

# SustainableViews

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## US business interests deeply embedded in election

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By [Elizabeth Meager](#)

**Corporate influence on US elections is widespread, with companies and trade associations using substantial financial resources to sway political campaigns and public opinion**

### At a glance

- Businesses across the US play a pivotal role in campaign financing, typically funnelling money via trade associations in support of — or against — candidates or policies
- Companies and trade associations across sectors have financed candidates who favour deregulation and oppose environmental protections to the tune of billions in this election cycle alone
- Companies face reputational risks due to undisclosed contributions to trade associations involved in highly sensitive political issues, including climate and healthcare

When Tesla chief executive Elon Musk took the stage at a rally for Donald Trump at Madison Square Garden in late October, he became the latest face of a long-standing trend in US elections: corporate involvement in political campaigns.

Musk has donated more than \$119mn to Donald Trump's 2024 campaign, mostly via his political action committee, or PAC — tax-exempt organisations that pool campaign contributions, typically from employees.

Corporates across the US spend hundreds of millions of dollars each election cycle, donated either directly or via industry groups. Non-profit research group OpenSecrets [projects](#) total spending of \$15.9bn on the 2024 presidential elections, with PACs contributing at least \$2.6bn as of mid-October.

The 2024 US election is pivotal for the future of climate policy. Scientists have repeatedly warned this year that critical tipping points are being reached.

The two presidential candidates hold starkly [different views](#) on climate action. Democratic candidate Kamala Harris supports the Inflation Reduction Act, while Trump has [pledged to repeal it](#). Trump's pro-fossil fuel positioning has been buoyed by extensive donations from oil and gas companies: up to \$14.1mn as of the end of August, [18 times](#) more than the sector's donations to Harris's campaign.

"In the US, our system is heavily lopsided towards the fossil fuel industry," Deborah McNamara, executive director of ClimateVoice, a non-profit that encourages workers to push their employers towards progressive climate policy, tells Sustainable Views. "There is so much financial and political power propping up the fossil fuel industry."

### **Doing companies' dirty work**

Trade associations have a range of tactics that they employ on behalf of the companies they represent, in a bid to influence policy, politics and public opinion. These tactics range from donations to candidates at state and federal level, to adverts on key campaign issues — which, in this election, is energy.

"In most capitals [globally], trade associations do more lobbying than all other groups combined," says We Mean Business Coalition deputy policy director Dominic Gogol. "Particularly when it comes to political donations and advertising in specific states, that is where the trade groups have big budgets and are willing to use them to back their public policy decisions."

Trisa Thompson, a sustainability consultant who spent 20 years at tech company Dell, ultimately as chief responsibility officer, says trade associations offer companies "a great way to undercover".

"You might be a 'Maga' CEO, or you might be super liberal, but you don't really want to come out and say that either way, because you have customers all over the map," Thompson tells Sustainable Views. "If you really want to oppose something but don't want the negative headlines, you push it through your trade association and then no one knows who's in favour and who isn't. It's a major transparency issue."

Industry groups are notoriously opaque about who provides their funding and how much. Companies have also been reluctant historically to provide this information. In 2020, fewer than half of companies in the S&P 500 disclosed their election-related contributions to PACs and trade associations, [according to](#) the Center for Political Accountability. Among those that did disclose, two-thirds of their spending went to trade associations.

### **Corporate risks**

A good chunk of corporate money goes to "527" organisations. Like PACs they are tax-exempt entities created to influence elections, but unlike PACs they are not subject to contribution or spending caps. While they cannot make direct contributions to federal candidates, they wield their influence indirectly by raising awareness or advocating for specific issues. The Democratic and Republican governors' associations are 527 organisations, although many others are focused on a single or a regional issue.

Since 2010, just over half of S&P 500 companies have donated to these groups, with 61 per cent of all donations going to Republican-aligned 527s. The [CPA says](#) that while half of the S&P 500 does not donate directly to PACs or 527 organisations, some of the country's biggest businesses are “exposed to significant risks through their trade associations with these groups and the candidates they help to elect”.

“There’s a risk of corruption, as well as risks around recruitment, employee morale and consumer boycotts — we’ve seen all of this play out,” CPA president and co-founder Bruce Freed tells Sustainable Views. “The standard response is ‘we don’t agree with the trade association on everything’. But that’s a cop-out, because trade associations want companies’ money. [Companies] can tell them not to do it.”

### **Oil and gas: clear motives**

When the Biden administration announced a pause on liquefied natural gas exports in January 2024, InfluenceMap [research](#) identified a spike in adverts across Facebook and Instagram from oil and gas-focused trade associations such as the American Petroleum Institute, as well as from the US Chamber of Commerce. The adverts “promote false claims about LNG’s environmental benefits”, distorting the public conversation, InfluenceMap analyst Mohammed Nasif said at the time.

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*Trisa Thompson, sustainability consultant*

“It was very intentional, and very clear that its goal was to influence public opinion — and many of them were ending up in key election states” such as Pennsylvania, California, Texas, Florida and New York, Nasif tells Sustainable Views.

Chevron, Shell, and Exxon have [disclosed](#) that they pay between \$5mn and \$12.5mn a year for their API memberships.

A spokesperson for the API told Sustainable Views that the Department of Energy’s export permit pause “is not based in sound policy”, and that the organisation will continue to urge the DoE to “stop playing politics with global energy security”.

### **General business: murkier motives?**

Some trade associations have an obvious stake in specific outcomes. It is self-evident that the API has interests in the continuation of fossil fuel production in the US.

But for organisations like the Chamber of Commerce and Business Roundtable, which represent thousands of businesses across sectors and regions in the country, the motives are less clear. Business Roundtable and the chamber’s climate policy engagement mirrors the interests of fossil fuel advocacy groups, aligning most closely with the API and the American Gas Association, according to ClimateVoice [research](#) published in October 2024.

And not all of the biggest contributors to the chamber are fossil fuel companies. ClimateVoice estimates that Chevron and Exxon are among the biggest, contributing between \$500,000 and

\$2.4mn in fees annually, but consumer goods groups PepsiCo and Johnson & Johnson, pharmaceuticals company Pfizer and car manufacturer Ford all provide upwards of \$500,000 to the industry group every year. ClimateVoice calls this “guilt by trade association”.

Because of the wide range of issues covered by 527 organisations over the past decade, companies and trade associations have financially contributed to the blocking of clean air standards, attacks on the Affordable Care Act, gerrymandering, and restrictions on abortion, [according to](#) the CPA. In 2018, the chamber was the biggest trade association donor to the Republican State Leadership Committee, which helped fund efforts to introduce restrictions on abortion.

A spokesperson for Business Roundtable told Sustainable Views that its members are committed to combating climate change. The Chamber of Commerce did not respond to request for comment.