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Revealing think tank donors: A noteworthy first step

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The Center for American Progress, the think tank founded in 2003 by John D. Podesta, has mushroomed into what [The New York Times describes](#) as “a government in exile for liberal policy experts.” Its stature in Washington can be measured by the \$30 million to \$40 million it vacuums up annually from wealthy lovers of liberal causes. But it, like other politically connected think tanks that increasingly influence the national agenda, isn’t required to reveal its donors. And it didn’t — until now.

Podesta, a former chief of staff to President Bill Clinton, [stepped down from the top of the CAP](#) to begin a new White House gig as counselor to President Obama. Facing inevitable questions about whether think tank donors might get special treatment from Podesta, CAP [voluntarily disclosed a list](#) of its 2013 corporate donors.

[It was already under pressure to do so](#) after having called for more campaign finance disclosure while declining to name its own contributors. Then, last June, [The Nation reported](#) that CAP donors included Walmart and assorted defense contractors. That led board members to announce they would go public with a list of donors. [Podesta’s new job put pressure](#) on the organization to come up with it sooner rather than later.

This is a good first step in transparency, although it would be more helpful if the think tank also disclosed the amounts contributed by these corporate donors. Among CAP’s peers in the world of think tanks, the extent of disclosure varies. The conservative Heritage Foundation lists donors who give \$10,000 or more, unless a donor requests anonymity — an enormous loophole. The liberal-leaning Brookings Institute lists donors and their range of giving — again, unless anonymity is requested. The libertarian Cato Institute lists corporate sponsors who contribute \$5,000 or more.

A lot of good thinking goes on at think tanks. But the public should know who is influencing it, and it shouldn’t take a White House appointment to flush it out.