



# Who should choose the next mayor — Philadelphia voters or four billionaires?

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Some think our mayoral election is a little dull, but nothing could be further from the truth. What we haven't fully grasped yet about this election is that Philadelphia is ground zero in the fight to save democracy in the United States. It is where we can and must take a stand against extremely wealthy individuals who seek to convert their wealth into political power and, in doing so, override the wishes and interests of working people and the middle class.

Because of the [Citizens United decision](#), there are now no limits on how much money wealthy individuals can contribute to super PACs or that these PACs can spend to influence voters. So [Jeff Yass, Joel Greenberg and Arthur Dantchik](#), who made billions trading options at the [Susquehanna International Group](#), are now overwhelming all other spending in support of Anthony Williams' campaign for Mayor.

The Three Billionaires would have you believe that their only concern is to improve public education. I have no issue with that aim. I personally support charter schools, especially when they are created by groups of parents and teachers looking for creative ways of engaging kids in learning.

The Three Billionaires, however, want our public schools to be privatized. And that goal is [part of the right-wing ideological agenda](#) they have long supported.

Jeff Yass is a director of the [Cato Institute](#), which seeks to eliminate the minimum wage, reduce taxes for corporations and the rich, radically reduce government funding for scientific and medical research and public transit, eliminate all national parks and wilderness areas, strike all federal support for education including aid for college students, reduce Social Security payments and eventually privatize the system, repeal the Affordable Care Act and radically cut back

Medicare and Medicaid, and eliminate Head Start, funding for child care and the disabled, unemployment insurance, and welfare.

Arthur Dantchik is a director of the [Institute for Justice](#), which intervenes in court case to oppose government regulation of almost any kind, undermine labor unions, and seeks to have the Affordable Care Act declared unconstitutional.

Together the Three Billionaires have donated over \$4 million to these two radical-right organizations. They have also backed far right wing Republican candidates who embrace this agenda. They were major backers of Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, who has undermined public and private sector unions, cut funds for education, turned down the expansion of Medicaid, and supported voter ID laws.

If enacted into law, this political agenda would obliterate the middle class in America. The dystopian world they would create would force most of us into corporate run, test-factory schools that train us for working long hours for low wages while a small coterie of billionaires and their children run our lives.

And now the Three Billionaires have been joined by a fourth one, Gerry Lenfest, the owner of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Daily News*, who overrode, or allowed his top editor William Marimow to override, the [Inquirer's editorial board endorsement](#) of Jim Kenney.

William's backers have responded to criticism of the Four Billionaires in two ways.

First, they say that Kenney also has support from two super PACs, one funded largely by the American Federation of Teachers and the other by unions led by Electrician's Union head John Dougherty. There is, however, a huge difference between money contributed by tens of thousands of union members and the contributions of the Four Billionaires. And there is also a huge difference between unions supporting the interests of working people and the Four Billionaires spending money to advance an ideological agenda that benefits the wealthy. The Three Billionaires are spending four times more than labor unions and are now joined by the Fourth Billionaire who owns both newspapers in our city.

Labor support for Kenney is an example of democracy at work. Billionaire support for Williams is an example of the exact opposite.

Second, Williams' defenders say that accepting the support of billionaires doesn't mean that he is committed to their ideological agenda. But the Four Billionaires didn't get to be so rich by being fools. They know a good investment when they see one. Anthony Williams has already begun to pay back the \$6 million investment the Three Billionaires made when he ran for governor in 2010 by supporting voucher and tax credit legislation that would have further undermined our schools.

Moreover, the problem is not just that Tony Williams backs the ideological agenda of the Four Billionaires. He is the matchmaker between the overwhelming private wealth and Philadelphia's corrupt transactional politics. The network of connections — and personal benefits — that

Williams, his wife, his campaign manger and other connected to him have received from their involvement with not just the Three Billionaires but also the fracking industry are deeply disturbing.

So there is good reason to fear the influence of the Four Billionaires on a Mayor Williams. But that's not the biggest issue. Our democracy will be severely damaged if the Four Billionaires choose our next mayor. The lesson of this election will not be lost on other billionaires all over the country. If Philadelphia can captured by a campaign that would be going nowhere without the Four Billionaires, then American democracy is hanging by a thread.