



# Tracking the Dirty Dollars: Givers to and Takers in California's Legislature

## February 2021 Update

Campaign donations, independent expenditure campaigns, and direct gifts from individuals and special interests, including polluting industries, help elected officials achieve their political ambitions. Interest groups representing or aligned with polluting interests exploit this unfortunate reality to gain and maintain access to decision makers. This access often translates into votes in an industry group's favor.

[In November of 2020, Sierra Club California launched a survey of certain special interest spending to legislators.](#) We call this the *Tracking the Dirty Dollars Project* and our specific interest is in researching and disclosing contributions to legislators and the governor from the fossil fuel industry and its closest political allies.

This is an updated version of the November report. The November report looked only at so-called "Mod Dems", those Democratic legislators whose votes are hard to get on bills that touch fossil fuel interests. In this edition, we continue to track those legislators, but have also added all Republican state legislators and all of the members -- Democrat and Republican -- who won their first elections to either house in November. We tracked all the dirty donations they received from 2019-2020. We plan to add the remaining Democratic legislators when we release another update following the April 30, 2021 deadline for the first quarter 2021 reporting, and then after each quarterly report deadline after that. Thus, our next reports this year will be in May, August and November.

One additional notable change in the February Update is that we have excluded donations from the labor organizations who have often aligned themselves with the fossil fuel industry, including the California State Building and Construction Trades Council and the Pipe Trades. We have not revised the datasheets from the previous reports to exclude these labor groups, but we no longer include them in this or future updates of this report.

### **Why this Report is Necessary**

The oil and methane gas industries -- along with industries and labor groups that benefit from their polluting practices -- have an outsized influence in the Capitol. They not only can hire more lobbyists with their wealth, they can provide large donations to buy expensive tickets to breakfasts, lunches, dinners, receptions and golf tournaments designed to bring in the bucks for legislators' campaigns.

We have become increasingly frustrated at how difficult it is to advance pro-environment legislation through a legislature with Democratic super majorities in both houses. We have been similarly disheartened by how difficult it is to stop polluter-friendly bills. These reports are an effort to shed some light on why this difficulty exists even when a party whose platform supports environmental action has a clear vote advantage.

Most campaign spending goes unnoticed by the general public. It takes time and effort to monitor and wade through expenditure reports. It is our hope that the data we present in our spreadsheets will make it easier for the public to follow how the oil and gas money and influence flows to elected officials.

### **How We Put this Report Together**

The Secretary of State's website ([sos.ca.gov](https://sos.ca.gov)) has a powerful tool to research elected officials' campaign contributions. We used the aptly named "Power Search" tool to collect the vast majority of the data in this report.

Using that tool, we identified oil and gas companies and other fossil-fuel-linked entities that make direct donations. We also identified political action committees that receive oil and gas donations. With this information, we created a list of polluting donors.

Then for each elected leader, we downloaded a spreadsheet with all of their reported donations from 2019 and through the end of 2020. We filtered out all the donors that were not included on our donor list. This process left us with only the donations each leader received from the donors we selected. The result of our efforts are displayed on each elected leader's spreadsheet.

The Secretary of State's website also features a Power Search tool for independent expenditures. Independent expenditures are funds spent on an independent campaign in support of or against a candidate's campaign. The independent expenditure campaign is required by law to operate without communication with the candidate's campaign.

Using the Power Search tool, we downloaded the independent expenditures and noted any polluter or polluter-adjacent expenditure in support of an elected leader on the leader's spreadsheet page.

Finally, we browsed dozens of documents on CalAccess which report gifts -- often in the form of food, drink or spa treatment -- from monied interests to elected leaders. If we found any gifts from polluters or polluter-adjacent entities, we reported them on the appropriate elected leader's spreadsheet.

## **Why We Chose these Donors: The Three Ps**

The donors we selected fit into one of three categories:

1. **Polluters:** These are companies or groups whose members are directly responsible for refining, extracting or burning fossil fuels;
2. **Polluter-Adjacent:** These are companies or interest groups who benefit from the use of fossil fuels and have actively worked against legislation that would contain fossil fuels or their byproducts; or
3. **PAC:** A Political Action Committee (PAC) pools campaign contributions from various like-minded interests and then donates to candidates or independent expenditure campaigns or directly on independent campaign activity (such as mailers).

For example, Chevron, Exxon Mobil and Sempra (which owns SoCal Gas) are all directly responsible for refining, extracting and/or burning fossil fuels. They are some of the polluters featured on our donor list.

Dart Container, a plastics manufacturer, is polluter-adjacent as it uses petroleum to create its products. BNSF railway transports fossil fuels and therefore is also among those analyzed as polluter adjacent. The California Building Industry Association, which represents mostly subdivision builders, is included because it has been one of the most assertive opponents of getting gas out of new construction.

The PACs we included were selected because they received substantial amounts of money from polluter or polluter-adjacent contributors. The PACs sheet on our document shows from which contributors on our donor list the PACs received money.

## **Why We Chose These Leaders**

In the November 2020 edition of this report, we focused on Democrats whose votes we have struggled to secure on environmental- and health-protective legislation. These democrats remain in this edition and we will continue monitoring them going forward.

In this report, we have added Democrats and Republicans who were elected in November of last year to a new seat in the legislature, including those who moved from one house to another. We also added all returning Republican legislators to the updated report. In our May report, we will add the returning Democratic legislators, so that that report will cover everyone serving in the legislature through the first quarter of this year.

Governor Gavin Newsom, Senate President Pro Tem Toni Atkins and Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon were included in our first report because they are in leadership positions and they have an outsized role in determining the fate of legislation, and will continue to be included in every report..

## What We Learned

For a detailed look at which dirty donors are funding each elected leader's campaign, simply flip through the spreadsheets of this report.

This edition of the report gives us some reasons for hope. Newly elected Assembly members Steve Bennett, Alex Lee and Dave Min reported no Dirty Dollars in their campaigns. Returning Senator Josh Newman also ran a campaign sans Dirty Dollars along with Senator Monique Limon (a champion for us during her time in the Assembly). Assemblymember Chris Ward and Senator Dave Cortese each received only about \$2,000 in dirty dollar contributions.

This edition was not void of bad news, however. Newly elected Democratic Assemblymember Carlos Villapudua was the beneficiary of a whopping \$1.6 million in independent expenditures supporting his campaign and an additional \$900,000 opposing his opponent Kathy Miller. All of these funds were from an oil-backed PAC called "Coalition to Restore California's Middle Class, Including Energy Companies who Produce Gas, Oil, Jobs and Pay Taxes."

Returning Republican Assemblymember Steven Choi benefited from over \$100,000 in independent expenditures from the Chevron-backed PAC "Keeping Californians Working, a Coalition of Housing Providers, Energy and Insurance Agents."

Again, note the amounts are lower for newly analyzed leaders at least partly because we have excluded the labor groups from this iteration.

## How the Read and Use the Data Sheet

The data sheets that are the heart of our report are presented as an excel workbook composed of many spreadsheets. The first spreadsheet is a title page, followed by a table of contents. The third spreadsheet is the list of donors we tracked. The list includes polluters, polluter-adjacent or polluter-backed Political Action Committees (PACs).

The fourth spreadsheet outlines from which polluting donors the PACs we included received contributions. The PACs run down the side and the donors are listed across the top. The table itself is filled in with the amounts of money the polluting donors gave to corresponding PACs.

Most of the remaining spreadsheets includes the contributions from polluting donors given to the campaigns of each of the legislators in this report. The third-to-last spreadsheet shows the contributions from dirty donors to the governor. The final two spreadsheets list contributions from dirty donors to the Democratic and Republican parties respectively.

Each page of the report includes a link back to the Table of Contents. If you are looking for specific legislators, it is best to navigate through the Table of Contents. Otherwise, flip through the sheets and enjoy the journey.

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