

# The Daily Dot

## PragerU is conservatism for the youths—brought to you by old billionaires

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In one short decade, PragerU has become an indoctrination powerhouse.

PragerU, short for Prager University, though it is not an accredited institution of higher learning, preaches old-world conservatism—where men are masculine, abortion is illegal, the Civil War wasn't about slavery, systemic racism is a myth, everything socialist is evil, and taxes are best kept low, particularly for the rich—to its converts, most of whom are young.

“Changing the minds of millions worldwide,” it brags on its website, then proceeds to ask for money. Not that PragerU needs it; it has millions in the bank and millions more rolling in every year, much of it from a quintet of elderly, ultra-rich male donors who subscribe to precisely the type of conservatism that PragerU hopes to spread to the next generation.

Much of PragerU's appeal lies in its sophomoric presentation. It creates short videos garnished with cartoonish imagery and music where narrators speak very slowly in friendly, knowing (some might say smug) tones as they deliver easily digested conservative propaganda on subjects like climate change, reparations, guns, immigration, economics, and racism.

Though the ideas PragerU espouses poll far better with Baby Boomers than millennials, PragerU has attracted a huge following among the young. More than 60% of its audience is under 35. Videos like the recent explanation of “why God is male” routinely net a million-plus views; its YouTube channel has 2.3 million subscribers. Cumulatively, its videos have billions of views. Fans are so enamored that hundreds of them donate Facebook “birthday fundraisers” to the nonprofit that had an annual budget of \$6 million in 2018, and nearly \$15 million in assets (almost double the \$8 million it had in 2017).

Most of its presenters are over-40s, but many of PragerU's most recognizable stars are fresh-faced millennials. Ben Shapiro, Steven Crowder, Candace Owens, Will Witt, and Charlie Kirk were all born after 1983. And its mission sounds like a line from a *Bill & Ted* movie: “To promote what is true, what is excellent, and what is noble through digital media.”

But for all the slick youth that PragerU portrays, its roots lie in grey gardens. The five men whose money propelled PragerU's meteoric rise are neither hip nor young. They're elderly, ultra-rich and ultra-conservative. The youngest is in his sixties; two are in their eighties. The poorest, Michael Leven, has an estimated net worth of \$11 million; Lee Roy Mitchell, the next poorest, is worth a quarter-billion dollars. Three—Sheldon Adelson and brothers Dan and Farris

Wilks—are billionaires. Cumulatively, they control \$42 billion, \$2 billion more than the GDP of oil-rich Bahrain.

These five and founder Dennis Prager, a 71-year-old conservative talk radio host, have less in common with PragerU’s many collegiate fans than they do with their grandparents. Their conservatism is a throwback to the narrow-minded era from which they sprung, in which business interests trumped the individual, identity politics were anathema, and the good ol’ days were actually good, and not racist, misogynistic and oppressive.

By supporting PragerU they hope to create the next generation of far-right conservatives like themselves. As Prager puts it, he’s vaccinating them with his beliefs. “I feel like I have penicillin for the mind of this country,” he reportedly said while recruiting PragerU CEO Marissa Streit in 2009.

### **Dan and Farris Wilks: ‘the sugar daddies for the far-right’**

Texan billionaire brothers Dan and Farris Wilks are PragerU’s biggest backers. They provided seed funding for it, and have given it millions over the years; at least \$6.5 million according to one outlet. As of 2016, two members of the Wilks family were on PragerU’s board, according to IRS filings; the 2017 and 2018 filings indicate that they are no longer on the board.

The brothers, who made their fortune fracking natural gas, pour so much money into conservative causes and politicians that they’re known as “the sugar daddies for the far-right” and the “kingmakers” of Texas politics. They also reportedly own the Daily Wire.

Farris, 67, preaches at Assembly of Yahweh Seventh Day Church, an extremely conservative Messianic Israelite church founded by their parents. Women are not allowed to speak during services, and the church enforces a strict dress code. According to documents obtained by Reuters, tank tops are forbidden, as are sleeveless tops—“Blouses and dresses with a cap sleeve are acceptable,” the church decrees—skirts and shorts must be at least knee-length, no belly or back can show even when bending over or playing sports, and exposed cleavage is strictly forbidden. “See thru lace worn over exposed cleavage **is unacceptable.**” (Emphasis in original.)

Reuters reports that Farris has preached that homosexuality is “a perversion tantamount to bestiality, pedophilia, and incest.” “It’s a predatorial lifestyle in that they need your children, and straight people having kids, to fulfill their sexual habits,” he reportedly said. He’s also said in sermons that climate change is “God’s will.”

The brothers have bankrolled fake abortion clinics and given millions to groups that support banning abortion and gay marriage and other far-right positions, like denying humanity’s role in climate change. In 2014, Right Wing Watch reported that Farris’s foundation gave more than \$17 million to a laundry list of conservative think tanks and organizations, including several in the Koch network.

These positions align remarkably well with PragerU’s.

Prager, who testified before Congress in support of the Defense of Marriage Act, has denied that he is homophobic, even as he asserts that, “Society has the right and obligation to prefer

heterosexuality to homosexuality,” and said it’s fine to conflate homosexuality with incest. ” [H]eterosexuals who draw their line of acceptance at homosexual sex are not necessarily any more bigoted than gays who draw their line at consensual incest,” he opined in a 2003 column. In 2012, he wrote, “I believe that the ultimate aim of the LGBT movement [...] is nothing less than to end gender distinctions.”

PragerU’s videos have asserted that homophobia is a “meaningless buzzword,” said that accepting Muslims means one cannot support gay rights, and argued that homophobia really doesn’t exist on college campuses.

College campuses spend TENS OF MILLIONS of dollars on administrators and programs to combat issues like sexism, homophobia, and racism on campus.

But are these problems in any way prevalent at our universities?

Or is this "diversity" bureaucracy just a massive waste of money?

PragerU consistently expresses skepticism about humans’ role in climate change and the imminence of the crisis. The typically-staid Weather Channel has even branded its denialism “a course in climate misinformation.”

Opposing abortion is another of PragerU’s routine schticks. White-haired Dennis Prager and his anti-choice cohorts routinely express views that mirror the Wilks’: abortion is “never moral”—even in cases of rape, incest, or danger to the life of the mother or fetus—and should be illegal. To convince their young audience that’s statistically likely to be heavily pro-choice, PragerU grossly misstates medical and legal facts about abortion in videos like “This is What it Means When You Support Abortion,” and tweets claiming, falsely, that abortion is legal and unrestricted up until birth. The Supreme Court holds that states can prohibit or restrict abortion after fetal viability, roughly at 24-28 weeks of pregnancy, provided they provide exceptions for the life and health of the mother.

### **Lee Roy Mitchell, Roy Moore supporter**

Joining the Wilks in funding PragerU is fellow Texan Lee Roy Mitchell, the founder of Cinemark. In August, the Los Angeles Times reported that Mitchell gave PragerU \$800,000 in 2018. Mitchell reportedly gave it the same amount in 2017, the first year his foundation appears to have donated to PragerU. He came out swinging, however; the PragerU donation was the highest contribution by his foundation that year. He also gave Turning Point USA \$600,000 in 2017.

Mitchell doesn’t wear his political views as much on his sleeve as PragerU’s other benefactors. The quarter-billion-dollar man generally leaves the limelight to the stars of the films showing at Cinemark; even his age is mysterious. In 2017, Wallmine noted that he’s been in the motion picture business for 50 years, so he is most likely in his seventies at least.

Mitchell did manage to make headlines in 2017 when he donated to Roy Moore’s Senate campaign on the same day that Moore whipped out his gun on the campaign trail. By then Moore

was already in the news over allegations that he preyed on young teens when he was a thirty-something prosecutor in 1980s Alabama. According to [OpenSecrets](#), Mitchell and his wife were Moore's fifth-largest contributors.

Mitchell has a track record of donating to hard-core conservatives. In 2016, he gave more than \$1 million to the campaigns of Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), Rick Perry, Donald Trump, and other Republicans and aligned causes, [Newsweek](#) reports, precisely the sort of [politicians and causes](#) that PragerU supports and often praises. Prager himself even [cheered for Moore](#) to win the Senate race.

### **Sheldon Adelson: “Trump’s patron-in-chief**

Eighty-six-year-old Sheldon Adelson is the [24th richest person](#) in the world. The casino magnate uses his \$35 billion fortune to prop up GOP candidates and causes across the nation. PragerU is a logical beneficiary of his generosity as he seeks to remake America in his own image. Adelson's Maccabee Task Force is one of the organization's biggest donors, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. Five of nine videos—including one called “Israel: the World's Most Moral Army”—on [its website](#) are by PragerU. (Like Prager and Leven, Adelson is Jewish.)

As of May, Adelson had given more than \$25 million to Trump, according to [Business Insider](#), making him one of the president's biggest donors and earning him the moniker, “Trump's patron-in-chief.” Adelson is said to have wielded incredible influence over Trump's decisions to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal, cut funds for Palestinian refugees, and move the U.S. embassy in Israel.

“I would put Adelson at the very top of the list of both access and influence in the Trump administration,” Craig Holman of the watchdog group Public Citizen told [ProPublica](#) in 2018. “I've never seen anything like it before, and I've been studying money in politics for 40 years.”

In 2016, the Adelson-owned *Las Vegas Review-Journal* was one of just two major metro newspapers to endorse Trump. (The *Florida Times-Union* in Jacksonville, Florida was the other.) The [editorial](#) announcing the endorsement effused that Trump “brings a corporate sensibility and a steadfast determination to an ossified Beltway culture,” and wrote with alarm of “the orgy of influence peddling and entitlement designed to line their own pockets” that would've characterized a Clinton presidency.

It also claimed that Clinton would've overturned the Second Amendment (the president can't overturn constitutional amendments), and sternly warned of the importance of having a conservative like Trump fill Supreme Court vacancies.

PragerU's cast of characters—notably except Shapiro—line up just as firmly behind Trump as Adelson does. Even Prager, who was once a never-Trumper, now [sings his praises](#). The organization has made a surprising number of [videos about Israel and Palestine](#), which is less-than-surprising given the Zionist politics of its donors.

### **Michael Leven: The millionaire pundit who could**

Finally, there's 81-year-old Michael Leven. Through his foundation, Leven donated \$100,000 to PragerU in both 2017 and 2018; in 2017, he gave more than \$150,000 to Turning Point USA. He's also on PragerU's advisory board.

Leven amassed his comparatively small \$11 million fortune working as Adelson's right-hand man. The two are not only aligned by business, but by faith (Leven is also Jewish) and politics. In 2014, Adelson told Forward, "We share a lot of the same values."

Like Adelson, when it comes to politics, particularly regarding Israel and economics, Leven is firmly on the right. In an appearance on CEO Money last December, he spoke favorably of Trump's tariffs and admitted that he is pro-Brexit. (At least one PragerU video is nakedly pro-Brexit.) As a guest on one of Prager's fireside chats, Leven said of his three sons, "I'm proud to say they're all conservatives."

Unlike the other four, Leven describes himself as more liberal on social issues, which his statements and writings support, to a point. Writing in the National Review in the teens, Leven and co-columnist Lee Habeeb of Salem Radio Network railed against Islam on multiple occasions. "The Islamists are coming after all of us. And coming after us for being who we are," they wrote in a column claiming that there was something wrong with the Islamic faith because only 57% of Muslims polled in nine Muslim-majority nations were against al-Qaeda (30% were undecided; 13% supportive). They once claimed that that the most important privilege in America wasn't being white, but being raised by married parents, and wondered why liberals don't talk about that more.

Another column heaped praise on Dennis Prager for postulating that the bigger government gets, the smaller the individual becomes, and used this to further hypothesize that the bigger government gets, the smaller churches, families, and dreams become (yes, really). The column claimed that "the Left" lacks faith in the little guy, has a "dim view of mankind," and is to blame for impoverished inner cities and failing schools. The PragerU takes a similarly negative view of the left.

"The Left Ruins Everything" is the title of one of PragerU's most popular videos.

On the other hand, the pair wrote a column claiming that immigration was the source of America's strength in the era of declining birth rates. "Those who argue that undocumented immigrants crossed a desert only to live off the state are wrong," they wrote. Just like them, PragerU has advocated for legal immigration, though the facts and conclusions in one video were based on such shoddy research that the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank co-founded by Charles Koch, felt compelled to blog about it.

Much like Leven, PragerU takes a hard line on Muslims. It has been repeatedly criticized for being Islamophobic. (PragerU claims that Islamophobia doesn't exist.)

These five men, together with Dennis Prager, are committed to indoctrinating the younger generation to their twentieth-century ways of thinking. Through PragerU, the Daily Caller, and Turning Point USA, they've tapped millennials to make these arguments for them.

In a way, it's brilliant. Young people are more inclined to listen to a peer like Shapiro falsely claim that abortion is murder; Owens baselessly say the left uses racism to control black America; and Witt urge "stop the caravan, build the wall," particularly when you add cheerful music, cartoon figures, and circular logic that only holds up if you don't think about it too hard.

In another way, it's incredibly cynical. The PragerU method of indoctrinating people to their way of thinking rests on the assumption that ideas don't catch on because they're right, but because they're effectively communicated. If the people involved with PragerU were concerned with being right, they wouldn't put their names on videos that make demonstrably false claims that there is no gender wage gap, or that the Republicans never employed a racist Southern strategy, or that are deliberately deceptive about climate change, the Electoral College, and the non-existent "war on Christmas."

The fact that it persists in lying, misleading and obfuscating reveals that its—and its benefactors'—true driving force is power and money, and not necessarily in that order.