

ADAM KOVACEVICH IS FOUNDER AND CEO of the Chamber of Progress, a new tech industry coalition that includes Amazon, Google, Meta and Uber, devoted to a progressive society that works equally for consumers and business. He recently served as Head of North America and Asia Pacific Government Relations for shared scooter company Lime, where he expanded consumer access and helped cities craft rules for the new mode of transportation.

Kovacevich previously led Google's 15-person US policy strategy and external affairs team. In that role, he drove the company's US public policy campaigns. He currently serves on many tech policy boards including the Internet Association and the National Cyber Security Alliance, as well as the advisory council for the Center for Democracy and Technology.

Brunswick Senior Advisor Debbie Frost, herself a longtime veteran of Silicon Valley, spoke to Kovacevich on a range of policy topics in January. The following is an edited version of that interview.

You're a self-described "techno optimist." Is that still the case today, when people are so wary of the role tech plays in the fabric of our society?

I call myself a techno optimist with a pragmatic asterisk. I've always enjoyed working where the future meets the present—where the stuff that's exciting for the future meets the concern of the present as represented by policymakers and their constituents.



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The way technology has enabled protests and whistleblowing and dissent—progressives have wanted that for a long time. But a lot of Democrats stopped viewing tech as “their” industry, or our industry, when Donald Trump got elected. The Congressional Democrats went from thinking that the internet was this thing that we used to get Barack Obama elected to the thing that the Russians used to get Trump elected. Many of them quickly turned from techno optimist to techno pessimist. But Democratic voters show consistently positive attitudes toward tech. That’s a big gap that we’re trying to fill.

Tell me about the Chamber of Progress and what your plans and goals are.

I was starting to see ways in which trade associations

The founder and CEO of a new technology industry coalition speaks about anti-trust, key trends and why he’s a “techno-optimist.” By Brunswick’s **DEBBIE FROST** and **SUSAN LAGANA.**

were failing companies, or at least coming up short in terms of the value that they were delivering. First, several trade associations that I was a part of were basically being run by company member representatives and had devolved into companies vetoing each other back and forth. That leads to the association losing its effectiveness over time. Secondly, there are more and more public interest groups on the left that are anti-industry. As those groups got a mix of funding from companies and foundations, they faced pressure to take only foundation money and be anti-industry, which left a void on the center left.

I founded Chamber of Progress to respond to those dynamics. We don’t have a company member board. Companies don’t have a vote or a veto, which is a similar setup to the US Chamber of Commerce.

When I pitch to companies, I tell them, “I want you to be 70% thrilled that we’re going to be an effective bulldog for you and 30% begrudgingly tolerant of the rest.” And I believe that value proposition is better than “20% ho-hum happy” with what you’re getting from a bland, neutral association. Some companies are game for that, some companies are not.

We’re also expressly center left: We’re trying to articulate a path for the moderate Democrat who may have some concerns about tech but isn’t ready to throw the whole industry overboard.

Can you share some of your predictions for what we might see from the industry?

One of the things that guides me in our work is the understandable anxiety around the power of big tech. Ultimately, whether the debate is about anti-trust or speech content moderation or privacy, they are all just different components of the debate on how tech carries power. And the big dividing line among Democrats in the United States is what do you want to do about that power.

Polling that we’ve done suggests that the crowd of Democrats pushing to break up the big companies is no more than 25% to 30%. The rest are interested in harnessing that power. But that group is not as vocal. So the anxiety is going to continue.

I think on content moderation, Congress will do nothing. There’s no agreement there. Republican states will continue to pass content moderation bills this year, mostly focused on transparency and disclosure. Those bills will probably all be ultimately found unconstitutional. The courts are going to end up affirming the platforms’ own First Amendment rights to set whatever rules they want to. All these Republican lawsuits are actually going to end up strengthening platforms’ editorial rights.

One of the things that we’re sort of starting to dabble in is crypto. Crypto has a Democratic problem. Most of crypto’s biggest champions in Washington are Republicans, but most of crypto’s biggest users are Democrats, so there’s a big gap there that we’re going to try and remedy.

What trends are you seeing on anti-trust and the efforts for the US and the EU to unify around it?

I don’t expect much unifying. Here in the United States, there’s a package of bills that have been proposed, some of which have passed the committee level in the House of Representatives. One deals with basically banning most acquisitions by big tech. Another deals with data portability. The one that’s most contentious is nondiscrimination, how

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you shouldn’t favor your own products. Our group has been vocal against that. That’s being pushed by downstream companies: Yelp, Spotify, Match and Tile, all of whom have some issue with Amazon, Google, Facebook and Apple. That has gotten the most attention, but in the House, the moderate and California Democrats are concerned about it.

Our point is that if you support nondiscrimination, you’re targeting integrated products like Google Maps and Search Results or Amazon Prime and Amazon—you’re denying companies the opportunity to provide an integrated product experience. All of these things are beloved by consumers. Half the country has an Amazon Prime account. We generally support marketplaces and the right of marketplaces to set their own rules, even if that’s disruptive to a downstream player. But we also have small companies that we’re working on other issues with, that don’t care about the anti-trust issues at all.

Do you think folks will exhaust themselves on anti-trust, and refocus on things like consumer privacy and areas where there are easier wins?

I think if Republicans take over the House, they will make speech and content moderation their primary vector of attack against big tech, less so the anti-trust issues. I’m not sure politicians can set aside their love of headlines in favor of pragmatic solutions.

About a dozen years ago, there was this summer where all these planes got stuck on the tarmac for, like, five hours. It caused a huge outcry and led Congress to push the FAA to adopt a three-hour tarmac rule. That is an example of a very properly, narrowly tailored regulation that has probably 90% support. And it worked. They didn’t break up the airlines, they didn’t tax the airlines. They just did this rule.

I don’t know what the tarmac rule of tech regulation is. When it happens, it will have 90% support. But most of the ideas that are debated right now are not that and they don’t have 90% support.

Is it easier to think about these issues with the partisan divide in mind?

I do. I think most politicians do. The difference is your average congressional Democrat has to get elected with both Democratic and Independent votes. Your average Republican can get elected in many cases with purely Republican votes. So these members of Congress view this stuff differently.

Also, “techlash” in polling is far more acute among Republican voters than among Democratic voters. I personally believe that’s because of Trump and Fox News—the echo chamber effect. On actual issues, I

don't see that big a partisan divide in polling. If you ask people, "Do you think tech ought to be more regulated?" or "Do you think tech has too much power?" 70% to 80% of people say yes. Where the polling starts to diverge is, "If this proposal had this effect, would you support it or oppose it?" If you are a company fighting a policy that's harmful to you, your best argument is to lay out for the consumer the effect it's going to have on the product.

What advice do you have for smaller, pre-IPO companies to weather this landscape this year?

The biggest thing is to get fans and followers as quickly as possible. One of the things I found interesting at Lime was that very early on, it started building a database of users for political action. It could be something as simple as sending a petition to a city on scooter rules. More and more startups that I interact with are doing this, building their own internal mobilization function as early as possible.

For example, last fall the US infrastructure bill had this crypto taxation provision, and it sparked a massive outcry from crypto users. And it was effective. I don't think that will ever happen again, because now Congress and the administration are a little scared of the crypto people. They're going to take this tool and turn it into a missile.

Getting those fans and followers as quickly as possible means the moment that your business model gets on the radar of a regulator, you can say, "I've got thousands of people behind me who like my product." And that's powerful.

What's your organization's strategy toward the adversarial approach that regulators and lawmakers have taken regarding big tech?

It's very easy to look at the coverage of tech policy and say that the Democrats are going after tech. That obscures intra-Democratic differences, both among voters and politicians. This is something we've been researching quite a bit.

Our thesis is that Democratic voters in the United States fall into three buckets. The first are "latte liberals"—the folks who tend to think that tech is victimizing people against their will, new tech is predatory, big companies are tax dodgers and it's all terrible. Latte liberals are probably no more than a third of the Democratic vote, but they predominate in both journalism and political staffing. Many Democratic staffers for more moderate members are themselves latte liberals.

The second category I call satisfied urbanites and suburbanites. These are people who get Amazon

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Prime deliveries two or three times a week, and use Instacart, DoorDash, Uber and Lyft. This is a pro-tech group, but they're happy and also busy. They don't have time to show up at a city council meeting, or time to write a letter. But they do vote, and were probably the most important swing part of the Biden vote. One of my pet ideas is Biden should have an Office of Suburban Affairs in the White House, because suburban voters were so important to him.

The third category is the "dubious dreamers." These are folks living in places like Fresno and Stockton and the Bronx and Queens, often Black or Hispanic, though not exclusively. They're not anti-tech but they're a little wary. They'd love to see more tech-related jobs and opportunity come their way, but they're understandably skeptical of overpromising.

Part of our thesis is that if we can do a more effective job as a group in organizing and mobilizing the second group and the third group, that can help counteract the cultural power of the first group.

What trends do you see in highly regulated areas like telemedicine or automation or crypto?

The two most interesting issues in tech policy are the problems of big tech and all the scrutiny associated with that, and the challenges of new and emerging tech, which is mostly a market access challenge.

We want to do something innovative in health, housing, transportation, education. It's in a legal gray area, or we have to go city by city or state by state to get approval, and it's really hard.

What is your approach to new members?

Our membership, or partnership, is really in three buckets. One is technology issues, so that's primarily competition, speech, content moderation and privacy. The second bucket is what I call civic innovation: delivery services, drones, autonomous vehicles.

The third bucket is financial, so crypto and financial technology in particular. We focus on working with Democrats to show how new tech is improving on the predatory problems of the past, rather than repeating them, and creating financial opportunity that people haven't historically had access to.

We welcome partner companies that either have a policy or political target on their back or a market access challenge. I have great respect for companies that are not in those two categories. But what I've observed in some of the big trade associations is that companies that aren't in one of those two categories are often the ones urging the association not to stick its neck out. And that's not what we want at Chamber of Progress. ♦