



Some Minnesota corporations quietly resume donations to election disputers

[Some Minnesota corporations quietly resume donations to election disputers \(startribune.com\)](https://www.startribune.com/some-minnesota-corporations-quietly-resume-donations-to-election-disputers/)



[UnitedHealth is one of the companies in Minnesota that has resumed, after a pause, giving money to members of Congress who did not vote to certify the last presidential election.](#)

— Glen Stubbe, Star Tribune

By [BRIANA BIERSCHBACH](#) AND [KAVITA KUMAR](#), STAR TRIBUNE
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In the aftermath of the insurrection on the U.S. Capitol, many of Minnesota's largest corporations publicly announced they were pausing campaign donations to all members of Congress, including those who joined Donald Trump's push to block the certification of the 2020 election.

In the months and years that followed, most have quietly resumed donating to politicians who voted to overturn the results.

At least eight big companies with headquarters in Minnesota — including UnitedHealth Group, Target, U.S. Bancorp and Cargill — that [initially suspended donations](#) have since resumed contributions and have given more than \$400,000 directly to the campaigns of members of Congress who disputed Joe Biden's victory, according to a Star Tribune analysis of thousands of donations and Federal Election Commission (FEC) records.

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"They've quietly picked it back up," said Bruce Freed, president of the Center for Political Accountability, which advises corporations on responsible donations. "They've reverted to spending as usual, and they are engaging in spending for access."

After the Jan. 6, 2021, attack, Minnesota-based Best Buy and [General Mills](#) immediately said they would stop giving money to election objectors, going further than most Minnesota companies that initially took a more neutral stance. Since then, General Mills appears to have continued with its pledge, while Best Buy has changed course and resumed such donations.

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In addition, at least two other Minnesota companies — Medtronic and 3M — that paused donations three years ago have made changes to their political giving policies and haven't given since then to any election objectors.

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Medtronic, which is based in Ireland, but run from Fridley, said its PAC board reviewed and made changes to its guidelines in 2021.

"We enhanced our giving criteria to include that, in addition to demonstrating behavior consistent with Medtronic's values, candidates must also demonstrate principles of American democracy," the company wrote in a statement.

Most resumed giving

Days after the attack on the U.S. Capitol, Minnesota's largest public company, Minnetonka-based UnitedHealth Group, announced it paused giving to all candidates immediately in order to review its donation strategy. By fall of that same year, it resumed political donations to Republicans who didn't certify the last election.

Since then, the global health care conglomerate has donated at least \$272,000 to 42 of the 147 Republican members of Congress who objected to certifying the election results. Companies make such contributions through their political action committees, or PACs.

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"We participate in the political process to inform health care policy decisions that affect our company, and the people we are privileged to serve," a UnitedHealth spokesman wrote in an emailed response. "Bipartisan political contributions are just one part of our efforts to engage in the policy process and our participation comes with the understanding we may not agree with recipients of political contributions on all issues."

Richfield-based Best Buy went further than UnitedHealth, [pledging to stop donating](#) to members of Congress who didn't vote to certify Biden's win. But last year, the company's PAC contributed at least \$6,000 to three Republican lawmakers who tried to overturn the election results, according to FEC records.

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Best Buy did not provide an explanation for why it restarted such donations.

In making these decisions, corporations weigh the interests of consumers, their own employees and shareholders, said Jiao Luo, an associate professor at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management.

Many initially felt pressure to make some sort of statement or action after Jan. 6, she said. But many worried they risked alienating Republicans if they did not resume contributions. The conflict for businesses reflects overall the political polarization in society, she added.

"It's difficult for them to make decisions that appeal to stakeholders with very different preferences, so they're a little bit caught in between," Luo said.

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A handful of Minnesota companies that initially paused donations, including Ecolab and Target, sat out the midterm election cycle but then resumed contributing to election objectors in 2023.

St. Paul-based Ecolab gave \$2,000 last year to two lawmakers who did not vote to certify the election, including Minnesota Republican Rep. Michelle Fischbach. Since the attack, the company "reviewed and strengthened its assessment criteria before considering case-by-case contributions," said Ecolab spokesman Nigel Glennie.

Minneapolis-based Target lists "respect for democratic election process" on its [corporate website](#) as one of the factors it weighs when making PAC contributions. "This means we will consider a candidate's respect for the civic process and maintaining the integrity of our elections," the website says.

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Still, Target gave at least \$16,500 in 2023 to six Republicans who objected to the results of the 2020 election. The retailer did not comment beyond pointing to its website.

In 2021, Minneapolis-based U.S. Bancorp said it would review its political giving policies to ensure that its involvement helps "advance, improve and do what is right for the country, our customers and our employees." Its giving since then has included at least \$53,500 to 10 election objectors. U.S. Bancorp declined to comment.

Ameriprise, which also has headquarters in Minneapolis, initially suspended donations as well but has since given at least \$28,500 to 13 lawmakers who didn't certify the election, including \$1,000 to Fischbach. It declined to comment.

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In the aftermath of Jan. 6, Wayzata-based Cargill, one of the world's largest privately held companies, said in a statement that the "unconscionable attack on democracy stands in sharp contrast to our values as a nation and company" and it was "immediately and indefinitely" suspending all political contributions.

The company has since given at least \$28,500 to 12 Republicans who didn't certify the last presidential election. The company did not return a request for comment.

And after pausing donations, C.H. Robinson, the Eden Prairie-headquartered transportation and logistics company, has given at least \$7,000 to three Republicans who tried to overturn the results. It did not provide a comment.

Public paying 'much closer attention'

All of the companies gave directly to members through their PACS, which pour tens of millions of dollars into the battle to control Congress and the White House each election cycle.

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Some corporate PACs take voluntary contributions from employees to spend on elections, and many dole out their givings to lawmakers on a bipartisan basis. After the 2022 election, Republicans narrowly took back control of the U.S. House. Most contributions flowed to their members in leadership positions or those who sit on powerful committees that debate policy on spending, taxes and business regulations.

But some companies feared associating their brand with individuals who bucked the nation's system for certifying election results. Their vote against certifying the election took place just hours after a mob stormed the Capitol, sending lawmakers into hiding and temporarily pausing the proceedings.

Some companies have taken a stand. In addition to Medtronic, Maplewood-based 3M also changed its criteria for contributions in 2022. Its PAC now "prohibits contributions to candidates who overextend Congress' role in the election process and continue to deny federal election results," the company wrote in a statement.

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Freed recommends all businesses have policies in place to guide their political giving and strategies to manage risk. Even a small contribution can connect a company to a person or idea that might be unpopular with some of its customers.

"Many companies are realizing they need to have a framework for their giving and spending because they run a real risk in terms of who they associate with," he said. "The general populace is paying much closer attention to what companies are doing and how they are using their money."

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