

## Meet the top 15 Jewish political donors in this election cycle

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(JTA) — George Soros may draw some of the most vociferous criticism, but he's hardly the biggest political donor in this cash-heavy election cycle — Democrat or Republican.

In fact, Soros is 24th on the largest givers in this cycle, and Jewish donors on both the right and left populate the list above him.

That's according to Open Secrets, which provides the top 100 individuals or married couples donating to the 2020 campaign. Among the top 25 on the list, 15 are Jewish or of Jewish origin.

They include Tom Steyer, No. 1 on the list, and Donald Sussman, who have joined Soros in the litany of Democratic donors criticized by Republicans. Miriam and Sheldon Adelson are No. 5 — their money goes exclusively to Republican candidates. Plus there's a host of Jewish donors who have drawn little public attention despite giving in the multimillions.

The Open Secrets rundown is up to date as of Sept. 8. With the final weeks of the campaign seeing an accelerated fundraising push, the rankings are likely to change.

Here's what you need to know about the big-spending Jewish donors seeking to influence this year's high-stakes elections, especially those whose giving has made the most waves.

### 1. Tom Steyer

*Amount given so far:* \$54 million to Democrats

Steyer tops the list by far. The hedge funder, who was among the candidates seeking the Democratic presidential nomination, has donated over \$54 million to Democrats — and, intriguingly, \$35 to Republicans.

Lest you think Steyer is leading this cycle because of his own campaign, he has resided in the top three since the 2014 congressional cycle, and most of his money has gone to outside groups backing an array of Democratic candidates. (Steyer has endorsed Joe Biden and is fundraising for him.)

Steyer, whose father was Jewish and who identifies as ethnically Jewish, is a practicing Episcopalian, although in his youth he practiced Judaism and included a rabbi in his wedding.

### 4. Stephen and Christine Schwarzman

*Amount given so far:* \$28.4 million to Republicans and \$8,400 to Democrats

Stephen Schwarzman is CEO of Blackstone, an investment management firm, and served on one of Trump's council of business advisers until they all shut down after the deadly neo-Nazi march

in Charlottesville in 2017. Trump equivocated in condemning the rioters, and businesses came under pressure to cut ties with the administration.

Schwarzman told Reuters he got messages calling him a Nazi.

“It was pretty clear that the country itself felt like it was going out of control,” he said at the time. “We decided there was too much pressure for too many people all running public companies.”

His first major donation to Israel was in 2018, when he gave the National Library \$10 million.

## **5. Sheldon and Miriam Adelson**

*Amount given so far:* \$28 million to Republicans

Sheldon Adelson, 87, is a Las Vegas-based casino magnate and Miriam, 74, is a physician. They are major givers to an array of Jewish and pro-Israel causes, as well as to medical research. Adelson’s endorsement of Trump in May 2016 opened the floodgates to Jewish donors who until then had been skeptical of the candidate.

Their ongoing support for Trump has been in question: Trump reportedly berated Sheldon Adelson last month for not giving enough to the campaign as Biden’s fundraising began to outpace the incumbent’s. But Adelson bellied up this month and has pledged \$50 million to elect Republicans and send Trump back to the White House.

Adelson may be hedging his bets: He reportedly has paid \$87 million for the residence of the U.S. ambassador in suburban Tel Aviv, possibly as a means of preventing Biden from moving the embassy back to that city (although Biden has said he has no intention of doing so). Trump says his move of the embassy to Jerusalem was one of the highlights of his presidency.

## **6. Donald Sussman**

*Amount given so far:* \$22.3 million, all to Democrats save for \$5,600 to Republicans

Sussman, 74, launched his investment career at age 12, in 1958, when he bet that the Cuban revolution would drive up the price of sugar. He’s known for his close ties to the Clintons — he was a major backer of Hillary’s 2016 presidential campaign. Sussman said he was dumping money into her campaign because of her pledge to take money out of politics, and he acknowledged the irony.

In his charitable giving, he appears to be particularly proud of his relationship with Israel’s Weizmann Institute, listing his position as deputy chairman of its international board of governors and his honorary doctorate from there on his official bio.

Sussman was married to a Maine congresswoman, Chellie Pingree, from 2011 to 2016 and continues to be heavily involved in the state. He has given \$100,000 to groups backing Sara Gideon, who is challenging incumbent Republican Sen. Susan Collins. Despite his stakes in the New England state (he is on friendly terms with his ex, and for a period owned MaineToday, a media company) Republicans there have endeavored to depict Sussman as an interloper, or in the state’s lingo, “from away.” In a radio interview, Collins singled out three “from away” Jews, including Sussman, as backing Gideon’s campaign.

## 7. James and Marilyn Simons

*Amount given so far:* Nearly \$21 million to Democrats

James Simons has been called one of the smartest Wall Street financiers of all time, thanks to his contributions to string theory and his application of mathematical breakthroughs to investment banking. Born to a Jewish family in the very Jewish Massachusetts suburb of Brookline, Simons' net worth is over \$23 billion. He and his wife set up the Simons Foundation, one of the largest charity groups in the U.S., in 1994.

## 9. Michael Bloomberg

*Amount given so far:* \$19.3 million to Democrats

Bloomberg, who runs an eponymous media empire, was a three-term mayor of New York, elected as a Republican and then as an Independent. He endorsed Hillary Clinton for president in 2016 and in his speech at the Democratic convention excoriated Trump as a con man, earning the Trump sobriquet "Mini Mike." Bloomberg, 78, mounted a campaign for the presidency this year and initially polled well — until he was eviscerated in his first debate by a rival, Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., who depicted Bloomberg as Trump lite.

During his run, Bloomberg had pledged \$1 billion to electing whomever won the nomination. Once he quit the race, however, he seemed to have forgotten his promise (and also a vow to pay the salaries of his staffers through the election, whatever happened).

But he's back: Bloomberg said this month that he will spend \$100 million in Florida, a swing state won by Trump in 2016 and critical to his reelection.

He has already donated \$16 million for paying the fees of former felons. (Floridians voted overwhelmingly in a 2018 referendum to allow former felons to vote, rolling back a Jim Crow-era law. Jewish groups backed the initiative. The GOP-led legislature effectively scuttled the initiative by passing a law requiring that the ex-felons pay outstanding fines and court fees. Challenges are wending their way through the courts.) Florida's Republican attorney general says Bloomberg's donation may be criminal and wants the feds to investigate.

## 10. Jeffrey and Janine Yass

*Amount given so far:* More than \$13 million, mostly to Republicans

Jeffrey Yass, a trader who co-founded the Susquehanna International Group, is the lone libertarian on the list. In the 2016 cycle he gave \$2.8 million to Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul's campaign. Major beneficiaries of his largesse include Save the Children and the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

## 12. Deborah Simon

*Amount given so far:* \$12.5 million to Democrats

Simon is the daughter of Mel Simon, the late billionaire businessman and movie producer who was involved in Jewish philanthropy. Deborah Simon and her sister, Cynthia Simon-Skjoldt, have long given to progressive and Jewish causes such as the Anti-Defamation League.

Based in Indiana, Simon has been a longtime ideological opponent of Mike Pence, the vice president and former governor of the state known in part for his anti-abortion stance. This year, she has said she will “do anything” to unseat Trump.

Simon also donates to the U.S. Holocaust Museum and talked with the museum’s magazine this summer.

“The Holocaust was a formative part of my Jewish identity,” she said. “The danger of xenophobia and the rising hatred we’re seeing around the world and in this country is very troubling to me.”

### **13. Henry and Marsha Laufer**

*Amount given so far:* \$11.8 million to Democrats

Henry Laufer worked closely with James Simons at his pioneering Renaissance Technologies, a quantitative hedge fund, and also became a billionaire. Marsha Laufer, his wife, was the Democratic Party chair in the Long Island, New York, town of Brookhaven for seven years. Outside of the presidential race, the Laufers have given to several individual Democratic politicians, including Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Florida, a former chair of the Democratic National Committee.

### **16. Joshua and Anita Bekenstein**

*Amount given so far:* Nearly \$11 million to Democrats

Joshua Bekenstein is a co-chairman of Bain, the global finance company co-founded by Mitt Romney, the former Republican presidential candidate and now Utah senator. Along with his wife, Bekenstein has given to an array of candidates and PACs this cycle, as well as to the Democratic Party. Residents of suburban Boston, they also operate a donor-advised fund through the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Boston.

### **18. Bernard and Billi Wilma Marcus**

*Amount given so far:* \$9.7 million, all to Republicans save for \$6,900 to Democrats

Marcus, 91, co-founded Home Depot and has long been a major donor to Jewish causes, looming large in the Atlanta area. This year he took on the Jewish Future Pledge, dedicating at least 50% of his charitable giving to Jewish causes, and his eponymous foundation gave \$20 million to the Jewish Education Project to help lower the cost of youth trips to Israel.

Marcus is all in for Trump. His pro-Trump posture — he gave Trump’s campaign \$7 million in 2016 — has led to boycotts of Home Depot, although he retired as the hardware chain’s chairman in 2002. The New York Times, reporting this week that the Republicans were trying to get the Green Party on the presidential ballot to siphon votes from Biden, revealed that Marcus funded an identical campaign in 2016. It may have worked: The votes for the Greens were greater than the margin of Trump’s key victories in Wisconsin and Michigan.

Marcus also backs congressional candidate Laura Loomer in South Florida. Mainstream GOP Jews have endeavored to ignore Loomer, who is Jewish and a self-declared Islamophobe. She’s run a campaign that has incurred the wrath of mainstream Jewish groups for likening Democrats to Nazis. Trump has enthusiastically endorsed Loomer — he lives in the district.

## 22. Paul Singer

*Amount given so far:* \$8.8 million to Republicans

Singer, 76, is a hedge funder who eased the Republican Party (somewhat) into accepting rights for LGBTQ people (his son is gay). He has a tenuous relationship with Trump and was the initial funder of the opposition research that led to revelations about Russian attempts to infiltrate the Trump campaign. But by last year he was on the Trump train, saying Democrats posed a socialist threat to the United States.

## 23. Stephen and Susan Mandel

*Amount given so far:* \$8.8 million to Democrats

Stephen Mandel, a hedge fund manager, and his wife both grew up in Jewish families. Their philanthropic giving has centered on education issues. This year, in addition to donating to Democratic candidates across the country, Mandel has donated \$2 million to the Lincoln Project, a PAC founded by former Republicans to prevent Trump from winning reelection.

## 24. George Soros

*Amount given so far:* **\$8.2 million to Democrats**

Soros, 90, is a Hungarian-born Holocaust survivor who made his billions as a hedge funder. He launched his philanthropy in the 1970s, advancing democratic movements in South Africa and then as the Soviet empire began to crumble, in Central and Eastern Europe. His emphasis was the introduction of free markets, which first earned him praise from conservatives.

That dissipated once he turned his attention to liberal and Democratic politics, and especially when he spoke out against the Iraq War launched by President George W. Bush in 2003. He spent a record \$27 million in 2004 to oust Bush, including millions on MoveOn, the group that along with the Howard Dean campaign set the standard that year for online fundraising.

(Adelson has said that Soros' outsized '04 spending spurred his own big spending: In the 2008 cycle, the casino magnate spent \$30 million on Freedom's Watch, a failed effort to set up a conservative counterpart to MoveOn, and Adelson broke spending records in 2012 in a losing bid to unseat Barack Obama — at least \$100 million, possibly as much as \$150 million.)

Soros within the Jewish world has staked out a confrontational posture, deriding AIPAC in 2007 as overly influential and the next year becoming the main funder of J Street, a liberal rival to the pro-Israel giant. His foundation, Open Society, has also funded civil society groups in Israel that are sharply critical of its government.

As his ranking suggests, Soros has not been as major a player in presidential fundraising this year as he has been in the past. His focus in recent years has been on funding candidates for prosecutor who favor justice system reforms. In July, Open Society pledged to spend \$220 million over five years to fund racial justice groups, its response to the protests this summer against police brutality.

Soros' newsworthiness this cycle has less to do with what he's given and more to do with how he has become a target. Some on the right, including Trump, have leveled baseless slanders against Soros, accusing him of everything from being behind illegal immigration to rioting in cities, as

well as having been a Nazi collaborator. The smears led to a failed bombing attack on Soros in 2018 and helped spur the gunman who slaughtered 11 worshippers at a Pittsburgh synagogue the same year.

## **25. Steve and Connie Ballmer**

*Amount given so far:* \$7.5 million to Democratic groups

Steve Ballmer is the former Microsoft CEO and current owner of the NBA's Los Angeles Clippers. His mother was Jewish and, through her, he is related to the late Jewish comic Gilda Radner. At Microsoft, he sat on a council of world leaders convened by the Jewish National Fund and made multiple trips to Israel to ramp up Microsoft operations there. He also reportedly prepared as an adult to have a bar mitzvah ceremony.

This year, almost all of Ballmer's giving — \$7 million — went to Everytown for Gun Safety Victory Fund, the PAC associated with the gun control advocacy movement. Connie Ballmer gave \$500,000 to Unite the Country, a PAC that is supporting Biden.