost that race, but it may have been something of a pyrrhic victory for Leading the Future. All its spending sparked unwelcome chatter about the group in both tech and political circles.

During the Bores campaign, word circulated among Democrats on Capitol Hill that embracing serious AI regulation could have its costs — that pro-AI forces would "try to destroy you," according to one swing state Democratic political strategist granted anonymity to speak candidly. Some of Leading the Future's hardball tactics have also led prominent companies, including OpenAI, to [distance themselves from the PAC](#).

The political salience of AI is growing rapidly, and the issue is set to be a defining one for voters in the 2026 and 2028 elections. With Vlasto and Moffatt running the AI industry's richest political organization, they're now among the most important — and controversial — operatives in America.

Meanwhile, they're tasked with advancing the industry's agenda at a time when [only one in five Americans](#) have a lot of confidence in Big Tech, a new low in Gallup surveys. Moffatt and Vlasto are now beset by landmines on all sides. Can they find their way through? And what would it mean for the future of the country if they do?

Vlasto and Moffatt have each worked at some of the highest levels, and in some of the most stressful environments, of American politics.

After coming up as the press secretary for Sen. Chuck Schumer in the mid-2000s, who at the time had [a reputation for being particularly tough on staffers](#), Vlasto joined then-New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's office in 2011 as his deputy communications director. He rose through the ranks to become Cuomo's chief of staff before exiting in 2014.

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But he didn't completely leave Cuomo-land, returning as an informal adviser to the governor as scandals over sexual misconduct engulfed him in 2020. During a 2021 deposition with the New York Attorney General's Office, Vlasto was forced to recount an incident early on in Cuomo's first term in which the governor called him an "incompetent asshole" in front of staffers. And yet, befitting his role as a hard-nosed political strategist, he didn't take it personally. Certainly, he's heard worse.

"Albany is a tough place to work and get things done," [he told POLITICO Magazine last year](#).



Vlasto, right, walks with New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo in Albany, New York, on June 21, 2011. | Mike Groll/AP

When asked whether Vlasto's time in New York politics prepared him for his role at Leading the Future, former Rep. Max Rose (D-N.Y.), a longtime friend of Vlasto's ("since we both had more hair and didn't have dad bods," per Rose) and an LTF adviser, laughed.

"When you've dealt with stuff at that level, in that environment, you're ready for anything," he said.

This isn't Vlasto's first time working with the tech industry. Before the 2022 midterm elections, he became the chief spokesperson for the pro-crypto PAC Fairshake, where he worked with Chris Lehane, a longtime political strategist who worked for President Bill Clinton and who is currently the Chief Global Affairs Officer at OpenAI.

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Fairshake quickly became known as a [fierce political operation](#), and was at least partly responsible for ousting crypto opponents like former Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) in 2024. LTF was modeled directly on Fairshake's success, and Vlasto was approached about joining the pro-AI industry effort last spring. Lehane was involved in LTF's creation but is no longer engaged in day-to-day operations; Vlasto continues to work for Fairshake in addition to his LTF duties.

Not long after Vlasto, 44, officially started at the helm of LTF last August, the Trump administration griped about his work for New York Democrats.

"Any group run by Schumer acolytes will not have the blessing of the president or his team," an anonymous White House official [told NBC News](#). Many of LTF's top donors were also Trump allies, and the White House was apparently perturbed that the group would be working with and backing Democrats.

Vlasto shrugged off the episode as well as questions about whether his current position aligns him with Trump. Vlasto and Moffatt said they have no problem working with the Trump administration on AI policy and that LTF has a good relationship with the White House.

At least in part, that's because the Republican half of LTF is one of the most influential consultants in the country.

After also getting his start in New York politics — working as a cub staffer for then-Republican Michael Bloomberg's 2001 NYC mayoral campaign — and kicking around on other roles at the RNC and on campaigns, Moffatt started the conservative digital strategy shop Targeted Victory in 2009.

In the 2012 presidential cycle, his firm started doing freelance work for Mitt Romney, and Moffatt caught campaign manager Matt Rhoades' eye.

"When he's committed to something, he's all in," Rhoades said.

Moffatt, the Republican half of LTF, is one of the most influential consultants in the country. | Heather Diehl/Getty Images

Moffatt, 46, was an early adopter of putting more money and manpower into digital advertising and advocacy, a natural part of campaigns now that was not so obvious in 2012. Down the stretch of the presidential race, he [started getting plaudits for his work](#). But after the Romney campaign crashed, the conservative blogosphere started [spinning up conspiracy theories that Moffatt's firm Targeted Victory](#) was responsible for the failure of the Romney campaign's voter targeting program.

The accusations didn't stick, and former Sen. Cory Gardner (R-Colo.), who has known Moffatt since 2014, called Targeted Victory among the preeminent Republican consultancies in the country. (Stagwell, a global marketing and communications network, took a controlling interest in Targeted Victory in 2018; Moffatt became Stagwell's global chair of communications and advocacy in 2025.)

After decades of being ensconced in their own partisan corners, the two are now on the same side. And they say it hasn't been difficult to join forces.

"It's enjoyable to work with talented professionals and it's been easy to get aligned with Josh," said Moffatt. "What's lacked in other efforts in the past is an understanding of both worldviews."

And with AI still being defined as a political matter, Vlasto and Moffatt see an opportunity to put their stamp on both parties.

Moffatt and Vlasto's aim is far more ambitious than simply winning a few congressional races: It's to reshape the politics of AI and marginalize the technology's skeptics and its industry opponents.

The operatives declined to signal what races they're targeting next, but they've been careful about how they've deployed their funds and have done so in largely bipartisan fashion. The organization has thus far spent money in 19 GOP primary races and 11 in Democratic primaries. Their top five expenditures — and their only ones totaling over \$1 million — have all been on the Democratic side; the second-most amount of money they spent after Bores was \$1.45 million to support Jesse Jackson Jr., who lost his race in Illinois.

The candidates they've chosen to support range in age, background, style and politics, but they are united by a generally pro-business, often centrist attitude. Some, like Rep. Jay Obernolte (R-Calif.), are leaders in Congress on AI issues, but many have not taken a public position on the issue at all, something that LTF doesn't mind as they hope to help shape the debate themselves.

LTF has a questionnaire that prospective endorsees fill out, followed by a dialogue with a team at Build American AI, a 501(c)(4) that's a subsidiary of the group, followed by an endorsement decision. The

questions posed to candidates, according to Vlasto, are simple: “Is this someone who wants to see America lead in AI, wants to harness the benefits, wants to work thoughtfully and substantively on a structure that mitigates risk?”

Most of LTF’s candidates have been in non-competitive primaries — but they are betting these candidates will remember them and their agenda when they get to Congress.

“They don’t have the kind of power they would like to have in competitive races in order to score some points,” said Shaunna Thomas, a co-founder of the recently launched anti-LTF PAC Guardrails Alliance. Instead, she said, they are “buying congressional reps.”

LTF’s signature battle — and certainly their most expensive one so far — has been to oppose Bores’ candidacy in NY-12, to the tune of \$8.15 million.

The race, which took place on the Upper West and Upper East sides of Manhattan, played out in perhaps the most media-soaked district in the country, as well as one of the wealthiest. It became the second-most expensive House primary of all time, only beaten out by the race that saw Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) toppled earlier this year.

Bores ultimately came up short, losing to Micah Lasher, an Upper West Side assemblyman who was outgoing Rep. Jerry Nadler’s (D-N.Y.) chosen successor. But even with Bores’ defeat, the race has threatened to tarnish Leading the Future, at least to important stakeholders in the AI industry and the media.

Alex Bores addresses club members at a meeting of the Four Freedoms Democratic Club in New York, on Jan. 29, 2026. | Angelina Katsanis for POLITICO

Bores, with the help of consultants at the New York consultancy Slingshot Strategies, became something of a media darling. His campaign attracted profiles in [*POLITICO Magazine*](#), [*Rolling Stone*](#), [*The New Yorker*](#), [*WIRED*](#), [*Vanity Fair*](#), [*The New York Times*](#) and others.

As the lead author of New York State’s main AI safety law, the RAISE Act, Bores also became a cause célèbre for AI researchers in Silicon Valley and effective altruist allies, who eventually vastly outspent Leading the Future on the race. The Anthropic-aligned PAC Public First — LTF’s chief antagonist — alongside other PACs with similar goals directed nearly \$20 million in Bores’ favor. As the race went on, the money kept pouring in both for and against Bores, and the fight increasingly was portrayed as a battle over the future of AI policy and politics in the U.S.

LTF’s hard work to bury Bores was noticed by political allies and enemies alike.

“They made themselves the new AIPAC in a quarter of a cycle on the Democratic side,” said Alyssa Cass, a partner at Slingshot who led Bores’ campaign media effort, suggesting Leading the Future’s cash was as toxic as AIPAC money in Democratic primaries. “That’s an incredible accomplishment. Not everyone can do that. AIPAC spent 50 years doing what they accomplished.”

In response, Moffatt said that “the reality is more candidates than ever have raised their hands to engage with our organizations since the NY-12 [race] concluded, and we’ll continue to proudly put our name on everything we do.”

Leading the Future argues their spending was essential to slowing down Anthropic and its political arm, which wants government to take a greater stake in regulating the development of frontier AI models (in ways that critics argue often assists Anthropic’s own growth). “We were very transparent about why we were going in, about who Alex Bores was and his ties to Anthropic,” said Vlasto. “And then we ran and executed our strategy.”

Anthropic did not respond to a request for comment.

The race and its results have turned into something of a Rorschach test for how you think about the industry and its players. Bores’ defeat looks either like a moral victory or a critical loss for the AI safety movement. But many independent political professionals were convinced that the race left LTF looking bruised, that their seeming obsession with Bores and his funders rendered the organization unable to see the reputational damage they were doing to themselves.

After Bores lost, LTF politely declined opportunities to celebrate in the press. Don’t mistake that for being chastened.

The idea that their money somehow hurt their reputation and elevated Bores? “If you ignore facts, numbers, polling and the ultimate outcome, if you set aside those things, then yes, I buy that theory,” said Vlasto.

The messy world of AI politics has recently been infused with jaw-dropping amounts of money. But for years, it has also been [litigated online](#). OpenAI and a16z already have a lot of online enemies, and Leading the Future now finds itself at the center of many of those debates.

Earlier this year, [The Midas Project reported](#) on a series of “sockpuppet” meme accounts that were connected to Build American AI, the 501(c)(4) policy organization that is a branch of Leading the Future.

One such account, “@JonathanDoomer,” consistently posted memes with the kind of inflammatory anti-AI language that LTF frequently accuses its opponents of using. In essence, the meme account was a strawman for the arguments LTF felt the other side was making. @JonathanDoomer posted pro-China content, anti-innovation content, and also trafficked in [memes promoting violence](#) in order to stop the spread of AI. It was an explosive story in the world of AI, and in response, Build American AI sought to downplay the effort, saying that it wasn’t a “core part of their strategy.” That did little to quell tensions.

Nathan Calvin, the general counsel at Encode AI, a pro-AI safety policy organization, said their response was disturbing. “So, you’re saying any part of your strategy involves mocking disabled people and posting photos of AR-15s? Weird 4chan trolling is any part of your strategy?”

The problem for LTF, though, is not what their political enemies thought of the stunt. It’s what some of their friends think. Just two days before the *Midas Project* piece was published — and exactly [a month](#)

[after a WIRED piece](#) found a link between Build American AI and influencers spreading messages stoking fears about China — OpenAI released a statement saying “Groups that are advocating on AI should be clear about their policy views, be honest about whom they represent, and not use tactics like astroturfing that obscure the real choices facing policymakers and the public.”

Lehane himself [told reporters in May](#) that “we certainly weren’t so much into the tactics ... that Super PAC is an independent thing that runs on its own.”

Representatives at OpenAI and Lehane did not respond to requests for comment for this article.

Vlasto worked with Chris Lehane, a longtime political strategist who worked for President Bill Clinton and who is currently the Chief Global Affairs Officer at OpenAI. | Mandel Ngan/AFP via Getty Images

When asked about this episode, Vlasto and Moffatt pointed to their adversaries’ influence operation, describing an apparatus of shadowy spending and connections that have been built up over years.

“I think it’s shocking to people when they find out that the effective altruists and the doomers have been spending a decade-plus, with a billion dollars-plus spending, to get to this point,” said Moffatt. “We’re out there saying, ‘Enough, pay attention.’”

When Vlasto and Moffatt discuss the “doomer playbook,” which they do often, it has echoes of the notion popularized by Lehane some 30-years ago in [a 332-page memo](#) he wrote for Clinton describing a “vast right-wing conspiracy” looking to take down the president.

“As we said, it wasn’t a core part of the strategy, it was tongue in cheek,” Moffatt added, referring to the meme sockpuppet accounts. “But we see ourselves as an omni-channel media operation that needs to get through to a variety of different audiences, both in Washington and Silicon Valley.”

If Lehane and OpenAI were actively trying to distance themselves from Leading the Future, some employees at the company took that as a signal. Eight current or former OpenAI employees donated nearly \$250,000 to the Guardrails Alliance super PAC aimed at countering Leading the Future during the last FEC filing period.

“Tech billionaires such as Greg Brockman funded Super PAC Leading the Future to keep AI unregulated,” said Juan Felipe Céron Uribe, a research engineer at OpenAI. “I was very happy to learn that Guardrails Alliance is pushing back against LTF; my decision to donate to them was easy.” Guardrails has been backed by money from both the tech industry and from the sort of organizations more traditionally associated with the political left, like the Working Families Party, the American Association of University Professors and the American Federation of Teachers’ union.

As Chris Hyams, the former CEO of Indeed.com who serves as a founding member of Guardrails’ board and as a spokesperson, frames the fight: “It’s everyone against the billionaires.”

And Vlasto and Moffatt, according to Hyams, are on the side of the billionaires.

Just as the technology of AI is shifting rapidly, so are the politics.

“Being anti-AI regulation is just an absolute political loser, as demonstrated by Leading the Future tripping on their own rake,” said Rob Flaherty, a top Democratic political strategist who served in the Biden White House.

Moffatt and Vlasto insist Leading the Future is not anti-regulation and never has been — that what they want are common sense regulations that don’t hinder innovation. The group had largely backed the Trump administration’s push for a national framework of AI rules, though Congress’ penchant for inaction always made that unlikely to happen.

Still, a lot has changed over the last year amid a growing AI backlash. Leading the Future must now contend with an exploding political opposition to data centers, a growing anger on the social conservative right about children’s safety and a Trump administration that seems to vacillate between wanting unlimited AI development and [occasionally stopping it in its tracks](#). Results from [July’s POLITICO poll](#) show that 41 percent of Americans would oppose a data center being built within three miles of where they live, up from 28 percent in the January survey.

And LTF’s strategy has changed at least somewhat. With legislation in Congress going nowhere, they’ve shifted toward endorsing some measures in the states — a move that would have seemed unlikely based on their push to preempt state regulations with a federal law just a few months ago.

“You can both try to deter an increased ratcheting of regulation, as well as once you’ve fought and lost, you accept that’s become the new standard,” said Adam Kovacevich, the Founder and CEO of Chamber of Progress, a center-left tech industry policy coalition.

Many natural LTF allies are deeply concerned about the state of play in Washington.

“The Doomer cash (from philanthropists and corporations alike) has resulted in a massive shift in the Overton Window in Washington. The forces of freedom and free speech are now completely outnumbered and overwhelmed on Capitol Hill,” [wrote Adam Thierer](#), an innovation policy analyst at the center-right R Street Institute, on X on Thursday. “It’s a truly terrible situation. Doomers now completely in the driver’s seat.”

Brad Carson, the head of the Anthropic-aligned PAC Public First, has sought to declare victory on the broader debate over AI regulation despite spending millions to see Bores, his favored candidate, lose. He argues that the episode, and the associated heat around Leading the Future, has made their money mostly useless and has forced them into supporting similar AI regulations to the ones that Public First does.

“We defeated them, and so they’ve agreed to our peace treaty,” he said. “They’re like the Japanese soldier fighting on the island until 1975. They’re complaining about things that have been completely overtaken by events.”

LTF officials scoff at that notion. Perhaps more notably, super PACs associated with Public First ended June with [a combined total of only \\$1.8 million](#) in the bank — though an Anthropic IPO later this year could unlock significantly more funds for their effort. Meanwhile, Leading the Future has seemingly limitless cash — and appears to be ready to fight for the long haul.

“The amount of money they’ve raised and the amount they spent on Bores was a warning shot for 2028,” said one AI and politics insider who was granted anonymity to discuss internal dynamics at Leading the Future. “They didn’t create this infrastructure just to influence the 2026 midterms.”

It is one of the most intoxicating environments for a couple of political veterans who don’t mind a little bit of risk: a giant issue, growing in salience, with its political contours not yet defined. Vlasto and Moffatt have been accused of many things. What you can’t call them is afraid of the fight.

Their checkbook is large, their ambitions are titanic and their work is still beginning. They want nothing less than to change America’s future and shape the country’s most prominent politicians’ views on the development of one of the world’s most consequential technologies.

“This is the first inning of many,” said Moffatt. “November is a stop on the journey. It’s part of a larger destination.”