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Comcast, Time Warner and Congress: Perfect Together

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As the US Senate holds its first hearing on the proposed Comcast-Time Warner deal -- a $45 billion transaction that will affect millions of consumers and further pad some already well-lined pockets -- it's useful to get a look at how our elected officials have benefitted from the largesse of the two companies with an urge to merge.

Although the ultimate decision will be made by the Federal Communications Commission and the Justice Department, according to the Sunlight Foundation, a reliable, nonpartisan watchdog, "The number one and number two cable providers in the country are also big-time on the influence circuit, giving upwards of a combined $42.4 million to various politicians and groups since 1989.

The Sunlight Foundation's Influence Explorer tool also shows that the two companies have spent a combined $143.5 million lobbying Congress since 1989 on issues including telecommunications, technology, taxes and copyright.

President Barack Obama benefitted the most, by far, from Comcast, whose employees and their family members contributed more than $537,800. Two Texans -- Gov. Rick Perry and Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst -- are the top recipients of contributions from Time Warner Cable, receiving $185,000 and $170,000, respectively.

Three Democratic and three Republican members of the Judiciary Committee are up for reelection this year and almost all have profited at least a bit from Comcast and/or Time Warner contributions, but the Democrats have come out ahead, the Sunlight Foundation reports. Minnesota Democrat Al Franken -- an outspoken critic of the merger described as "a fundraising powerhouse" by Sunlight -- has received $15,050 from Comcast and $13,350 from Time Warner, as per the Center for Responsive Politics' OpenSecrets.org, and has pulled in $54,500 from individuals who have worked for Comcast-owned NBC Universal, including *Saturday Night Live* executive producer Lorne Michaels.

As for the other two Democrats, Delaware's Chris Coons and Senate majority whip Dick Durbin of Illinois, Comcast has been Coons' third-highest overall contributor ($53,300) and the senator has gotten $3,000 from Time Warner Cable employees. Durbin has received $51,700 from Comcast-affiliated employees and $3,500 from Time Warner employees.

Of the three up for reelection on the Republican side, Alabama's Jeff Sessions, John Cornyn of Texas and South Carolina's Lindsey Graham, the Sunlight Foundationnotes that none have been "significant Comcast beneficiaries."

Overall, the three Southern state senators have received a total of $31,500 from Comcast and Comcast-affiliated employees, a sliver of the almost $70 million the three have raised in total during their respective runs for federal office. Time Warner employees have given $30,700 to Graham and $10,500 to Cornyn. Sessions has not received any money from Time Warner.

It should be noted, however, that since 1989, Comcast has given at least $470,170 to the National Republican Senatorial Committee -- and $640,625 to its Democratic counterpart.

Yes, you might not be able to get decent cable service or a good Wi-Fi signal but when it comes to Congress, Comcast is quite the attentive suitor. As *Politico* reported last month, including those up for

reelection this year, "... money from Comcast's political action committee has flowed to all but three members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Checks have landed in the campaign coffers of Sens. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Mike Lee (R-UT), who oversee the chamber's antitrust panel.
Meanwhile, the cable giant has donated in some way to 32 of the 39 members of the House Judiciary Committee, which is planning a hearing of its own. And Comcast has canvassed the two congressional panels that chiefly regulate cable, broadband and other telecom issues, donating to practically every lawmaker there -- including Rep. Greg Walden (R-OR) and Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-WV).

Comcast stresses its donations are a function of its business. "Comcast NBCUniversal operates in 39 states and has 130,000 employees across the country," said spokeswoman Sena Fitzmaurice. "It is important for our customers, our employees and our shareholders that we participate in the political process. The majority of our PAC contributions are to the senators and members who represent our employees and customers."

Clearly, Comcast is paying for the premium package. Its money was donated before the proposed big deal with Time Warner, but its " proactive giving," as Sunlight's executive director Ellen Miller calls it, "so that when a corporation needs access in a time of trouble, investigation or oversight, they have already built the quote-unquote relationships they need to soften or make their arguments to a sympathetic audience... It's a long-term investment they make."
Remember that the next time you get your ever-spiraling cable bill. Just think of it as a long-term investment.

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