

# THE AMERICAN PROSPECT

## D.C.'s Professional Left Flocks to Google Policy Conference

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Attendees at a controversial closed-door policy summit this week at Google headquarters included representatives from a broad section of think tanks and policy shops on the center-left, according to a document obtained by the *Prospect*. A former Democratic FCC Commissioner and numerous members of consumer, civil rights, and human rights organizations participated in the summit.

The get-together was held at Google's Mountain View headquarters, and the tech giant promised it would be the first of a "series of quarterly policy and product summits." Top Google lobbyists Karan Bhatia and Mark Isakowitz spoke at the event, as well as other company officials, about products like search, advertising, and artificial intelligence, according to Axios.

Through conferences like this, Google, whose reputation has suffered in Washington amid a backlash against the power and dominance of Big Tech, can play the influence game without technically engaging in lobbying. By bringing together groups that have the ear of policymakers and can present themselves as a nominally independent voice, Google can implant—even if subconsciously—its viewpoints on a host of policy topics. It's a lobbying event masquerading as a conference, in other words, and could prove more fruitful than direct lobbying.

The cross-ideological guest list of 47 influencers and experts included:

- Mignon Clyburn, the former FCC Commissioner who now chairs Full Color Future, a tech entrepreneurship and civil rights group. Clyburn, daughter of House Majority Whip James Clyburn, is also a lobbyist with MLC Strategies who advised T-Mobile on its merger with Sprint;
- Representatives from establishment Democratic stalwarts Brookings, Third Way, the Progressive Policy Institute, and the Center for American Progress;
- Tech and internet freedom groups like the Center for Democracy & Technology and Public Knowledge, whose president and CEO Chris Lewis attended;
- Sharon Bradford Franklin of the New America Open Technology Institute. New America is the organization that dissolved its Open Markets team after it posted a press release critical of Google. New America received over \$21 million from Google through 2017, and its conference room is known as the "Eric Schmidt Ideas Lab" after the former Google executive chairman;
- A slew of representatives from civil rights and equal rights organizations: UnidosUS, the Hispanic Technology & Telecommunications Partnership, the National Urban League, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, the National Partnership for Women and Families, the Institute for

Intellectual Property and Social Justice, the Urban Institute, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, NAACP, and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC);

- Several members of human rights organizations: the Human Rights Center at UC Berkeley, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, the International Committee of the Red Cross, Amnesty International, Freedom House, WITNESS, and the Human Rights Campaign;
- A smattering of consumer groups, including Consumer Action, Consumer Policy Solutions, and the National Consumers League.

Some right-wing groups, like Americans for Prosperity, the Center for Growth and Opportunity, the Cato Institute, Americans for Tax Reform, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, and the Heritage Foundation, were also on hand.

Google stated on the invite that the goal was to “strengthen connections between our valued partners and our broader teams.” So these representatives—dozens of representatives of the D.C. left, particularly in the areas of civil and human rights—are seen, by Google at least, as partners.

In one sense that is literally the case. Fully 31 of the 47 groups invited to the conference were recipients of “substantial” contributions from Google at some point over the past two years, according to [Google’s transparency page](#). Relatedly, tech policy shops like the Center for Democracy & Technology and Public Knowledge, both of whom receive significant Google support, nominally support [investigations into Google](#) and [new privacy laws](#), but have been [criticized](#) on occasion for [aligning](#) with [Google](#) on various issues.

In addition, Instagram postings from at least one attendee, Patrick Hedger of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, suggest that he was staying during the conference at the Four Seasons Silicon Valley, an opulent hotel that costs over \$500 a night. Other guests' names could not be found by hotel staff, according to phone calls by the *Prospect*. CEI did not respond to inquiries.

The large presence of civil and human rights groups is particularly striking. Google has pushed for [deals with authoritarian governments](#) in Saudi Arabia and China, including a censored search engine for the Chinese market called [Dragonfly](#). The company’s [surveillance panopticon](#) can be misused in the hands of repressive governments. And critics have highlighted the [racial and gender discrimination](#) that can arise from artificial intelligence and algorithms. Most recently, Google has come under fire for [seeking out dark-skinned people](#) for a facial recognition project.

Google would certainly want to lower pressure on their activities by cozying up to groups that focus on civil and human rights. Even buying their silence or reticence can be a net victory. It’s not abnormal for a large company to ingratiate itself with policy experts, and Google has hosted policy professionals for discussions in the past. But the broad influencing effort has displeased Google’s critics.

“I think foundations and large progressive donors need to do some serious introspection about the organizations they’re writing checks to,” said Luther Lowe, vice president of public policy at Yelp, a longtime Google antagonist. “These groups that they’re sponsoring are happy to fly out to Mountain View on Google’s dime and break bread with Google executives and Koch Brothers operatives. This type of soft capture is precisely how Google and Big Tech have historically co-opted the left.”

While the event was bipartisan, a review of the attendee list shows only 11 conservatives and 36 on the center and left end of the political spectrum. Noted Matt Stoller, author of *Goliath: The 100-Year War Between Monopoly Power and Democracy*, "I guess they've divided up the world so Google takes the left and Facebook takes the right."

In a statement, a Google spokeswoman said, "We've long engaged with organizations from across the political spectrum that focus on technology issues. We always appreciate the opportunity to host people at our headquarters to explain our products and the work we do to innovate."

Below are the names of the invitees, pulled from a document Google produced for the event that the *Prospect* obtained. The representatives with an asterisk after their name come from organizations that have received Google funding:

- *Alejandro Roark, Executive Director, Hispanic Technology & Telecommunications Partnership*
- *Alegra Howard, Policy Advocate, Consumer Action\**
- *Alexa Koenig, Executive Director, Human Rights Center, UC Berkeley*
- *Amy Studdart, Senior Advisor for Digital Democracy, International Republican Institute\**
- *Billy Easley, Senior Policy Analyst, Americans for Prosperity*
- *Chris Calabrese, Vice President, Policy, Center for Democracy & Technology\**
- *Chris Lewis, President and CEO, Public Knowledge\**
- *Christopher Koopman, Executive Director, Center for Growth and Opportunity*
- *Claudia Ruiz, Analyst, UnidosUS Policy Analysis Center\**
- *Clint Odom, Senior Vice President, Policy, National Urban League\**
- *Curt Levey, President, The Committee for Justice*
- *Damara Catlett, Executive Director, Full Color Future and Principal, The Raben Group*
- *Darrel M. West, VP, Director of Governance Studies, Brookings\**
- *Debra Berlyn, Executive Director, Project GOAL (to Get Older Adults Online) and President, Consumer Policy Solutions*
- *Emily Sternfeld, VP, External Affairs, Third Way\**
- *Gabe Horwitz, Senior Vice President, Economic Program, Third Way\**
- *Gabe Rottman, Director, Technology and Press Freedom Project, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press\**
- *Hoda Hawa, Director, Washington DC Office, Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC)*
- *Jocelyn Frye, Senior Fellow, Center for American Progress\**
- *John Breyault, VP, Public Policy, Telecommunications and Fraud, National Consumers League\**

- *John Samples, Vice President, Cato Institute\**
- *Katie McAuliffe, Manager, Federal Affairs, Americans for Tax Reform, Executive Director, Digital Liberty\**
- *Kim Tignor, Executive Director, Institute for Intellectual Property and Social Justice*
- *Klon Kitchen, Senior Research Fellow, Technology, Heritage Foundation\**
- *Koustubh “K.J.” Bagchi, Senior Counsel for Telecommunications, Technology, & Media, Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC\**
- *Larry Gonzalez, Principal, The Raben Group*
- *Lashawn Warren, Senior Vice President of Campaigns and Programs, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights\**
- *Lateef Mtima, Professor of Law, Howard University School of Law, Founder and Director, Institute for Intellectual Property and Social Justice*
- *Lindsay Lewis, Executive Director, Progressive Policy Institute\**
- *Liza Getsinger, Chief of Staff, Urban Institute\**
- *Mark David Silverman, Advisor, International Committee of the Red Cross*
- *Michael Kleinman, Director, Silicon Valley Initiative, Amnesty International*
- *Michael Mandel, Chief Economic Strategist, Progressive Policy Institute\**
- *Mignon Clyburn, Chairman, Full Color Future, Principal, MLC Strategies, LLC*
- *Patrick Hedger, Research Fellow, Competitive Enterprise Institute\**
- *Sam Gregory, Program Director, WITNESS*
- *Sarah Fleisch Fink, VP, Political and Strategy, National Partnership for Women and Families\**
- *Sarah Moulton, Technology Innovation Advisor, National Democratic Institute (NDI)\**
- *Sarah Repucci, Senior Director for Research and Analysis, Freedom House\**
- *Scott Wallsten, President, Technology Policy Institute\**
- *Sharon Bradford Franklin, Policy Director, New America Open Technology Institute (OTI)\**
- *Simbi Ntahobari, Corporate Development Manager, NAACP\**
- *Sindy M. Benavides, CEO, League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)\**
- *Spencer Overton, President, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies\**
- *Ty Cobb, Senior Director, Strategic Initiatives & Research, Human Rights Campaign\**
- *Wayne Brough, Ph.D., President, Innovation Defense Foundation*
- *Will Rinehart, Director of Technology and Innovation Policy, American Action Forum\**

