



Did lawmakers who voted to keep defense-surplus program for police get 73% more in defense cash?

By [Louis Jacobson](#)

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The recent unrest in Baltimore following the death of an African-American man who'd been taken into police custody has gotten people debating on social media, questioning the role of the federal government in militarizing local police.

A reader asked us to check a [meme](#) on this topic that recently entered their social media feed.

"The U.S. representatives that voted to keep militarizing the police received 73 percent more campaign money from the defense industry," the meme reads. It accompanies an image of a phalanx of helmeted police with guns raised at a suspect whose hands are raised in surrender.

The meme was created by [represent.us](#), which was founded in 2012 and describes itself as "building a fiercely nonpartisan movement to pass tough anti-corruption laws in cities and states across America." Its board members range include former Louisiana Gov. Buddy Roemer, GOP strategist Mark McKinnon, former disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff, Harvard law professor Lawrence Lessig and D.C.-based think tanker Norm Ornstein.

We thought the meme merited a closer look.

Checking the number

The source of the statistical claim was not hard to find. It originated with a [study](#) done using an online tool created by MapLight, a website that tracks and analyzes money in politics.

The study looked at how lawmakers voted on an amendment to the [Department of Defense Appropriations Act of 2015](#) (H.R. 4870) that would have prohibited the use of funds to transfer various types of surplus military vehicles and gear to local and state police forces through a Pentagon program established in the late 1990s known as the 1033 program.

The amendment in question was offered by Rep. Alan Grayson, D-Fla., on June 19, 2014. It failed by a vote of 62-355, but the MapLight study found some interesting statistics.

The study tallied up all of the donations to lawmakers from the defense industry between Jan. 1, 2011, and Dec. 31, 2013, using seven categories of industrial sectors tracked by the Center for Responsive Politics. It determined that lawmakers who voted against the amendment took in \$53,153 from defense-related donors, while those who voted in favor of the amendment took in \$31,240 from those same industries.

That means the "no" voters received 70 percent more in defense donations than did the "yes" voters. That's slightly off from the 73 percent cited in the meme, but it's pretty close. (MapLight appears to have contributed to this by mistakenly typing "73 percent" instead of "70 percent" in one of its [articles](#) on the study.)

So the number is close to the mark. But what about the significance of this finding? This is less certain.

What does the connection actually mean?

As we noted, the 1033 program gives *surplus* military goods to local and state law enforcement, so it's not obvious how the defense industry would benefit from a vote to keep the 1033 program alive. The industry sells its goods only to the Pentagon; the 1033 program doesn't open up a pipeline for the industry to sell its products to local law enforcement. Nor does the industry get a cut of the transaction with state and local police forces.

Some experts told PolitiFact that they don't see how the defense industry would have a dog in this particular fight.

"There is no reason to think that defense contractors benefit from the 1033 program," said Benjamin H. Friedman, a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "The transfer of military goods to local or state authorities is quite unlikely to affect what the Pentagon orders in the first place." Friedman called the connection "likely spurious."

Brent Skorup, who has studied the issue for the free-market Mercatus Center at George Mason University, said that while the meme "seems to imply that lobbying dollars buys votes ... the causation is pretty complicated, and I think the implication is overblown."

Todd Harrison, a fellow with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, agreed that the link was likely "tenuous."

"It is possible that defense companies could profit by selling spare parts for that equipment to state and local governments," he said. "If the Defense Department simply destroyed the equipment, the companies would have a smaller market for (original equipment-manufacturer) parts, in theory. But a lot of the equipment being transferred doesn't seem like it would have the potential for high-priced, high-volume spare parts. I don't see much of a connection here."

A spokesman for Represent.us, Mansur Gidfar, disagreed. He said the existence of the 1033 program indirectly benefits the defense industry because it allows the Pentagon to err on the larger side when making orders. "The Pentagon may not be ordering more than they need intentionally, but I have to imagine 'we're passing these resources on to communities that need them to keep the streets safe' is a much more palatable talking point than 'we ordered too much and now they're sitting in a warehouse,'" Gidfar said.

In addition, at least one armored-vehicle contractor -- [Lenco Industries](#), which sells to both the military and domestic law enforcement market -- [advertises](#) federal grant-writing classes to police, which suggests that suppliers take an interest in such legislation. Vehicles initially obtained through the 1033 program may hook police forces on their products and spur direct purchases further down the road.

Given the uncertainties, Gidfar said that his group was careful when creating the meme to highlight the correlation between defense-industry dollars and voting -- not a causal relationship. Indeed, several experts noted that it may be an independent variable -- the lawmaker's philosophical or ideological affinity for a strong military and aggressive policing -- that could account for *both* the larger acceptance of defense-industry money *and* a "no" vote on the amendment.

Ultimately, "it is up to citizens to decide whether or not money played a role in how their legislator voted," said Pamela Behrsin, MapLight's vice president of communications and a contributor to the original study.

Our ruling

The group Represent.us created a meme that read, "The U.S. Representatives that voted to keep militarizing the police received 73 percent more campaign money from the defense industry" than did the representatives who voted to stop it.

The correct number is actually 70 percent, which is close to what the meme said. But it's worth noting there's significant doubt about how meaningful this connection is. Several independent experts said it's not obvious that the defense industry would have a strong self-interest in supporting the continued existence of the program, and if they don't, that would undercut the meme's underlying message. Others say defense contractors do have a small but real interest in seeing that police get the equipment.

Overall, the statement is accurate but needs clarification or additional information, so we rate it Mostly True.