



NOV. 1, 2018 6:15 PM

[Oil industry spends millions to boost California Democrats](#)

Laurel Rosenhall

The California Democratic Party no longer accepts donations from the oil industry, viewing that as politically unsavory for a party pushing to curb climate change. But that hasn't stopped oil companies from spending millions to help California Democrats win on Tuesday.

Instead of giving money to the party, oil companies are donating directly to Democratic candidates and pouring huge sums into outside groups that campaign for a mix of Democrats and Republicans.

The petroleum industry has put \$19.2 million into California politics in the 2017-18 election cycle, according to a CALmatters analysis of campaign finance data. Much of it is helping Republicans, including \$2 million to the California Republican Party and a portion of the roughly \$14 million the industry has put into independent committees supporting some politicians from both parties.

But the oil money helping California Democrats is significant. It includes:

- More than \$853,000 in direct contributions to 47 Democrats running for Assembly and Senate—including powerful leaders of both houses of the Legislature—and to the campaigns of Democratic Attorney General Xavier Becerra and to Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor, state Sen. Ed Hernandez.
- More than \$2.8 million on an independent campaign to help Democrat Susan Rubio win a Los Angeles-area state Senate seat

- More than \$343,000 on an independent campaign supporting the re-election of Democratic Assemblyman Rudy Salas of Bakersfield
- Nearly \$160,000 to a committee that campaigns for business-friendly Democrats

In addition, oil companies and other business interests are pooling funds on campaigns supporting other Democrats running for the Legislature: Tasha Boerner-Horvath of Encinitas, Sabrina Cervantes of Riverside, James Ramos of San Bernardino, Bob Archuleta of Pico Rivera, Vanessa Delgado of Montebello, Freddie Rodriguez of Pomona and Sydney Kamlager of Los Angeles.

It's all part of a broader push by business interests in recent years to shape the *type* of Democrats who hold power in the state Capitol. As the Republican Party has diminished in California and progressive activists nudge the Democratic Party leftward, big business has helped foster a cadre of more conservative Democrats in the Legislature. This "mod squad" amounts to a bloc that can kill or water-down environmental legislation.

"For years I would have to convince the business community every election cycle that a moderate Democrat is good for them. Not as great as a Republican who would do everything they tell them to, but better than a liberal Democrat," said David Townsend, a political consultant who runs a business-backed political action committee that works to elect Democrats.

"I don't have to make that argument anymore. It's patently clear," he said. "Now it's a question of who is a mod and how much can (business) help?"

Chevron, Valero and Phillips 66 are among the businesses working to elect Democrats through Townsend's PAC and others like it. The companies are members of the Western States Petroleum Association, which doesn't give political donations but lobbies in Sacramento.

"We're focused on bringing the conversation around energy back to the middle and away from the polarized extremes," Catherine Reheis-Boyd, president of the petroleum association, said in a statement.

But many environmentalists see this kind of centrism as anathema to Democratic party principles. The California Democratic Party's platform calls for a moratorium on fracking and a new tax on fossil fuel extraction—ideas that have failed in the Democratic-controlled Legislature.

“Our fear is that if oil companies are pouring money into candidates even before they're elected, if they are elected, what will be their moral compass when there are issues with the refineries or natural gas power plants?” said Diana Vazquez, a policy manager with the California Environmental Justice Alliance.

The group ranks legislators every year on their environmental records. One of the low-scoring Democrats this year is Salas, the Bakersfield assemblyman benefitting from big spending by the oil industry, a major employer in his oil-rich region.

The environmental group gave an even lower score to Assemblywoman Blanca Rubio—the sister of Susan Rubio, who is running for state Senate with more than \$2.8 million in support from petroleum. Environmentalists are supporting her Democratic opponent, Mike Eng.

Susan Rubio's spokesman touted her work on parks funding and other environmental issues as a Baldwin Park council member, and said her sister's track record doesn't indicate how she'll vote.

Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon said that despite campaign support from Big Oil, Democrats have passed environmental measures that oil companies opposed—including legislation to curb offshore drilling and expand renewable energy.

“Does it influence individual members? I'm not sure,” Rendon said. “But as a body, I think we have a good record of standing up to oil.”

Yet Big Oil's influence in the state Capitol is why the chair of the California Democratic Party's environmental caucus pushed the party to ban oil company money at the end of 2016. (The Democratic National Committee followed suit

earlier this year but, facing blowback from labor unions that rely on oil industry jobs, quickly reversed course and overturned the ban.)

R.L. Miller, the party's state environmental caucus chair, said she's not surprised the petroleum industry has found other channels for spending on California Democrats this year.

"I've always known that it would be a long road," she said. "Getting the party not to take the money is a step, but the end goal here is to remove their influence in Democratic politics."