



Scoop: Conservatives sound alarm against taking Big Tech money

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Conservatives in Washington are growing much more leery of groups with financial ties to Big Tech.

Driving the news: The American Principles Project, a conservative advocacy group, will send a letter today warning Republican lawmakers and staffers to be aware of third-party lobbyists who receive funding from Big Tech in an attempt to "influence public policy on the Right" and "coopt the Republican party."

Why it matters: Third-party influence is a key lobbying strategy for major companies in Washington and has in the past been very effective for Silicon Valley. Now it's becoming a liability, making it even harder for tech companies and their allies to push their message on Capitol Hill.

What they're saying: "Over the last two years, Big Tech has not only interfered in our elections and increasingly censored conservatives, but also simultaneously plotted to coopt the Republican Party and avoid scrutiny on the Right by pouring millions of dollars into center-right think tanks," Jon Schweppe, director of policy and government affairs at APP, writes in the letter.

- The group, which promotes family issues, warned Republicans to be particularly careful about Google and Facebook.

The big picture: There's growing suspicion of Big Tech by both parties, but for different reasons.

- Democrats are angry that the platforms have allowed misinformation to proliferate, while Republicans are concerned that the platforms' content moderators have censored conservative views.

There's also rising suspicion of any person or group tied to the companies financially, regardless of how they they lean politically.

- "Meeting with a group that gets Google money is essentially the same as meeting with a Google lobbyist," Schweppe told Axios about the letter.

- "When you get funding from an entity, you have some loyalty to that entity, especially when they're bankrolling your salary," he said. "Members don't always know how deep this influence is."
- The letter stops short of warning GOP lawmakers to halt all meetings with tech allies, but cautions to "carefully consider your interactions with Big-Tech funded groups," especially when discussing antitrust issues, Section 230, common carrier regulation and political appointees to the FCC, FTC and DOJ.

To be sure, supporting think tanks, public interest and research organizations with grants, donations or partnerships is a longstanding practice in Washington.

- APP doesn't condemn this practice among all big business, but Schweppe said the agenda being pushed by Big Tech goes against GOP values.
- Many Republicans believe Big Tech interfered with the election thanks to, for example, Facebook removing certain ads and Google manipulating search results to make conservative voices harder to find, Schweppe said. (Google and Facebook have repeatedly denied censoring conservative voices.)
- As a result, "Republicans are extremely against Big Tech," Schweppe said. "When you have ostensibly right-leaning groups representing their interests, there's a conflict there."

The backdrop: Rep. Ken Buck (R-Colo.), the lead Republican on the House Judiciary antitrust subcommittee, announced recently that he will stop accepting donations from Amazon, Facebook and Google. The conservative Heritage Foundation has also halted financial support from the industry.

- **Yes, but:** Google and Facebook support plenty of right-of-center groups, including R Street Institute, Cato Institute and Americans for Tax Reform.

The other side: As we've reported, Democrats and a few left-leaning groups are also pulling away from some Big Tech donations, both as a way to paint the industry as toxic and to be able to claim independence when discussing policy ideas on the Hill.

Between the lines: By tarnishing the tried-and-true influence tactic of aligning with outside groups, Republicans damage Silicon Valley's Washington playbook.

- Google, Facebook, Amazon, Twitter and Microsoft have staffers whose jobs are specifically to maintain relationships with third-party groups.

My thought bubble: Conventional wisdom over the past few months suggested that, although Republicans and Democrats take issue with Big Tech for different reasons, their mutual distrust of the industry could result in real antitrust legislation.

- But this new heightened wariness on the right of anyone with Big-Tech financial ties is a sign that the gulf is still wide between the GOP and the Democrats.
- Right-leaning groups don't want Republican lawmakers to latch on to antitrust arguments that they consider to be Democratic talking points, picked up from center-right groups that got swayed by Big Tech money.

What to watch: Expect Republicans to be less willing to work with Democrats on Big Tech legislation as they focus on winning back the House in 2022 — which would allow them to pass a GOP-driven bill to kneecap the industry in way that aligns with their specific grievances with Big Tech.