

Dominion Energy's Undue Political Influence Hurts Virginians and the Climate

Dominion Energy (Dominion) has flexed its political muscle to successfully push an agenda that pads its profits at the expense of Virginia's communities and environment. The company promotes fracked gas and a sprawling network of pipelines and power plants that will lock Virginia into a fossil fuel future for decades. Dominion's political spending paved the way for an energy and utility regulatory landscape that benefits its bottom line while threatening the climate and raising utility prices for Virginia residents.

Dominion's cornucopia of campaign cash and gifts

Dominion, its corporate affiliates and employees have invested at least \$59 million to influence politicians in Virginia, on Capitol Hill and in other state capitols.¹ Over the past 20 years Dominion has been the biggest corporate campaign donor in Virginia, with its political action committee (PAC) and employees pouring more than \$10 million in contributions to Virginia candidates, campaigns and causes from 1998 to 2018.² The generosity is bipartisan: 86 percent of Virginia legislators have received Dominion campaign cash.³ Of the \$2.7 million funneled by the company to Virginia's current lawmakers, half went to only 25 state legislators, and the top 5 recipients received nearly one-third of Dominion's contributions (see table).⁴

Former governors Republican Bob McDonnell and Democrats Terry McAuliffe, Tim Kaine and Mark Warner (the latter two now U.S. senators) all benefited from Dominion's campaign largesse.⁵ Current Democratic governor Ralph Northam won his race while refusing to take a firm stand on controversial gas pipelines.⁶ He held between \$5,000 and \$50,000 worth of Dominion stock before he was elected.⁷ His transition team included several people affiliated with

Dominion, and the company donated at least \$50,000 to his inaugural committee.⁸ As governor, Northam's promised in-depth review of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline route turned out to be merely a reaffirmation of a prior study that found little environmental risk; Northam offered little additional state scrutiny beyond the federal oversight that critics said was far from rigorous.⁹

Between 2008 and 2016, Dominion spent over \$430,000 on meals, cocktails, sporting events and hunting trips, including \$122,000 to take legislators to Washington Redskins games.¹⁰ Gifts included \$47,000 spent on sending legislators to the Gillionville Plantation in Georgia, an "obscenely expensive" quail hunting resort for the wealthy.¹¹ Dominion brought Virginia State Senator Thomas "Tommy" Norment to Gillionville several times.¹² Norment was the Chairman of the Virginia Commission on Electric Utility Deregulation, and he sponsored at least two of Dominion's legislative initiatives.¹³

Dominion also gives generously to Congress and to elected officials in other states. Since 2007, Dominion's PAC and its employees contributed more than \$8 million to congressional candidates and leadership PACs,¹⁴ and since 1999 the company has poured approximately \$31 million into federal lobbying.¹⁵

Top 5 Virginia Recipients of Dominion Campaign Cash, 1998-2018

Incumbent and party	State legislative body and district	Dominion PAC and employee contributions
Richard L. Saslaw (D)	Senate District 35 (Fairfax)	\$274,250
Terry G. Kilgore (R)	House District 1 (Wise County)	\$196,641
M. Kirkland Cox (R)	House District 66 (Chesterfield County)	\$148,721
Thomas K. Norment, Jr. (R)	Senate District 3 (Hampton Roads)	\$115,540
R. Creigh Deeds (D)	Senate District 25 (Charlottesville)	\$110,300

Dominion's charm offensive to push unpopular pipeline and policies

Dominion supplements its political spending with public relations efforts, including creating corporate-funded fake grassroots groups, known as astroturf. It has pumped money into shell organizations that downplay their direct industry ties in order to create support for their projects.¹⁶ During the 2017 Virginia elections, Dominion, other investors in the controversial and Dominion-controlled Atlantic Coast Pipeline and the American Gas Association funded astroturf groups to encourage voters to "elect a pipeline."¹⁷

Dominion has also poured money into polling, focus groups and media ads to win the public relations battle for the Atlantic Coast Pipeline.¹⁸ The company sent 76,000 mailers to its employees, shareholders and retirees urging them to consider candidates' pipeline positions when voting.¹⁹ In 2018, Dominion spent \$4.4 million on media promoting its Virginia legislative agenda and its takeover of the South Carolina utility SCANA, including television ads during the Super Bowl.²⁰

Take action to stop Dominion's power grab

Dominion long has been a dominant corporate political player in Virginia,²¹ enabled by lax campaign finance, ethics and conflict-of-interest rules. Dominion leveraged its political power to repeatedly reshape Virginia's electric utility regulation over its Virginia Power subsidiary — each time adjusting the rules to benefit Dominion while driving up electric bills.²² The company also has thwarted progressive energy measures. Dominion ensured that Virginia Power would be the gatekeeper for community-based solar projects instead of allowing churches or community organizations to develop and benefit from their own solar projects.²³

Virginia must rapidly shift to a clean, renewable energy future, and Dominion's political power is the biggest obstacle to curbing climate change in Virginia. The legislature must pass comprehensive campaign and ethics reforms and stand up to Dominion's political muscle to deliver solar and wind energy and promote energy efficiency, public transportation and community-based renewables. Contact your delegate and state senator today: fwwat.ch/VA100Renew

Endnotes

- Food & Water Watch analysis of federal and state campaign contributions, federal lobbying disclosure, and Virginia gifts to legislators and officials from Federal Election Commission, National Institute of Money and Politics (NIMP), U.S. Senate Lobbying Disclosure Act Database and Virginia Public Access Project (VPAP). Food & Water Watch estimate is likely an underestimate, as it is limited by available campaign contribution, lobbying and gift data that do not uniformly provide data from 1998 to 2018.
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