

## OPINION

## In the Politics of Innovation, Steve Jobs Shows Less Is More

Apple's unwillingness to pursue government favors stems from Jobs's brand of progressive industrialism

By G. PASCAL ZACHARY / DECEMBER 2010

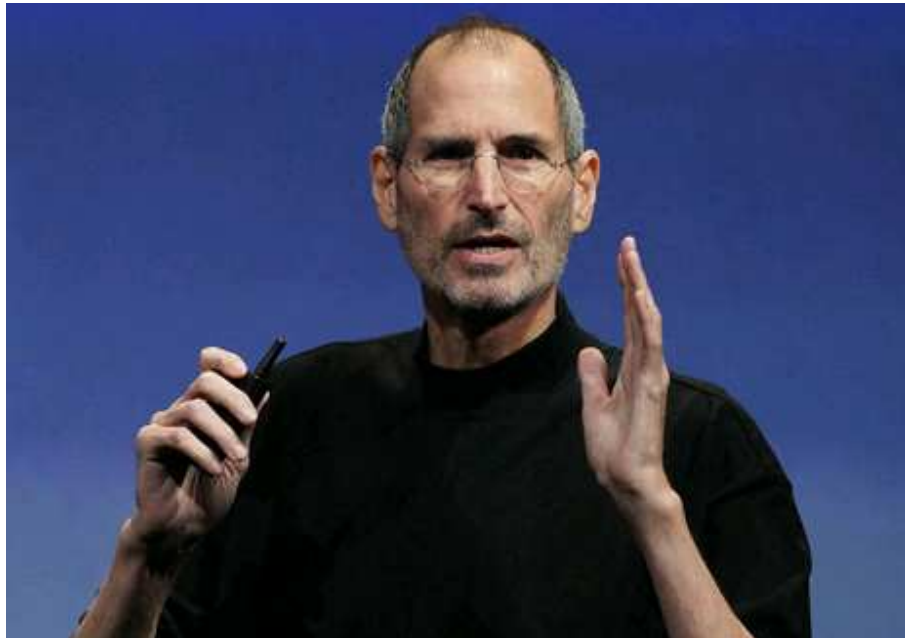


Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images



What does Apple's Steve Jobs know about the politics of science and technology that other industrial tycoons don't?

The answer is not merely that Jobs sticks to his knitting, churning out new Apple products that strike a compelling engineering balance between emerging and stable technological elements. Jobs is not simply apolitical—he's antipolitical.

Instead of making hefty personal donations or having Apple mount Washington, D.C., lobbying efforts in the manner of a Google or a Microsoft, Jobs relies on his star power, his celebrity. When he met with President Obama in October, the White House pointedly announced that the president had sought the meeting, not Jobs. "He's eager to talk to him about the economy, innovation and technology, education," [Robert Gibbs told the press](#).

Jobs is not averse to making political contributions, nearly always to Democrats. Jobs donated US \$50 000 to the Democratic National Committee in 2000 and \$26 700 to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in 2006, [according to Bloomberg Businessweek](#). Jobs also appointed Al Gore, the former vice president and a Democratic activist, to a seat on Apple's board. And in 2009, [Apple quit the United States Chamber of Commerce](#) in protest of the chamber's opposition to climate change legislation.

Yet while cultivating friends in high places and capitalizing on his personal legend, Jobs doesn't view political action as strategic to Apple's business or to its capacity for innovation. All kinds of industrial giants routinely ask the federal government for assistance in supporting their innovation capacity, but not Apple.

Jobs has studiously avoided explaining to the public why he doesn't seek federal aid for Apple's innovation capacity or competitiveness strategy. People close to him over the years say he sees himself as a "progressive industrialist" who eschews moral gestures and views succeeding in the marketplace with innovative products as his central mission in life. His unwillingness to follow conventional approaches to handling government affairs stands in stark contrast to other high-tech leading companies, even some in the computing and Internet fields.

Just this month, [Facebook said it will expand a Washington lobbying office](#) that already employs six people. And this year another Internet darling, [Google, has sharply increased its spending on lobbying](#) and is now on pace to spend nearly \$5 million in 2010 alone. One goal of the lobbying seems fiendish: to lower Google's tax bill to nearly zero. Paying a mere 2.4 percent tax rate on its massive profit, Google saved billions in the past few years alone, through legal but [dubious corporate revenue shifting](#).

Defenders of Google might argue that tax dodges help the company amass needed funds for future innovations. At least Google isn't trying to constrain competition and improve its business profile through lobbying (well, maybe not blatantly). Other technology companies—but, again, Apple is not one of them—are doing so. In a withering complaint against engineering-innovation companies that are asking the government to prevent business rivals from bringing engineering innovations to market, Adam Thierer of the Cato Institute, concludes, "The high-tech policy scene within the Beltway has become a cesspool of backstabbing politics, hypocritical policy positions, shameful PR tactics, and bloated lobbying budgets."

Thierer points out several dismaying examples of how politics has become a substitute for innovation in the supposedly libertarian world of high tech. After years of hammering Microsoft over alleged monopolistic behavior, Microsoft is now hammering Google for the same. Telecom providers are pursuing various forms of corporate welfare. And broadcasters, meanwhile, campaign against emerging innovations that make controlling their content—and their customers—harder. The result is what the Beltway watchdog Politico calls a "tech lobbying frenzy."

To be sure, the obvious point is worth making: When people supposedly in charge of innovating spend so much time and money seeking special favors from government, either their innovations aren't very compelling, or maybe they know that innovating isn't the way to succeed in business after all.

That makes the unwillingness of Apple to engage in conventional lobbying all the more striking. Apple does maintain a small, low-key Washington office—four people who spent \$340 000 in a recent three-month period (about a quarter of what Google spends). But this effort seems so pedestrian that even *The Washington Post* has chastised Apple for not assembling the sort of powerhouse influence-peddling team that would normally work for a corporate behemoth. The *Post* argued that Apple recently settled Justice Department allegations that it used antipoaching agreements with other firms to keep wages down. The Federal Trade Commission has also investigated a complaint by Adobe that Apple's lock on its applications store harmed Adobe when it rejected the Flash applications for the iPad.

The *Post* quoted one securities analyst as saying that Apple is "now at the vortex of some key issues at the FCC and FTC that they will need to move forward on."

Move, the government will. And Steve Jobs is no saint. Somehow, he managed to avoid any whiff of scandal a few years ago in a well-documented case of backdating stock options. Yet to remain obsessed with innovation—the iPad today, who knows what tomorrow—is why Jobs embodies an antipolitics of science and technology. Jobs seems to know, in his bones as well as in his brain, that at least for his own innovative company, the best politics of science and technology is not to have one.

#### **About the Author**

G. Pascal Zachary is a professor of practice at the Consortium for Science, Policy & Outcomes at Arizona State University. He is the author of *Showstopper!: The Breakneck Pace to Create Windows NT and the Next Generation at Microsoft* (1994), on the making of a Microsoft Windows program, and *Endless Frontier: Vannevar Bush, Engineer of the American Century* (1997), which received IEEE's first literary award. Zachary reported on Silicon Valley for *The Wall Street Journal* in the 1990s; for *The New York Times*, he launched the Ping column on innovation in 2007. The Scientific Estate is made possible through the support of Arizona State University and *IEEE Spectrum*.