

Silicon Valley to boost clout in Washington

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For years, Silicon Valley companies wanted as little to do with Washington as possible. Hiring lobbyists to promote and protect their interests was about as far as they went. But a new generation of technology entrepreneurs believes it can no longer afford to ignore the Beltway, and is setting its sights on Capitol Hill.

Leading the way is Facebook co-founder and Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg, who with other tech executives is starting a political advocacy group that plans to push an ambitious legislative agenda, people familiar with the plans said.

Zuckerberg has pledged tens of millions of dollars to what is expected to become a \$50 million war chest for the group, which is scheduled to launch in a couple of weeks, said the people, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not authorized to discuss it publicly.

Topping the agenda: comprehensive immigration reform that would raise [work visa](#) caps to address what they say is a shortage of engineers in [Silicon Valley](#).

"It is a reflection of the next generation of valley giants looking to play in impact politics," Democratic political consultant Chris Lehane said. "They have transformed how we live, and they have transformed our economy. Can the same transformative views and successes be translated into politics? It will be interesting to see."

Zuckerberg, 28, is one of a growing number of Silicon Valley young

guns increasingly unafraid of confronting the hard political realities in the nation's capital. And they aren't just pulling out their checkbooks. They are harnessing social media and new online community organizing tools to influence public opinion and pressure lawmakers.

This new willingness to engage Washington is a political coming of age for Silicon Valley.

In 1977, Hewlett-Packard co-founder David Packard pushed Silicon Valley to engage in the political process by forming the Silicon Valley Leadership Group. "Our jobs as CEOs is not to sit on the sidelines and cheer or jeer," Packard said at the time. "Our job is to get in the game and move the ball forward."

Under threat of increased rules and regulations, Silicon Valley venture capitalist John Doerr in 1997 brought together technology executives to found TechNet and educate Washington on the importance of "the Internet, freedom and self-regulation."

But only in recent years have companies here become far more active in Washington, creating political action committees and stepping up lobbying. Now the industry led by some of its youngest members is focusing on setting the agenda rather than responding to Washington.

They have used the online tools they have created, such as Facebook, to boost Silicon Valley's "outside game," making sure lawmakers hear from constituents in their inboxes. A key victory was an online campaign to defeat anti-piracy legislation championed by the entertainment industry, the first real test of this generation's political clout in Washington.

Increasingly, these Silicon Valley executives and startup entrepreneurs are rolling up their sleeves not just to defend against threats but to take on policy fights to further their interests.

"It's a very good thing for prominent people in Silicon Valley to engage in organizations where we can be part of the solution," Silicon Valley investor Mike Maples said. "I like the fact that the issues Mark Zuckerberg cares about are the issues that are important for economic growth."

For years Zuckerberg has shown a keen interest in public policy - but has shown no overt interest in politics. He made a \$100 million donation to Newark, N.J., public schools in 2010 shortly before the opening of "The Social Network," a movie that cast him in an unsympathetic light. In December, he said he would give nearly \$500 million in Facebook stock to a Silicon Valley foundation to provide funds for health and education issues.

Zuckerberg has met President Barack Obama several times and hosted a town hall for the president at Facebook's headquarters in 2011. He took part in a recent event organized by TechNet to press Obama and Congress on immigration reform. In February, Zuckerberg threw a fundraiser at his home in Palo Alto, Calif., for Republican New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie.

But the latest move to create a policy advocacy organization represents a new level of engagement from Zuckerberg, who, according to close associates, has come to realize that Silicon Valley's opening up wallets and holding five-figure fundraising dinners were not advancing high-tech's pet issues on Capitol Hill.

"This is different. This is about political work, which is new," said one person familiar with the project. "This is the next generation of political groups."

Zuckerberg's group, which does not yet have a name, has hired consultants with a range of political backgrounds and is mainly focused

on the House Republican Caucus, seen as the main stumbling block to immigration reform. Beltway veterans Rob Jesmer, the former executive director of the National Republican Senatorial Committee; Republican strategist Jon Lerner; and Joe Lockhart, Facebook's former vice president of global communications and a former press secretary under President Bill Clinton's administration, are advising the group.

"These political consultants and lobbyists know who the decision makers are, they know what will motivate actions that they deem in their best interests, and more importantly, they know where the bodies are buried. They know how to get members to understand the position they need them to embrace," said Garrett Johnson, a former staffer for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who moved to Silicon Valley to co-found SendHub, which makes Web and mobile business phone systems.

The move has sparked interest in Washington - not just because of the big money, but because of the Zuckerberg name.

"It triples the media attention and quadruples the interest from Capitol Hill," said Dan Schnur, director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California. "Every decade has a tech star: The 1990s had Bill Gates, the 2000s had Steve Jobs, today we have Mark Zuckerberg. The size of the checks matter, but Mark Zuckerberg also brings a halo and a level of attention that even other successful Silicon Valley types can't match."

Heading up the effort is Joe Green, a close friend of Zuckerberg who lived in the same dorm at Harvard University and has a strong interest in developing new tools to democratize politics. Green, who co-founded Causes and NationBuilder, is now an entrepreneur in residence at venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz. He declined to comment on the new group.

Green and Zuckerberg have recruited more than a dozen tech executives including LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman. The executives plan to train their sites first on immigration, then move to other issues such as education reform and funding for scientific research.

The group plans to register as a 501(c)(4), a tax-exempt entity that can spend millions of dollars but is not subject to the disclosure requirements that apply to candidates, parties and political action committees.

As the CEO of Facebook, which has had a tough time winning over investors after its troubled debut as a publicly traded company, Zuckerberg will have to tread carefully in Washington, said Charles Elson, a corporate governance expert at the University of Delaware.

[Facebook](#) has spent years befriending lawmakers on Capitol Hill and in 2012 increased its lobbying spending there almost 200 percent to nearly \$4 million as it pushed its agenda on consumer privacy, data collection and immigration.

"[Mark Zuckerberg](#) is entitled to any individual beliefs he wants as long as he makes clear that these are his beliefs and his money. That's the American way," Elson said. "But as CEO of a publicly traded company, he has to take into consideration how exercising those beliefs affects his ability to carry out his job effectively and affects his company. His primary obligation is to his investors."

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