

FAST COMPANY

Facebook, Google, Amazon are ramping up their secretive influence campaigns in D.C.

Andrew Perez and Tim Zelina

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With calls for big tech companies to be broken up growing louder, Silicon Valley is flooding think tanks and nonprofits in the nation's capital with cash.

Tech giants Amazon, Facebook, and Google have spent \$33 million on Washington lobbying efforts so far this year, and their political action committees have donated \$900,000 to federal candidates this election cycle.

The companies have also used stealthier methods of influence, pouring money into dozens of influential conservative and centrist think tanks and nonprofits. Many of the organizations don't disclose their donors. Although [Facebook](#), [Google](#), and [Amazon](#) voluntarily disclose their contributions to nonprofits, they don't say how much they've donated.

In recent years, the [New York Times](#) [has documented](#) how think tanks have become a key part of corporate and foreign influence campaigns. Even so, the policy shops are still generally treated as neutral arbiters by Beltway journalists who call them for quotes and invite them to write opinion pieces, and lawmakers who rely on the organizations for analysis.

"These companies now are running into the same problem that companies face with their political spending—their giving needs to be in line with their core values and positions," said Bruce Freed, who leads the Center for Political Accountability, a nonprofit that encourages companies to disclose their political contributions. "Conflicts can be highlighted and outed through social media, and it can affect a company's reputation."

On its website, Facebook [says](#) that it donates to a variety of trade organizations and nonprofits "because they are engaged in meaningful dialogue about either the internet or the local communities in which we operate."

"While we actively participate in these discussions and believe collaborative problem solving is the best way to address a problem and have the greatest impact, we do not always agree with every policy or position that individual organizations or their leadership take," the company states. "Therefore, our membership, work with organizations, or event support should not be viewed as an endorsement of any particular organization or policy."

An Amazon spokesperson said in an email: "Amazon works with organizations connected to the issues that affect our business, customers, and employees. It's common for us to work with

different groups based on evolving business priorities. That does not mean Amazon agrees with that organization 100 percent of the time.”

A spokesperson for Google did not respond to requests for comment.

QUIETLY FUNDING THINK TANKS THAT PROMOTE CLIMATE SCIENCE SKEPTICISM

Facebook and its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, has faced criticism for the company’s laissez-faire rules on political advertising, which allegedly allowed foreign agents to share content boosting President Donald Trump during the 2016 election.

Although Facebook has made it easier for users to figure out who’s paying for political ads on its website, the company also recently updated its advertising policies to allow politicians to run ads containing misinformation—a move the Trump campaign exploited immediately. Facebook employees recently sent a letter to Zuckerberg imploring the company to reverse the decision, arguing that “it communicates that we are OK profiting from deliberate misinformation campaigns by those in or seeking positions of power.”

Zuckerberg has also drawn scrutiny for holding private dinners with Republican lawmakers and conservative commentators and pundits.

Records show that Facebook, Google, and Amazon have quietly funded numerous conservative think tanks and nonprofits, some of which are among the nation’s most prominent peddlers of climate science skepticism.

The tech companies all donated last year to the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). Earlier this year, the conservative think tank urged Congress to support the Trump administration’s exit from the Paris climate accords. The organization has long warned of “climate alarmism.”

James Pethokoukis, an AEI fellow, published a column in *The Week* last year arguing that antitrust advocates’ criticisms of Facebook, Google, and Amazon, are “astonishingly weak.” More recently, he authored a blog post that highlighted the vast riches accumulated by the founders of Amazon, Facebook, and Google in a bid to claim that growing wealth inequality isn’t a problem, because they exploited advances in information technology rather than political connections.

“The big point here is that all of the sudden concern about wealth inequality should factor in an acknowledgement of how so many American fortunes are built,” he wrote. “It’s [because] of our economy’s superpowers.”

An AEI spokeswoman said that the think tank has a longstanding policy of not disclosing or discussing its donors, and that there’s a wall in place between AEI’s scholars and fundraising department so the scholars don’t know the source of the organization’s funds.

Google and Facebook have funded other organizations promoting climate change skepticism, including the Competitive Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation. Facebook has also donated to the State Policy Network; Google is sponsoring its annual meeting.

The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank cofounded by billionaire Charles Koch, has argued that people should be “extremely skeptical about predictions of entrenched monopoly power” for Silicon Valley’s biggest tech companies.

Facebook and Google have also donated to the American Action Forum, a policy group affiliated with the American Action Network, the dark money organization associated with House Republican congressional leaders. The American Action Forum has claimed that the Green New Deal, a resolution favored by progressives that would urge Congress to take action to mitigate climate change, would cost \$93 trillion.

Google has defended its donations to climate skeptics. Earlier this month, a spokesperson for the company told the Guardian: “We’ve been extremely clear that Google’s sponsorship doesn’t mean that we endorse that organization’s entire agenda—we may disagree strongly on some issues.”

Records show that Google also donated last year to the Independent Women’s Forum, a conservative dark-money organization that helped defend Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh during his confirmation process after he was accused by Christine Blasey Ford of sexually assaulting her when they were in high school.

ALSO FUNDING CENTRIST AND PRO-BUSINESS LIBERALS

The big tech companies have also funded center-left think tanks.

Facebook, Google, and Amazon all donated last year to the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI), a pro-business think tank that regularly sponsors briefings for Democratic elected officials. The organization doesn’t publicly disclose its donors.

In March, PPI published a blog post criticizing Democratic presidential candidate and Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren’s plan to break up big tech companies: “Sen. Warren’s call to break up America’s tech leaders may go down well with her party’s ‘democratic socialist’ faction,” the organization wrote. “It will no doubt be applauded by European regulators, who have also drawn a bead on U.S. tech companies. But to most voters, they symbolize American ingenuity and entrepreneurial prowess. Are those qualities progressives really should oppose?”

Google and Facebook donated last year to Third Way, another pro-business Democratic think tank. Facebook also donated to Center Forward, a moderate Democratic think tank that’s largely led by corporate lobbyists.

Amazon, Facebook, and Google all contributed last year to the Center for American Progress (CAP), a think tank closely aligned with the Democratic Party establishment in Washington. While the center’s president, Neera Tanden, has frequently criticized Facebook’s advertising policies, she defended Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos’s ownership of the Washington Post after Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders complained about the paper’s coverage of his Democratic presidential campaign.

CAP disclosed receiving at least \$50,000 from Google and \$5,000 from Facebook in 2018. On Wednesday, after MapLight reached out for comment, CAP updated its website to include a donation of at least \$5,000 from Amazon.

Google has long been a major funder of the New America Foundation, a left-leaning think tank. In 2017, the organization forced out the staffers working for its Open Markets team in 2017 after one of its scholars urged regulators to take on Google and Amazon.