

Defense Industry Gives More To Bernie Than Any 2020 Candidate

Despite his frequent votes against defense bills, Senator Bernie Sanders has collected more presidential campaign contributions from defense industry sources than any other candidate, including Donald Trump. That's according to data on 2020 funding at the [OpenSecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org) website, which is sponsored by the Center for Responsive Politics.

As of early December, Sanders had out-collected Trump [\\$172,803](#) to [\\$148,218](#) in defense industry contributions, a difference of 17 percent. And his margin had been growing in October and November.

Among the top five defense contractors (Lockheed-Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, and General Dynamics), Sanders typically out-collected Trump by multiples. His receipts from [Lockheed Martin](#) and [Boeing](#) more than doubled Trump's; his intake from [General Dynamics](#) was almost threefold that of the president and his contributions from [Northrop Grumman](#) about fivefold. Only in the case of [Raytheon](#) did he fail to at least double the president's take.

Sanders also out-collected all of his Democratic rivals. His total defense industry contributions (\$172,803) roughly doubled those of [Pete Buttigieg \(\\$88,494\)](#) and [Elizabeth Warren \(\\$83,429\)](#), and more than tripled those of [Joe Biden \(\\$49,540\)](#). The rest fall even further behind. He also out-collected his Democratic rivals among each of the top five defense corporations, except in the case of Raytheon, which gave Buttigieg eight percent more.

Unless he's receiving defense industry money under the table from ostensibly non-defense PACs or via "[dark money](#)," Donald

Trump is performing remarkably poorly vis-à-vis several Democratic contenders, not just Sanders. Low overall performer Biden pulled more from Lockheed-Martin; Elizabeth Warren pulled more from General Dynamics and Boeing; Warren, Buttigieg and Biden drew more from Raytheon and Northrop Grumman.

For someone polling as a front-runner, Biden attracted less money from among defense contractors: he ranks near [Andrew Yang](#) in the lower tier.

The implications for the relationship of defense industry contributors to Sanders and the others may, or may not, be everything you might assume. Defense industry PACs, and the corrupting influence they have over compliant politicians, are not the source of this money. While PAC funds very much predominate in the recorded donations to members of Congress in the 2020 OpenSecrets.org data, none of the presidential candidates – even Trump – have accepted any recorded defense industry PAC money.

Instead, it all comes from what the OpenSecrets.org data show as “Individuals,” who are allowed to give only up to the federally allowed limit of \$2,800 per election. Thus, the money shown from corporations like Lockheed Martin is from individual donors who specified an association with Lockheed Martin in the paperwork associated with their contribution.

The data for Sanders may be illustrative. From OpenSecrets.org, it appears that Sanders has thousands of individual contributions from people who identified affiliations with Boeing and Lockheed Martin, though no donations appear to amount to the legal maximum, and most seem to be from engineers, technicians, and other non-management types.

Sanders has collected [more contributions from Boeing than any other recorded federal politician](#) and doubles the politicians

in second and third place. And the \$52,059 he collected from Boeing about doubles what he received from his next highest defense industry contributors, Northrop Grumman and Lockheed Martin. What might this mean?

A Google search of [Boeing and Sanders](#) reveals several articles in late 2018 discussing various charges by Sanders against Boeing management and in favor of union workers. It is possible that Sanders' unique performance in collecting Boeing-affiliated donations stems from this activity, especially if the unions affiliated with Boeing plants made his activity especially well known and prompted membership to be individually supportive.

That hypothetical explanation, however, does not mean that the donations from individuals strips the giving of collective influence and is no more than an expression of grassroots support unrelated to corporate interests. Indeed, OpenSecrets.org explains at its FAQ page that [“our research over more than 20 years shows enough of a correlation between individuals' contributions and their employers' political interests that we feel comfortable with our methodology.”](#)

Moreover, if it is correct that union-member donations from Boeing-affiliated individuals explains some significant part of Sanders' unique performance in collecting Boeing contributions, it would be the union, not the corporation, who might want to keep candidate Sanders reminded of their support and interests. Significantly, unions frequently lobby in favor of the defense products made in plants where they have representation. [The F-35 Strike Fighter is a good example](#). On some issues the difference is without distinction.

Influence peddlers from lobbyist shops, defense corporations and the Pentagon have evidence Sanders can be a receptive target of their ministrations. The fact that he and Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) were acquired as advocates of basing the Defense Department's [highly controversial F-35](#) in [Burlington,](#)

Vermont certainly hasn't gone unnoticed. Sanders describes himself as opposed to the F-35 but also receptive to the in-state economic benefits of the basing at Burlington.

Lobbyists for programs beyond the F-35 will never expect to convince him or his staff to reverse on an issue like President Trump's \$1.7 trillion plan to upgrade the U.S. nuclear triad of weapons and delivery systems, but perhaps they can convince him on the edges of some of the sub-issues, like proceeding with the new nuclear ballistic submarine and missile program, rather than to extend the life of the existing Trident program. Or, perhaps to eschew proposals to eliminate the ICBM leg of the Triad as several authors have already suggested.

Each example is hypothetical, but the methodology is always the same among defense industry and military spending operatives: you must get access to have a chance to make your case; contributions help to do that. In that industry, victories for even minor programs are worth billions.

Contributions do not automatically buy obedience, but they do create the opportunity for the advocate to make a case in front of the selected audience. That is their Constitutional right even without the money, but as a practical matter on Capitol Hill money enables access, and access pricks eardrums. My more than two decades of experience on Capitol Hill tells me that is exactly how they think.

No one should consider Sanders unique. The same logic applies to the other candidates, especially those, like Warren, who has also been a critic of defense spending. Those face-to-face meetings can help soften the rough edges in the relationship. That she collected more from Boeing than Trump seems to indicate an interest in having a relationship among Boeing-affiliated individuals. Biden and Buttigieg must be wondering why their more compliant approach to defense spending has not elicited more for them than the others: presidential campaigns

are buying seasons for defense lobbyists; the selling comes later.

A common refrain from the 2020 Democratic presidential candidates is that they collect no “corporate PAC” money. In the case of the defense industry they have no need to; they get plenty from “individuals.” [As one academic commented](#), by giving up any corporate PAC money, these candidates are basically “giving up the sleeves out of their vest.”

Salient lessons that can be learned from the data above are that Bernie Sanders is being targeted for future defense industry access, and Donald Trump is not pulling nearly as much public money from defense corporations as the Democrats – nor as one might expect.

There will be more to this story as the campaign proceeds. Trump may pound the table demanding more; Sanders may articulate his irritation with his first place status, but his returning the money is not likely. Biden and Buttigieg might even claim their lower status shows they are actually defense spending critics, which will be baloney. Warren is surely working on a plan.

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