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ACCOUNTABLE ALLIES

The Undue Influence
of Fossil Fuel Money
in Academia

By Bella Kumar

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Introduction

In recent years, fossil fuel combustion has been responsible for approximately 73 percent of the U.S.'s greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and 89 percent of the world's emissions. As GHG emissions have accumulated in the atmosphere, they have increased global average temperatures by almost 10 percent (more than 1 degree Celsius) since preindustrial times, and with them the intensity and frequency of costly natural disasters have increased as well. In 2020 alone, the U.S. spent \$145 billion on disaster recovery — more than the federal government spent on public health that year. While taxpayers have been forced to pick up the tab for the climate crisis, fossil fuel companies have continued to prosper. In 2021, leading fossil fuel companies made \$205 billion in profits, of which their executives pocketed \$394 million.

It's no mistake that fossil fuel companies have continued to make major financial gains through the climate crisis; fossil fuel industry executives, knowingly, have long misled the public about their impact on it. In fact, in 2022 a number of leading fossil fuel executives were subpoenaed by Congress in an investigation into their false and misleading climate commitments. In addition to decades of public disinformation campaigns, oil and gas companies have fought to control the political and even scientific discussions of the climate problem and its potential solutions. In public, fossil fuel executives make grand commitments to climate action; in private, however, they have led the charge against ambitious climate policy, funneling more than \$450 million into congressional lobbying since 2011. In the first three quarters of 2021 alone, they spent around \$82 million, including \$577,000 in campaign contributions to Senator Joe Manchin, who garnered significant media attention for stalling Congress' reconciliation package containing major investments in climate and clean energy last year.

Perhaps most dangerously of all, fossil fuel companies have been quietly leveraging their wealth to gain influence across higher education, including sponsorship of climate and energy-related research. Many of the nation's most prominent universities, including Harvard, MIT, and George Washington, are awash with fossil fuel funding, and scientists are ringing the alarm about the effects this money has on climate research. A new study revealed that favorability toward natural gas in research is directly related to a university's funding sources. Just as campaign donations are used to buy votes against climate action in Congress, research funding can be leveraged as an attempt to buy results or influence research priorities that benefit the fossil fuel industry's bottom line. Since last spring, more than 800 leading academics and climate experts — including Nobel Prize winners and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) authors — have signed a letter calling for an end to universities' financial entanglements with the fossil fuel industry for this very reason. Signatories underscored the “inherent conflict of interest” in fossil fuel industry/interest-funded climate research and called such funding ‘antithetical to universities’ core academic and social values,” pointing out that it serves to uphold companies’ greenwashing.

Recent Data for Progress polling finds that a majority of voters agree with the statement “colleges and universities studying the impacts of climate change and sustainability should refuse donations from fossil fuel companies so they can remain unbiased in their research,” indicating that this conflict of interest is clear to those outside of academia as well.

Data for Progress analyzed the contributions of key fossil fuel companies and allied interests to 27 universities across the US, including leading research universities. **ExxonMobil Corporation, BP America Inc., Chevron Corporation, Shell Oil Company, ConocoPhillips, and Koch Industries have donated or pledged at least \$677,373,368 between 2010 and 2020 to 27 universities. The top recipients of fossil fuel funding among these recipients were the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and George Mason University.**

In order to hold fossil fuel companies accountable, eliminate conflicts of interest within university funding streams, and end fossil fuel exploitation of the credibility of academic institutions, climate activists, allies, academics, and universities must work to establish funding transparency, institute robust conflict-of-interest and gift acceptance policies, and ban fossil fuel money in academic research, particularly climate research. With the added transparency of Data for Progress' [Accountable Allies project](#), university leaders, students, and local activists can hold corporations accountable to help put an end to the harmful and undue influence of the fossil fuel industry on academia.

University Complicity in the Climate Crisis

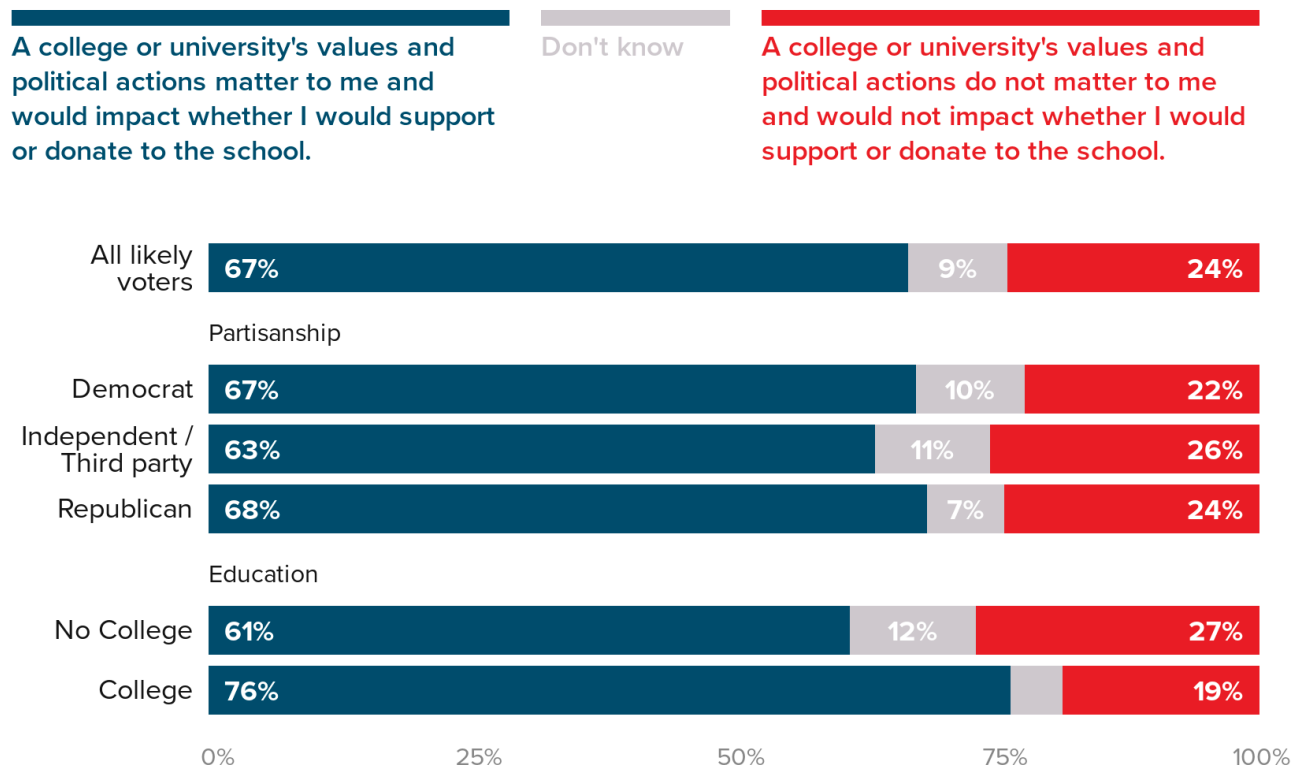
Universities occupy a unique role in the global economy as owners of massive amounts of intellectual and physical capital: the financialization of education has reduced the university to a place of business and the student to a [worker](#). Their ability to direct labor toward a particular cause and redefine issues is unmatched by any other group. Hundreds of U.S. universities, such as [Harvard University](#) and the [University of California, Berkeley](#), have recognized this and made [commitments](#) to support the fight against climate change. However, when these institutions look the other way as climate deniers, fossil fuel interests, and discredited backers of pseudoscience capitalize on their name and credibility, universities undermine these commitments and other positive actions.

University research partnerships with fossil fuel companies play a key role in bolstering these companies' reputations. When universities allow fossil fuel companies to buy and advertise connections to university research on key climate and energy issues, they provide these companies with much-needed scientific and cultural legitimacy. As stated by [Fossil Free Research](#), an organization that seeks to end the influence of fossil fuel money on academic research, "this is incredibly valuable to fossil fuel companies, as it allows them to report to policymakers, shareholders, and the media that they are working with globally respected institutions on transition solutions, greenwashing their reputation and cleansing their records of climate destruction."

Universities and the research they produce are critical to a rapid and just transition away from fossil fuels. Such efforts are fundamentally undermined by fossil fuel industry funding. Academics should not be forced to choose between researching climate solutions and aiding corporate greenwashing, nor should companies have the option to spread deliberate disinformation under university letterhead. And university actions are not lost on voters. In a national survey, Data for Progress [finds](#) two-thirds of likely voters (67 percent) agree that a college or university's values and political actions matter to them and would impact whether or not they would support or donate to the school. This includes 76 percent of college-educated voters and 61 percent of non-college-educated voters.

Most Voters Agree That a College's Values Matter to Them

When thinking about a college or university's values and political actions, which of the following comes closest to your view, even if neither is exactly correct?



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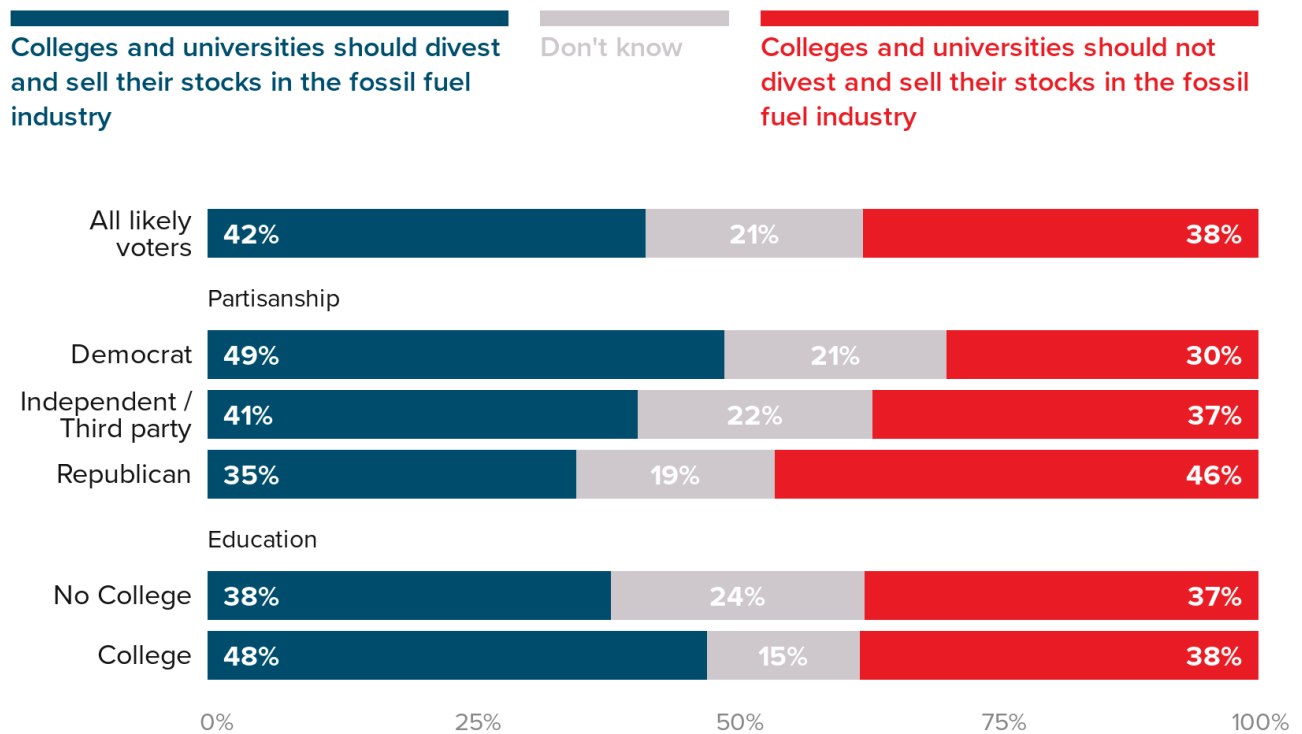
Many colleges and universities also use their endowment and financial resources to invest in fossil fuel company stocks. Divestment campaigns have spread across the world, with students demanding that their universities stop financing climate destruction. Voters are also calling for divestment: Data for Progress polling finds a plurality of voters (42 percent) agree that colleges and universities should divest and sell their stocks in the fossil fuel industry. This includes 48 percent of college-educated voters and 38 percent of non-college-educated voters, as opposed to 38 percent and 37 percent, respectively, stating that colleges should not sell their stocks in the fossil fuel industry.

A Plurality of Voters Agree That Colleges Should Divest From Fossil Fuels

Some colleges and universities use their endowment and financial resources to invest in fossil fuel company stocks.

Some have called for these colleges to **divest** their funding from the fossil fuel industry by selling their fossil fuel stocks.

When thinking about this, which of the following comes closest to your view, even if neither is exactly correct?



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The growing divestment movement is driven by the ever-increasing awareness about the relationship between universities, scientific research, and the fossil fuel industry — and the conflict of interest inherent in this relationship.

The Relationship Between Universities, Research, and the Fossil Fuel Industry

The relationship between universities, research, and the fossil fuel industry is becoming increasingly prevalent yet opaque. The universities highlighted in this work were selected for their stature, public influence, and demographic representation. This list cannot capture the extent to which the listed fossil fuel companies and their affiliates have contributed to these universities monetarily and otherwise; however, the companies selected represent those with particular prominence in the global economy and with a [track record](#) of disseminating [climate disinformation](#). The dollar figures presented have been found through a number of sources — including IRS 990 forms, foundation reports, school databases, school reports, news articles — and reflect the dollar value found in those sources. In certain cases, sources only disclosed the range of a donation value (e.g., \$100,000–\$499,999). In these instances, the dollar amount is represented by the minimum of the range. More information about our methodology can be found [here](#).

Publicly disclosed financial records reveal that leading fossil fuel companies donated and pledged at least \$677,373,368 to 27 universities between 2010 and 2020. Due to a lack of transparency across higher education, including instances where companies rescind or cut portions of university donations, it is unlikely that the funding listed below captures the full extent of fossil fuel industry funding at these universities.

University	Donation Amount
Arizona State University	\$10,732,921
Brown University	\$4,200,430
Colorado School of Mines	\$4,655,080
Columbia University	\$5,509,450
Duke University	\$5,116,555
Florida State University	\$11,553,232
George Mason University	\$63,935,218
George Washington University	\$4,463,083
Georgetown University	\$4,816,500
Georgia Institute of Technology	\$3,800,607
Harvard University	\$21,142,825
Iowa State University	\$19,814,754
Johns Hopkins University	\$1,311,211
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	\$40,475,798
Montana State University-Bozeman	\$6,330,101
Ohio State University	\$4,185,726
Princeton University	\$36,096,163
Rice University	\$27,681,709
Stanford University	\$56,622,194
Texas A&M University	\$26,490,970
University of California, Berkeley	\$154,302,577
University of Colorado, Boulder	\$7,048,633
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign	\$108,221,802
University of Michigan	\$1,874,100
University of Texas at Austin	\$45,421,866
University of Washington	\$126,054
Vanderbilt University	\$1,818,809
Total	\$677,373,368

An interactive version of this data can be found on the Accountable Allies project page [here](#).

Stanford University accepted at least \$56,622,194 from these companies between 2010 and 2020. Some of this funding is used for the [Stanford Program on Energy and Sustainable Development](#), [Stanford Global Climate and Energy Project](#), [Stanford Precourt Institute for Energy](#), [Stanford Natural Gas Initiative](#), and the [Stanford Energy Modeling Forum](#). In May 2022, Stanford University [announced](#) the new Doerr School of Sustainability. This research has advanced the interests of the fossil fuel industry in two ways: greenwashing and the corruption of climate research. The fossil fuel funders of clean energy and climate research at Stanford have been using these donations to [counter](#) claims that they are destroying the planet — a [greenwashing](#) tactic that distracts from the fact that their business model is nevertheless entirely dependent on oil, gas, and CO2 production. Additionally, their funding risks corrupting research produced by the Doerr School of Sustainability, as funders will likely want to curtail the release of reputation-harming data, making the new climate research biased at worst and [interest-conflicted](#) at best.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) accepted at least \$40,475,798 from these companies between 2010 and 2020, including funding for the MIT [Energy Initiative](#). In 2011, the initiative released a [report](#) that advocated for natural gas to be the bridge to a “low-carbon future,” dismissing [research](#) that found natural gas is, in fact, more harmful due to methane leaks. The following year, President Obama referenced MIT’s Ernest Moniz’s natural gas findings and appointed him secretary of energy, kicking off the [fracking boom](#) of the 2010s. This is another example of fossil fuel companies funding research to protect their public image, much like tobacco did half a century ago.

Columbia University accepted at least \$5,509,450 from these companies between 2010 and 2020. [Columbia’s Center on Global Energy Policy](#) (CGEP) has produced eight reports that, according to a recent Nature [study](#), were written by authors who were concurrently working on behalf of the natural gas industry. This study also found that these authors wrote the most positively about natural gas in comparison to similar research initiatives across higher education that did not receive industry funding, so much so that the center’s social media presence was almost indistinguishable from natural gas public relations campaigns. This fossil fuel-funded research distorts not only claims of unbiased research, but U.S. policymaking as well. In arguing for a lift on the U.S. oil export ban in 2015, Senate committee chairman Richard Shelby cited a [report](#) by CGEP entitled “Navigating the U.S. Oil Export Debate.” What’s more, in [documents](#) released by the U.S. House Oversight and Reform Committee, one BP executive remarked that the company’s relationships with universities such as Harvard, Tufts, and Columbia “are key parts of [BP’s] long-term relationship-building and outreach to policymakers and influencers in the US and globally.” Fossil fuel companies and their allies deliberately leverage the legitimacy of universities they fund to expand public perception that they are credible actors.

George Washington University (GW) accepted at least \$4,463,083 from ExxonMobil, Shell, and Koch Industries between 2010 and 2020. These funds have gone almost entirely to the [Regulatory Studies Center](#) (RSC), which crafts economic arguments that downplay the negative economic impacts of fossil fuel emissions. For example, in a 2019 [white paper](#), RSC scholar Brian Mannix claimed that “most of the efforts that have been made, by both governments and academics, to estimate the economic impacts of climate change have focused on global impacts. The effect on individual countries will vary dramatically, and in some cases may well produce a net benefit rather than a loss.” [Arguments](#) like these are published in journal articles and submitted as public comments to regulatory agencies. Invoking the credibility of the George Washington name, then RSC research cites fossil fuel [industry-funded statisticians](#), [established climate deniers](#), and allied economic consultants. In 2018, the EPA [cited](#) the work of RSC

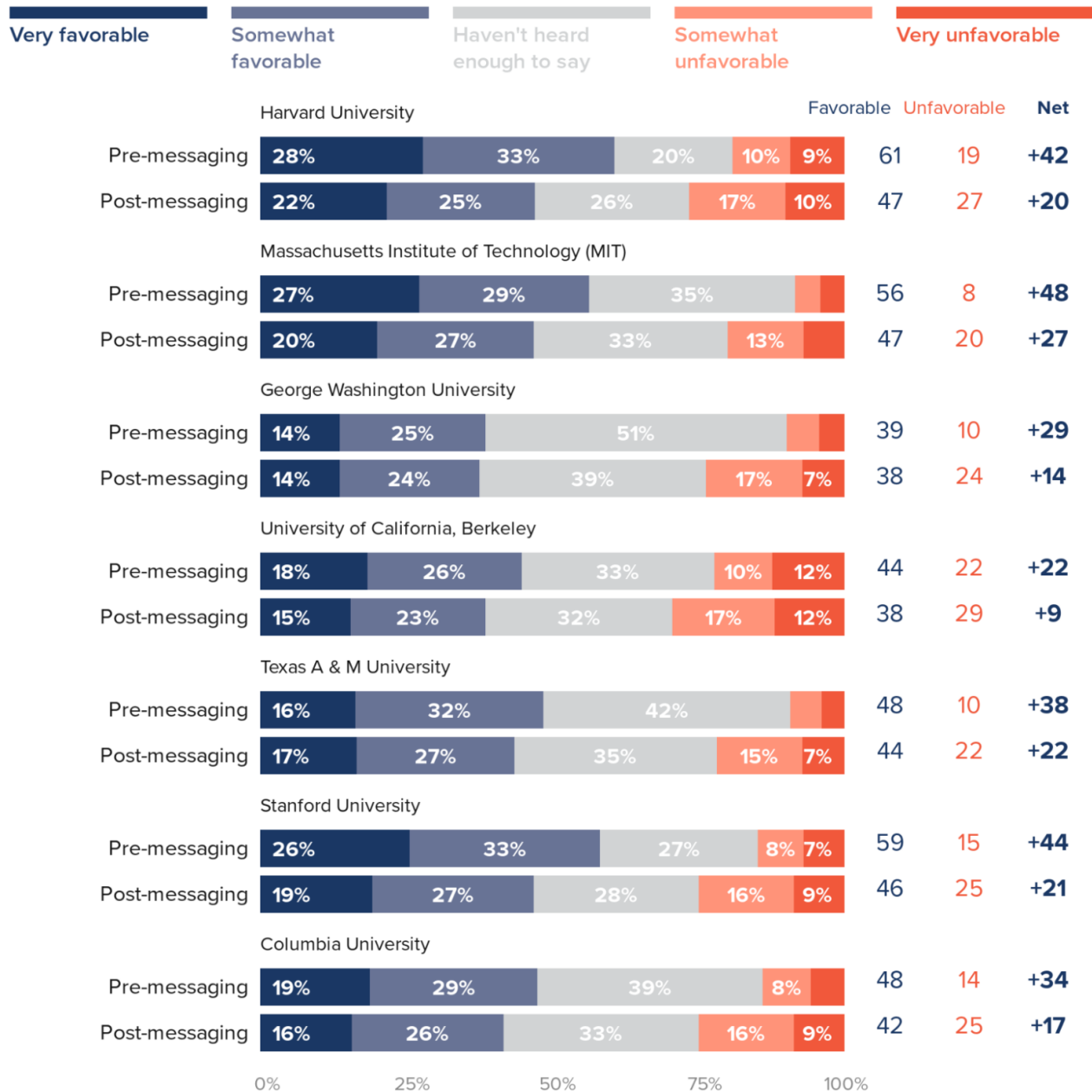
affiliates in its decision to substantially reduce the figure used to quantify the social harms of carbon emissions in environmental regulations, a clear blow to the climate movement.

These are just a few examples of the fossil fuel industry's impact on academia. The industry is just beginning to be held accountable for its disinformation campaigns, greenwashing, and attempts to bias climate and clean energy research. Beginning in February 2022, the House Oversight Committee conducted a series of hearings to examine the fossil fuel industry's role in climate disinformation and found that these companies have, indeed, issued misleading climate pledges to cover up the failure to take adequate steps to reach the goals of the Paris Agreement. Additionally, one of the most recent IPCC reports named climate disinformation as a barrier to climate action for the first time, noting "rhetoric and misinformation on climate change and the deliberate undermining of science have contributed to misperceptions of the scientific consensus, uncertainty, disregarded risk and urgency, and dissent." The fossil fuel industry has clearly impacted research, putting the entire academic integrity ecosystem at risk.

Voters were asked their opinions on Harvard, MIT, George Washington, UC Berkeley, Texas A&M, Stanford, and Columbia before and after telling them these universities have used donations from the fossil fuel industry to fund climate and environmental research in order to gauge how perspectives change pre- and post-messaging with this information. Harvard's favorability drops from 61 percent to 47 percent after respondents learn of the university's receipt of fossil fuel donations. The rest of the universities' favorability also declines, with Stanford showing a double-digit drop from 59 percent to 46 percent.

University Favorability Declines After Voters Learn of Fossil Fuel Donations Funding Climate Research

A number of colleges and universities, including Harvard, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), George Washington, UC Berkeley, Texas A&M, Stanford, and Columbia, have used donations from the fossil fuel industry to fund climate and environmental research. Knowing what you know, do you have a favorable or unfavorable view of the following institutions?



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It is clear that voter attitudes toward universities shift when they are made aware of fossil fuel ties, and universities should be paying attention, particularly as these ties relate to academic integrity surrounding climate and clean energy research.

Defining Fossil Fuel Industry Violations of Academic Freedom

Fossil fuel companies have funneled millions of dollars into scientific research, bankrolling studies addressing the very problems their own business model creates. This funding has clearly come at the cost of academic freedom — a steep price to pay, indeed.

Fossil fuel companies' influence on scholarship can be very direct. Industry donors have historically been granted representation on university boards or formal voices in governance; oil company representatives, for example, have sat on climate-focused institutes' boards at Princeton University and MIT. Contracts may grant donors rights to review, edit, or censor research before it is publicized — as in the case of a former EPA science adviser who has connections to the Regulatory Studies Center at GW, and admitted to allowing the American Petroleum Institute to proofread his research prior to publication. Industry voices can also mobilize to attack and discredit scholars with whom they disagree. Recently, ExxonMobil attempted to discredit Harvard researchers who found the company guilty of misleading the public about climate science by publishing Exxon vice president of research and development Vijay Swarup's rebuttal in the same journal. Swarup claimed the research had “at least two methodological flaws.”

Far more common, though, is more subtle research influence. Several studies have found that even in the absence of specific quid pro quos, corporate funding can skew research in the aggregate. As Accountable Allies researcher and Fossil Free Research co-founder Jake Lowe and Connor Chung noted in a 2022 op-ed, the power to direct funding means the power to shape which questions are asked and which are not. Once a question or topic is funded, dependence on the funding source can incentivize researchers to avoid conclusions that might threaten the possibility of future grants. It's these subtle incentives that have most effectively hindered academics' ability to pursue unrestricted inquiry, putting academic freedom at risk.

To end the fossil fuel industry's reliance on academic credibility to espouse climate denial and greenwash its reputation, climate activists, allies, academics, and universities should establish funding transparency, institute robust conflict-of-interest and gift acceptance policies, and ban fossil fuel money.

Policy and Advocacy Recommendations

1 — ESTABLISH FUNDING TRANSPARENCY

Fossil fuel funding, particularly money pledged to universities, is extremely obscure due to a lack of institutional transparency from universities. As illustrated above, with industry funding comes the potential for biased research outcomes that disproportionately align with industry interests. A lack of funding transparency emboldens the fossil fuel industry (and any donor for that matter) to enforce coercive funding agreements and increases the likelihood that conflicts of interest will go unchecked. Despite this, a vast majority of universities, public and private, have no policy mandating disclosure of their funding numbers or sources. In fact, because of this, the topline figure — \$677,373,368 of fossil fuel funding — demarks the lower bound of fossil fuel funding in climate and clean energy research. As was the case with [BP backing out](#) of \$75 million of its \$500 million grant to the University of California, Berkley and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2015, companies can also rescind or cut portions of university donations, thus decreasing the true value of the grant and causing confusion surrounding how much money universities are actually receiving from the fossil fuel industry.

In order to take a step toward accountability and to best position U.S. institutions to take on the great challenge that climate change poses, university administrations should pass a comprehensive funding transparency policy that stipulates:

- All restricted gifts of at least \$50,000 from for-profit and nonprofit entities must be disclosed in a publicly accessible database maintained by the respective university financial office;
- All externally sponsored research projects must be disclosed in a publicly accessible database including the project sponsor, amount of funding, research subject, and the name of the lead researcher, maintained by the respective university sponsored projects office;
- Donors must not attempt to manipulate the system; multiple donors or multiple gifts totaling \$50,000 or more proposed with the same or similar purposes and agreements must also be publicly accessible through the gift database;
- Donations under \$50,000 from individuals will not be required for disclosure, but voluntary disclosure must be encouraged; and
- Timely and relevant reports that contain clear and easily accessible reporting on current endowment investments and investment criteria must be produced.

An example of this policy can be found [here](#).

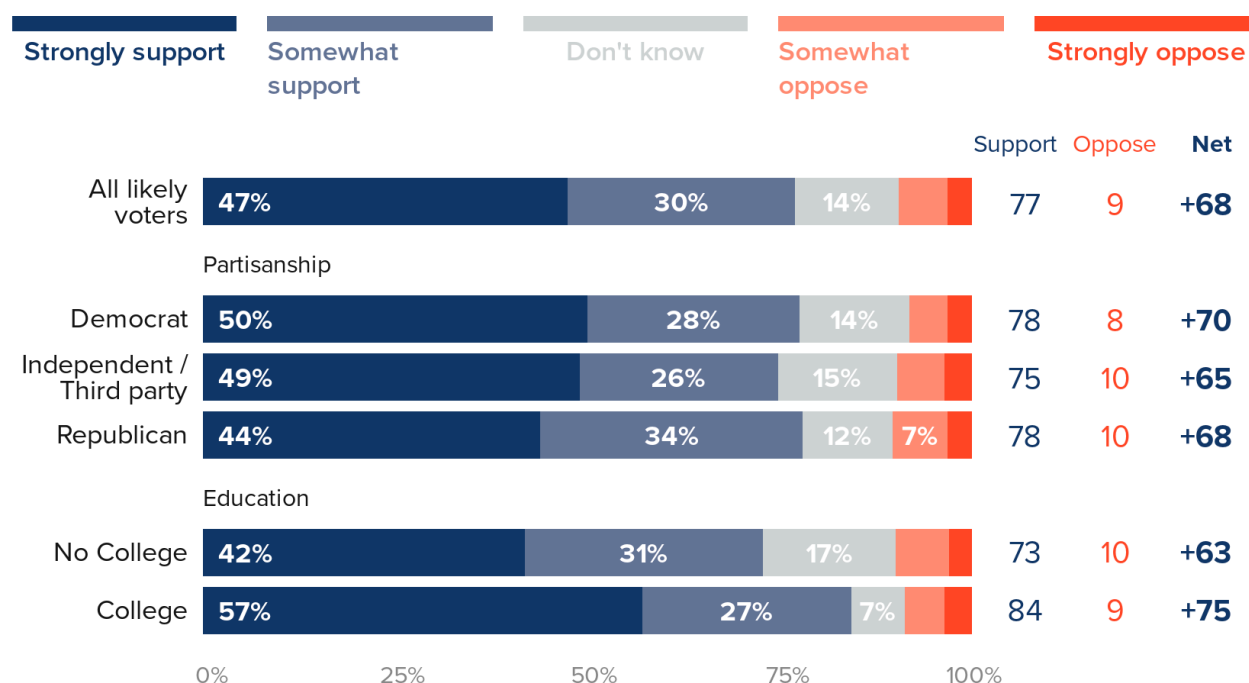
Voters have already reported being pro-transparency when it comes to the fossil fuel industry. Sixty-eight percent of voters [said last year](#) that it is “very important” or “somewhat important” that the companies from which they purchase goods and services are transparent about how their business activities are impacting climate change.

New Data for Progress polling tells a similar story: 77 percent of voters support establishing a funding transparency policy that publicly communicates all sources of funding for research that a school publishes.

Voters Overwhelmingly Support Funding Transparency Policy From Colleges

For each of the following policies, please indicate whether you would support or oppose colleges and universities *choosing* to take these actions:

— Establishing a funding transparency policy which publicly communicates all sources of funding for research that the school publishes



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Policymakers, journalists, students, faculty, and the public deserve to understand the full context in which academic work is produced to appropriately hold our institutions accountable. This can only happen in conjunction with a comprehensive and robust conflict-of-interest and gift acceptance policy.

2 — IMPLEMENT ROBUST CONFLICT-OF-INTEREST AND GIFT ACCEPTANCE POLICY

According to the [American Association of University Professors](#), “an institutional [conflict of interest] occurs when the financial interests of an institution or institutional officials, acting within their authority on behalf of the institution, may affect or appear to affect the research, education, clinical care, business transactions, or other governing activities of the institution.” Nearly all universities have some sort of conflict-of-interest and gift acceptance policy that attempts to deal with this problem; however, very few sufficiently address the secretive funding agreements of the fossil fuel industry.

This policy should include:

- Amendments to existing gift acceptance policy and grant acceptance policy to reject any restricted gift that violates academic freedom or shared faculty governance, threatens the mission of the university as an institution for the common good, or otherwise poses a conflict of interest;
- Comprehensive review of all existing restricted gift and grant agreements that support current faculty positions, student scholarships, or academic programs/curricula for violations of academic freedom and other conflicts of interest; and
- Creation of a standing committee responsible for oversight and consideration of new challenges posed by the financial relationships required to operate the university.

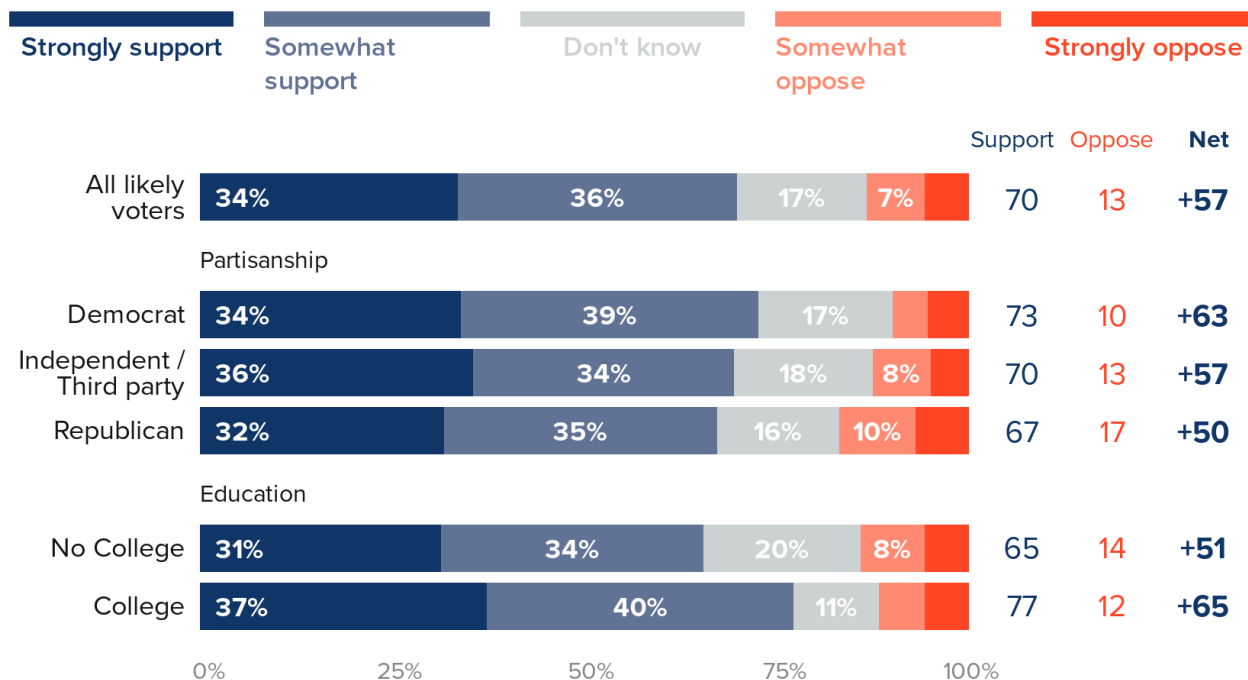
UnKoch My Campus, a cooperative campaign dedicated to disrupting corporate power on campuses, has an excellent model institutional conflict-of-interest and gift acceptance policy.

By a +45-point margin, voters support establishing conflict-of-interest policy in case a donor has a relationship that could cause bias in research that the school publishes. Voters also support, by a +57-point margin, establishing a gift acceptance policy that publicly communicates whom a school will accept donations from and where those donations can be used by the school.

Majority of Voters Support Transparent Gift Acceptance Policy For Colleges

For each of the following policies, please indicate whether you would support or oppose colleges and universities *choosing* to take these actions:

— Establishing a gift acceptance policy which publicly communicates who a school will accept donations from and where those donations can be used by the school



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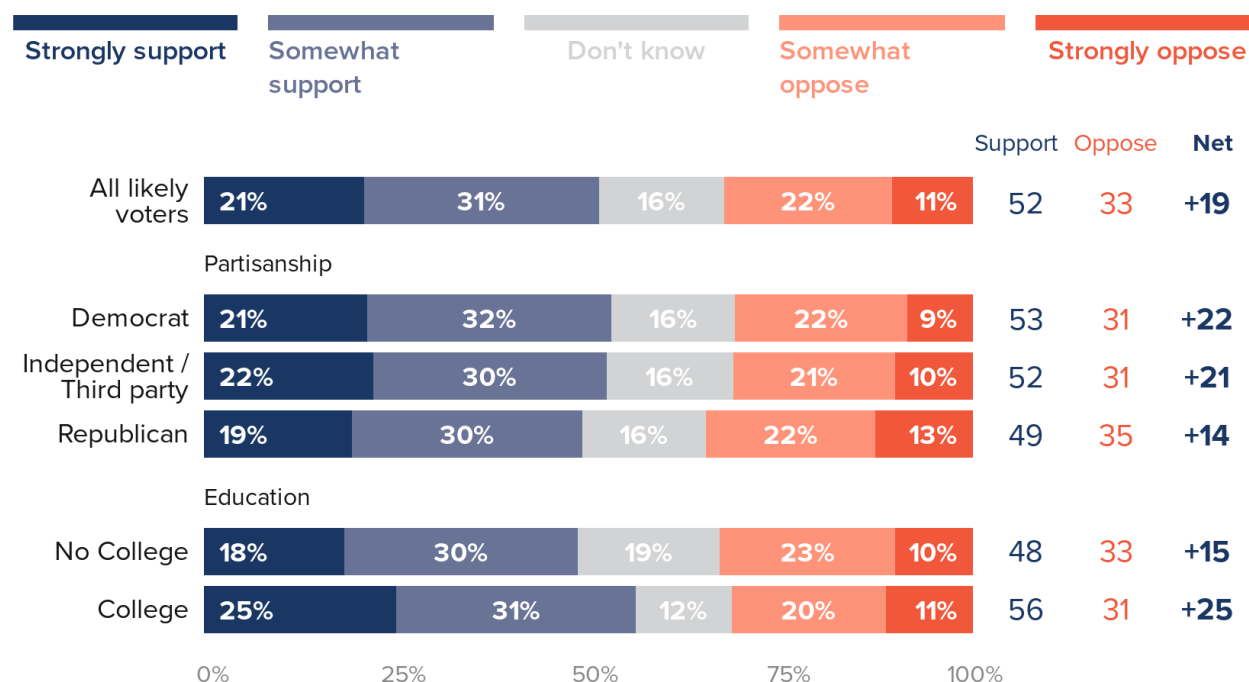
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Additionally, a majority of voters (52 percent) would support a law that would prevent the federal government from using research that has a clear conflict of interest when creating public policy. This includes 53 percent of Democrats and 52 percent of Independents.

Voters Support a Law Preventing Government From Using Research With Conflicts of Interest

Some colleges and universities take donations from the fossil fuel industry. Some of these colleges use these donations to fund climate and environmental research that impacts climate policy.

Would you support or oppose a law that would prevent the federal government from using research that has a clear conflict of interest when creating public policy?



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While necessary, funding transparency and conflict-of-interest policies alone are not entirely sufficient. Universities must step up and ban fossil fuel money for climate and clean energy research.

3 — BAN FOSSIL FUEL MONEY FOR CLIMATE RESEARCH

The fossil fuel industry's business model has been and continues to be predicated upon knowingly spreading false and misleading information pertaining to the climate crisis. Academic freedom, on the other hand, is predicated upon free inquiry and the pursuit of truth. Funding from an industry reliant upon falsehoods is therefore incompatible with the ethos of academic freedom.

In Data for Progress [polling](#) last June, a majority of voters (57 percent) agreed that colleges and universities studying the impacts of climate change and sustainability should refuse donations from fossil fuel companies so they can remain unbiased in their research.

The most concrete step to reduce conflicts of interest and preserve the sanctity of climate and clean energy research is a ban on fossil fuel money. This means both rejecting future funding and working to dismantle existing funding streams that are problematic. Students across the world are pressuring their universities to enact a ban on funding from the worst architects of the climate crisis.

A fossil fuel money ban should, at least, include companies that:

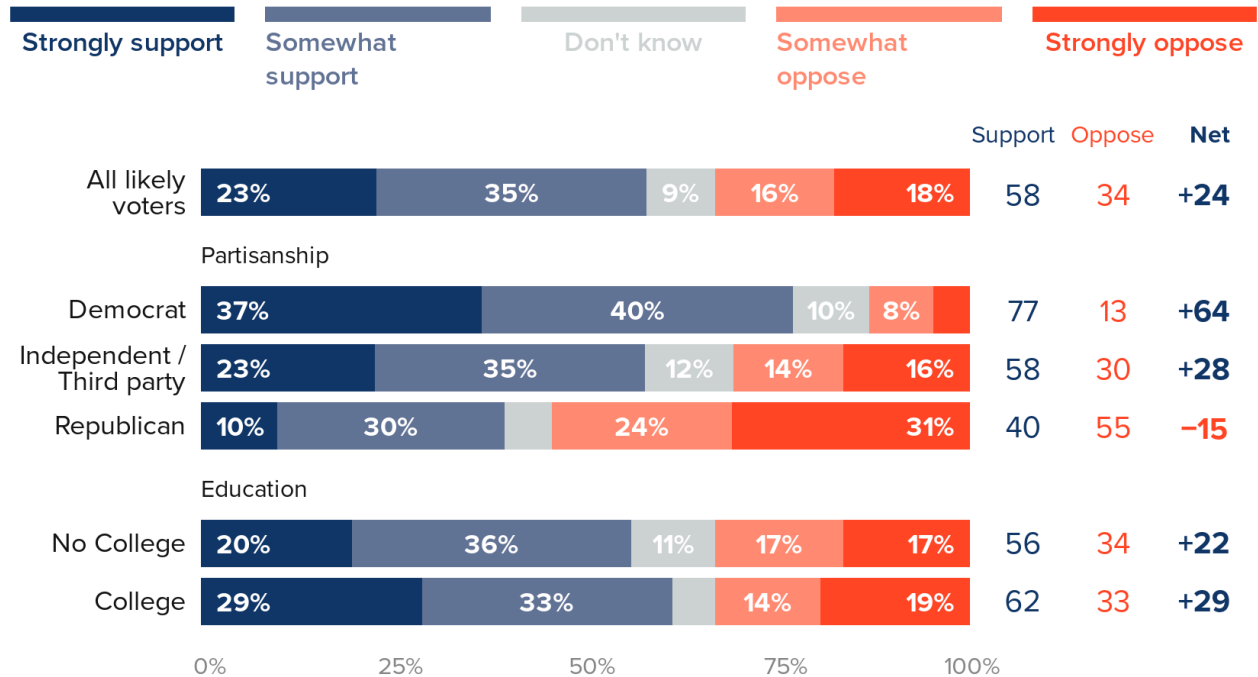
- Are constructing, or facilitating the construction of, new fossil fuel infrastructure;
- Are engaged in exploring, or facilitating the exploration of, new fossil fuel reserves;
- Retain memberships with trade associations engaged in political lobbying against climate legislation that would advance the Paris Agreement goal of preventing global warming beyond 1.5°C; or
- Are a corporation or nonprofit that supports, directly or indirectly, the creation and dissemination of climate disinformation, defined as knowingly spreading false information with the intent to deceive or mislead the public regarding the causes and effects of the climate crisis.

Sunrise GW, a hub of the national Sunrise Movement that focuses on fossil fuel money at George Washington, has laid out a [framework](#) for a fossil fuel money ban. [Stanford Coalition for a True School of Sustainability](#), [Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard](#), and [Climate Justice University of Toronto](#) have also explored fossil fuel money bans. They closely follow the work of public health academics' [tactics](#) in cutting ties with the tobacco industry, but offer a framework that can be applied to climate as well.

The federal government can make this ban more feasible by increasing funding for research, thus decreasing university reliance on industry funding. Fifty-eight percent of voters support increasing federal funding for climate research at colleges and universities, including 77 percent of Democrats, 58 percent of Independents, and 40 percent of Republicans.

Most Voters Support Increasing Funding for Climate Research

Would you support or oppose increasing federal funding for climate research at colleges and universities?



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Cutting academic ties with the fossil fuel industry is undeniably necessary to stop the spread of climate disinformation and biased research that has allowed the industry to decimate our planet for decades. Heeding these recommendations has never been more essential.

Conclusion

The fossil fuel industry poses one of the greatest threats to life as we know it. With its continuous spread of disinformation leading to the proliferation of climate change that disproportionately harms marginalized and frontline communities, we can no longer cross our fingers in the hopes of a change in its business model. One of the most significant ways the fossil fuel industry maintains its social license to operate is through the buying of climate research at prominent academic institutions. Since universities have a pivotal role to play in global conversations about tackling the climate emergency and advancing climate justice, they cannot afford to have their voices compromised, which is precisely what will happen if they remain financially dependent on the industry most responsible for fueling climate change. To stop U.S. universities' complacency in the climate crisis and chip away at the legitimacy of the fossil fuel industry, we must demand fossil free research now.

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