

Corporations recoil from eight Pa. GOP vote 'objectors,' suspending their money

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JESSICA GRIFFIN / Staff Photographer

Like many corporations that give heavily to politicians, Comcast Corp. prefers to do its spending quietly and to shower its money among Democrats and Republicans alike. It rewards incumbency, not party.

All of that changed Monday when the Philadelphia-based cable and internet

giant called the violence at the Capitol “appalling” — and suspended PAC donations to the politicians, exclusively Republican, who voted not to certify the results of the presidential election.

About 20 other large corporations made a similarly bold move, choosing to make a blunt and public intervention in our hypercharged national political debate. A somewhat smaller number of firms suspended PAC donations to everybody, both Democrat and Republican, a safer step that sent a message of concern to an alarmed public while not actually angering any specific politician or party.

In Pennsylvania, an Inquirer analysis shows, the eight GOP members facing a donations freeze — only one of the state’s nine Republican congressmen didn’t object to the vote outcome — took in \$650,000 from nearly 35 firms that are now reconsidering their contributions.

The eight representatives, along with the other 139 GOP politicians nationwide who questioned the election results, have also sustained a serious reputational blow. None of the eight commented for this article.

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That said, the prospect of losing future corporate donations may not totally unnerve the GOP eight. The \$6500,00 from the firms amounts to just 4% of the \$15 million they raised in the last two years. And, of course, among the top 30 givers to the eight Pennsylvania congressmen, about half the firms made no announcement about temporarily stopping donations.

Significantly, most firms that did change course promised only to suspend their PACs’ donations pending a review.

The paper sought comment from the GOP objectors in the House. Seven — Dan Meuser, Fred Keller, John Joyce, Mike Kelly, Guy Reschenthaler, Lloyd Smucker, and Glenn Thompson — did not return messages. A spokesperson for the eighth, U.S. Rep. Scott Perry referred questions to campaign staff, who did not respond.

They come from districts across Pennsylvania, many of which are largely rural and generally populated by strong supporters of President Donald Trump. The only Republican in the U.S. House to vote to certify the results last week was Brian Fitzpatrick, from Bucks County.

The Inquirer also reached out to more than two dozen firms whose PACs were among the biggest donors to the Pennsylvania objectors. Regardless of their stand on campaign donations, company after company condemned the violence in Washington last week

Bruce Freed, president of the Center for Political Accountability in Washington, D.C., which tracks corporate disclosures on political spending, said corporations had been deeply shaken by the Capitol melee.

"There's a recognition that political spending carries a serious risk," he said. "That risk was increased exponentially because of what happened last week."

Freed noted the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable for Fortune 500 executives, and even the highly conservative National Association of Manufacturers all spoke out last week on the need for a peaceful transition of power to President-elect Joe Biden. "Companies have to ask, 'do we rethink our role?' " Freed said.

If you're running for Congress, Comcast Corp. is often a good friend to have.

The iconic Philadelphia firm ranks high among largest corporate political donors in the country, [giving more than \\$2.5 million to federal candidates](#) in the last election cycle, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Its money was split 54% to Republicans, 46% to Democrats.

The funding was doled out by its political action committee. Its PAC, like others in the business world, is funded by employees; corporations are forbidden from making direct federal campaign donations.

During the 2019-2020 campaign cycle, the Comcast PAC donated \$162,500 to Pennsylvania's congressional delegation, giving substantial amounts to Republicans and Democrats alike. The 18-member House delegation is evenly split between the two parties.

It was the largest corporate donor to the eight GOP members of Pennsylvania's delegation who objected to the electoral college results, according to the Inquirer analysis of campaign finance data from the Center for Responsive Politics.

Comcast's PAC contributed \$82,500 in total to those Pennsylvania objectors, the analysis shows — a big part of the \$1 million the group received from 30 of the top corporate donors combined.

Next in line as a corporate giver was FirstEnergy Corp., an Ohio-based power company with a substantial Pennsylvania customer base. It gave \$69,500 to the eight objectors, and now says it has "paused political contributions while we evaluate our participation in the political process."

Koch Industries, the conglomerate known for its massive financial backing for conservative causes, was the next most generous. Its PAC gave \$60,000 to the eight — and nothing to any Democrat in the Pennsylvania U.S. House delegation. The company did not respond to a request for comment on its

future plans.

The next-largest donors were companies affiliated with the Blue Cross Blue Shield insurance network, listed as having given a total of \$53,600 to the eight. The network was one of the first to announce, as reported by the newsletter Popular Information, that it would "suspend contributions to those lawmakers who voted to undermine our democracy."

Philadelphia-based Independence Blue Cross, part of the network, stated flatly on Tuesday that it was joining in the decision.

"We share the deep disappointment in elected officials who attempted to thwart the peaceful transfer of power in our country, which is the cornerstone of our democracy," Stephen P. Fera, the health insurer's top in-house lobbyist, said in a statement. "It is important to note that our local Congressional delegation voted to certify the results of the presidential election.

Of the firms who targeted objectors for a donations suspension, seven gave to the Pennsylvania objectors. Along with Comcast and the Blue Cross network, they include the PACs for such firms as AT&T, the Allentown-based power company PPL Corp., the MassMutual life insurance company, the Philadelphia law firm of Cozen O'Connor and Walmart, the retail giant. They gave a total of \$347,000 to the eight GOP objectors.

AT&T donated \$42,000 to the Pennsylvania objectors. It said the employees on its PAC board "decided to suspend contributions to members of Congress who voted to object to the certification of Electoral College votes last week."

PPL's PAC donated \$40,000 to objectors. "We carefully consider the actions and positions of elected officials and will be suspending indefinitely support

for those lawmakers who voted against certification of electoral college votes," the firm said Tuesday.

MassMutual said its political action committee "has suspended contributions to any candidate who voted against certification of the 2020 presidential election results for any state." Its PAC gave \$20,000 to Pennsylvania objectors.

The PAC of Cozen O'Connor made \$20,000 in donations to Pennsylvania objectors. In suspending PAC contributions to them, Michael Heller, the firm's CEO, said "members of Congress who do not support the peaceful transfer of power do not align with our values."

As for Walmart, it also gave \$20,000 to the group of eight.

It's not known how long the suspensions on contributions announced by these firms and others will last, and it is early days for the next campaign cycle.

And even large donations by the likes of Comcast amount to just a fraction — less than 1% in Comcast's case — of the \$15 million in total raised by the eight Pennsylvania objectors.

Unlike those targeting their suspensions, other companies reached by the Inquirer said they are pausing campaign donations across the board, and did not specify for how long.

Among donors to the GOP group in Pennsylvania who adopted this position were UPS, Marathon Petroleum, UnitedHealth Group, Raytheon Technologies, the Ernst & Young accounting firm, and Land O'Lakes.

Malvern-based Vanguard said it had already paused its PAC activity in December even before the violence "to allow for a thorough review of our

program."