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EYE ON ALEC

Don't Be Evil? Google Funding a Slew of Right-Wing Groups

December 4, 2013
by Nick Surgey

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This post originally appeared at [PR Watch](#).

Google, the tech giant supposedly guided by its “don't be evil” motto, has been funding a growing list of groups advancing the agenda of the Koch brothers.



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Organizations that received “substantial” funding from Google for the first time over the past year include Grover Norquist’s Americans for Tax Reform, the Federalist Society, the American Conservative Union (best known for its CPAC conference) and the political arm of the Heritage Foundation that led the charge to shut down the government over the Affordable Care Act: Heritage Action.

In 2013, Google also funded the corporate lobby group, the American Legislative Exchange Council, although that group is not listed as receiving “substantial” funding in the list published by Google.

US corporations are not required to publicly disclose their funding of political advocacy groups, and very few do so, but since at least 2010 Google has chosen to voluntarily release [some limited details](#) about grants it makes to US nonprofits. The published list from Google is not comprehensive, including only those groups that “receive the most substantial contributions from Google’s US Federal Public Policy and Government Affairs team.”

What Google considers “substantial” is not explained — no dollar amounts are given — but the language suggests significant investments from Google and, with a stock value of \$330 billion, Google has considerably deep pockets.

Google has a distinctively progressive image, but in March 2012 it hired former Republican member of the House of Representatives, Susan Molinari as its Vice President of Public Policy and Government Relations. According to the [New York Times](#), Molinari is being “paid handsomely to broaden the tech giant’s support beyond Silicon Valley Democrats and to lavish money and attention on selected Republicans.”

New “Substantial” Right-Wing Google Grants in Past Year

CMD examined the [information released by Google](#) for the years 2010 to 2013. The voluntary disclosures indicate that the following groups are either new grantees of Google since September 2012, or have been listed as having received a “substantial” Google grant for the first time:

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Detailed information on each of these groups can be found at CMD's [Sourcewatch](#) website.

Google Funding for Anti-Government Groups

Heritage Action, the tea-party styled political advocacy arm of the Heritage Foundation, is perhaps the most surprising recipient of Google's largesse.

More than any other group working to repeal the Affordable Care Act, Heritage Action [pushed for a sustained government shutdown](#) in the fall of 2013, taking the country to the brink of a potentially catastrophic debt default.

Laying the ground for that strategy, Heritage Action [held](#) a nine-city "Defund Obamacare Town Hall Tour" in August 2013, providing a platform for Texas Senator Ted Cruz to address crowds of cheering tea party supporters.

For Cruz, increasingly spoken of as a 2016 presidential candidate, the government shutdown helped raise his profile and build his supporter — and donor — base.

Notably, Heritage Action [received \\$500,000](#) from the Koch-funded and Koch-operative staffed Freedom Partners in 2012. It is not yet known how much Heritage Action received in 2013 from sources other than Google.

Perhaps surprisingly, Google has a history of supporting Cruz. Via its Political Action Committee — Google Inc. Net PAC — the PAC provided the "Ted Cruz for Senate" campaign with a \$10,000 contribution in 2012. Additionally, despite being five years out from the freshman senator's next election, Google's PAC has already made a \$2,500 contribution to the Cruz reelection campaign for 2018, the largest amount that the PAC has given so far to any Senate candidate running that election year, according to [disclosures made by Google](#).

Americans for Tax Reform (ATR), the anti-government group run by Republican operative Grover Norquist, was another new recipient of funding from Google in 2013. ATR is [best known](#) for its "Taxpayer Protection Pledge," and for its fundamentalist attacks on any Republican who might dare to vote for any increase in taxes. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, ATR received [85 percent of its funding in 2012](#) (\$26.4 million) from the ultra-partisan Karl Rove-run Crossroads GPS, another dark money group.

ATR President Grover Norquist famously said that he wants to shrink government "[down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub](#)." Google's position on the relative size of government versus bathtubs is not known, but according to a [Bloomberg analysis](#) of Google's US corporate filings, it avoids approximately \$2 billion dollars globally in tax payments each year through the use of creative tax shelters.

[Bloomberg reported](#) in May 2013 that in France alone Google is in the midst of a dispute over more than \$1 billion in unpaid taxes that have been alleged. An August 2013 report by US PIRG — "[Offshore Shell Games](#)" — found that Google is now holding more than \$33 billion dollars offshore, avoiding taxes on these earnings in the United States.

National Taxpayers Union, headed by former eleven-year American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) Executive Director Duane Parde, has a similar anti-tax, anti-government agenda, and it also [received funding from Google](#) in 2013.

Google Sponsor Event Honoring Justice Thomas

Google also recently [sponsored a gala fundraiser](#) in Washington DC for the Federalist Society, a network of right-wing judges and lawyers that includes Supreme Court Justices Samuel Alito, John

Roberts, Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas. Justice Thomas was the guest of honor at that event, for which Google was listed as a top-tier “gold” sponsor. Google [names the Federalist Society](#) on its list of groups receiving its most substantial grants in 2013.

The company is also funding state special interest group operations. The Center for Media and Democracy, which publishes PRWatch, recently posted a [major national report](#) on the State Policy Network (SPN), a network of right-wing think tanks, with at least one organization in every state in the country. SPN groups typically promote a pro-corporate agenda, often at the expense of the interests of ordinary working people.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF), which is part of SPN, also received money from Google in 2013. As Progress Now’s state affiliate and CMD have [documented](#), the legislative agenda promoted by TPPF includes opposing renewable energy, blocking access to affordable healthcare and opposing state minimum wage laws.

Google, which did not respond to a request for comment, may argue that it simply funds groups on both sides of the political spectrum, providing other grants to organizations that advocate on behalf of values more closely associated with the corporation’s progressive image. Since Google does not release details of all its grantees and the dollar amounts, it is hard to judge this, although [they do disclose](#) providing funding to some progressive groups including the American Constitution Society, People for the American Way and the NAACP.

Although Google has funded both “conservative” and “progressive” groups, it does not disclose the relative proportions given to each, beyond the superficial symmetry, and the degree to which the groups tilt to the right or left in their agendas.

However, as noted by CMD’s Executive Director, Lisa Graves, “there really aren’t two proportionate sides to the facts about the climate changes that are underway, as to whether working people should be paid a living wage and whether corporations should have to pay taxes just like working people do. By funding extreme groups on the right under the guise of a false equivalency, Google is enabling groups that seek to undermine government.”

Google Membership in ALEC, Funding of CEI

Since CMD launched [ALECexposed.org](#) in 2011, revealing the complete agenda of that corporate front group that was secretly voted on by corporate lobbyists and state legislators behind closed doors, corporations have been [running to escape](#) association with the group. At least 50 corporations are known to have dropped funding since 2011, including Walmart, Coca Cola and Pepsi. Google – along with Facebook and Yelp – is bucking that trend having quietly joined in 2013. Google does not list ALEC as being a recipient of one of its largest grants, instead it [separately names](#) ALEC as an organization to which it has become a member.

There are many good reasons for brand-conscious corporations to stay away from ALEC. For example, its [legacy of Stand Your Ground](#) gun laws and bills to make it [harder for Americans to vote](#), its work to [repeal renewable energy laws](#) and the ability of the [EPA to regulate greenhouse gases](#) and its efforts to privatize almost everything, are just a few of its extreme measures.

ALEC is a corporate-funded lobby group, and the businesses that fund ALEC do so hoping to move a legislative agenda. An [ALEC publication](#) sent to corporate members in 1995, celebrated its legislative agenda to members as a “good investment,” stating clearly “nowhere else can you get a return that high.” As CMD’s Lisa Graves has said, “It’s a pay-to-play operation.”

Google joined ALEC just this year, and stepped up funding to groups such as ATR, Federalist Society and Heritage Action in 2013, but under the radar it has been funding a handful of other right-wing groups for several years. In 2013 Google provided a reported [\\$50,000 sponsorship check](#) to the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), another group trying to thwart efforts to address climate change, but it has previously funded “[Google Policy Fellows](#)” at CEI for several years, and has listed the organization as one that it has supported financially on its “[transparency](#)” pages for at least three years.

Google [states that its fellows](#) “work closely with CEI scholars to research and promote innovative, pro-consumer solutions to the public policy challenges of the information age.” Whatever projects Google fellows end up working on at CEI, the Google brand is now tied to an organization that has a reputation strongly connected to the denial of climate change.

“Political spending for corporations is purely transactional. It is all about getting policies that

maximize profitability,” Bob McChesney told CMD. “So even ostensibly hip companies like Google invariably spend lavishly to support groups and politicians that pursue decidedly anti-democratic policy outcomes. It is why sane democracies strictly regulate or even prohibit such spending, regarding it accurately as a cancer for democratic governance.” Professor McChesney co-founded the media reform group Free Press in 2002, and this year authored *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy*.

The policies advocated by some of the Google's grantees are in stark contrast with the progressive image that Google has worked to promote. It has [publicly committed to invest](#) more than \$1 billion dollars in renewable energy projects, reduce the use of cars by its employees, power its offices with renewables and otherwise green its buildings. The contrast between these promises, and Google's funding of groups that deny or challenge the reality of climate change – groups motivated by funding received from fossil fuel companies – has led several organizations to launch campaigns calling for Google to stop funding climate change deniers. Forecast the Facts has a “Hey Google! Don't Fund ALEC's Evil!” petition, and Sum of Us has a petition calling on Google to “never fund climate change deniers again.”

ALEC is holding its next conference in Washington, DC, from December 4th through the 6th. A Google lobbyist will likely be there, celebrating ALEC's 40th anniversary alongside legislators and other lobbyists. CMD will report on the events of the conference through the week at [PRWatch.org](#). To sign CMD's petition to Google CEO Larry Page, calling for him to publicly quit ALEC, [click here](#).



Nick Surgey is director of research at the Center for Media and Democracy. His work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian*.

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