



A Secretive Billionaire Handed His Fortune to the Architect of the Right-Wing

An elderly, ultra-secretive Chicago businessman has given the largest known donation to a political advocacy group in U.S. history — worth \$1.6 billion — and the recipient is one of the prime architects of conservatives' efforts to reshape the American judicial system, including the Supreme Court.

Through a series of opaque transactions over the past two years, Barre Seid, a 90-year-old manufacturing magnate, gave the massive sum to a nonprofit run by Leonard Leo, who co-chairs the conservative legal group the Federalist Society.

Our reporting sheds additional light on how the two men, one a judicial kingmaker and the other a mysterious but prolific donor to conservative causes, came together to create a political war chest that will likely **supercharge efforts to further shift American politics to the right.**

As President Donald Trump's adviser on judicial nominations, Leo helped build the Supreme Court's conservative supermajority, which recently eliminated Constitutional protections for abortion rights and has made a series of sweeping pro-business decisions. Leo, a conservative Catholic, has both

helped select judges to nominate to the Supreme Court and directed multimillion dollar media campaigns to confirm them.

Leo derives immense political power through his ability to raise huge sums of money and distribute those funds throughout the conservative movement to influence elections, judicial appointments and policy battles. Yet the biggest funders of Leo's operation have long been a mystery.

Seid, who led the surge protector and data-center equipment maker Tripp Lite for more than half a century, has been almost unknown outside a small circle of political and cultural recipients. The gift immediately vaults him into the ranks of major funders like the Koch brothers and George Soros.

In practical terms, there are few limitations on how Leo's new group, the Marble Freedom Trust, can spend the enormous donation. The structure of the donation allowed Seid to avoid as much as \$400 million in taxes. Thus, he maximized the amount of money at Leo's disposal.

Now, Leo, 56, is positioned to finance his already sprawling network with one of the largest pools of political capital in American history. Seid has left his legacy to Leo.

“To my knowledge, it is entirely without precedent for a political operative to be given control of such an astonishing amount of money,” said Brendan Fischer, a campaign finance lawyer at the nonpartisan watchdog group Documented.

“Leonard Leo is already incredibly powerful, and now he is going to have over a billion dollars at his disposal to continue upending our country’s institutions.”

In a statement to the Times, Leo said it was **“high time for the conservative movement to be among the ranks of George Soros, Hansjörg Wyss, Arabella Advisors and other left-wing philanthropists, going toe-to-toe in the fight to defend our constitution and its ideals.”**

The Marble Freedom Trust is a so-called dark money group that is not required to publicly disclose its donors. It has wide latitude to spend directly on elections as well as on ideological projects such as funding issue-advocacy groups, think tanks, universities, religious institutions and organizing efforts.

The creators of the Marble Freedom Trust shrouded their project in secrecy for more than two years.

The group’s name does not appear in any public database of business, tax or securities records. The Marble Freedom Trust is organized for legal purposes as a trust, rather than as a corporation. That means it did not have to publicly disclose basic details like its name, directors and address.

Seid’s \$1.6 billion donation is a landmark in the era of deregulated political spending ushered in by the Supreme Court’s 2010 Citizens United decision. That case, along with subsequent changes and weak federal oversight, empowered a

tiny group of the super rich in both parties to fund groups that can spend unlimited sums to support candidates and political causes. In the last decade, donations in the millions and sometimes tens of millions of dollars have become common.

Even in this money-drenched world, Seid's \$1.6 billion gift exceeds all publicly known one-time donations to a politically oriented group.