

Obama taps tech world for cash amid privacy debate (Update)

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President Barack Obama speaks at the USC Shoah Foundation's 20th anniversary Ambassadors for Humanity gala in Los Angeles, Wednesday, May 7, 2014. Obama received an award from the foundation created by movie director Steven Spielberg and plans to spend three days in California where he will raise money for the Democratic Party. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

President Barack Obama was to attend two high-dollar Democratic Party fundraisers Thursday hosted by Silicon Valley executives, drawing attention to the complicated relationship between the president and the

high-tech industry in the aftermath of scandals over government snooping.

The revelations of National Security Agency data collection made public by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden have created an outcry from tech companies whose data have been gathered by the government. Obama has had to reassure Internet and tech executives that he is committed to protecting privacy.

Still, Obama remains a popular political figure in Silicon Valley, and the wealthy tech entrepreneurs appear willing to part with their money to support the party, especially if the president is making the pitch.

Obama was to attend a fundraiser hosted by Anne Wojcicki, a biotech entrepreneur who founded the personal-genomics startup 23andMe. The event is advertised as a Tech Roundtable, with 30 guests and tickets set at \$32,400—a nearly \$1 million potential haul for the Democratic National Committee.

He also was scheduled to be the featured guest at an event hosted by Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer and Sam Altman, the 29-year-old president of Y Combinator, a venture capital firm that seeds tech startups.

The role of the computer and Internet industry in U.S. politics has grown sharply over the past 10 years, increasing political contributions and expanding its lobbying presence. Executives and employees in the industry favor Democrats, yet the political action committees set up by individual tech firms tend to split their money more evenly.

So far this election cycle, computer and Internet industry political action committees have contributed about \$3.5 million, with about 54 percent of it going to Republicans, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, which tracks political money. Counting political action

committees and individual donors, the industry has donated more than \$14 million to federal candidates, giving \$3 to Democrats for every \$2 to Republicans, according to the center.

In addition to cybersecurity, Silicon Valley executives also have been pushing for an overhaul of immigration laws, partly to secure more H1B visas for high-tech workers but also in support of giving immigrants who are in the country illegally a chance to achieve citizenship. They have also weighed in on new "net neutrality" regulations being fashioned by the Federal Communications Commission and have raised fears that the rules would allow telephone and cable Internet providers to impose fees on Internet companies.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest said the tech executives were donating because they support Obama's policies, and he rejected suggestions that the tech executives were getting financial leverage to affect Washington issues of concern to the industry.

"There's no reason to think that that the policy-making process is affected by those involved," Earnest said.

Among the major tech players, Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg has been an especially high-profile figure. He launched an advocacy group that has been among the most active on the immigration issue.

And he has been a vocal critic of the NSA's data collection, calling Obama to voice his alarm. Shortly after, Obama met with Zuckerberg and CEOs from Google, Netflix and other tech and Internet companies, pledging to safeguard privacy rights.

The administration has since issued recommendations asking Congress to pass new privacy laws that would provide broader data protections for Americans from both the government and the private sector.

Bill Carrick, a Democratic political adviser also based in California, says he doesn't see Obama suffering any permanent political damage with the tech community over the NSA revelation, but concedes that "obviously there was concern and it got expressed pretty vocally."

Obama was spending two nights in California. On Wednesday he was the star attraction at a fundraiser for House and Senate Democrats at the Los Angeles home of Disney Studios Chairman Alan Horn. On Thursday, he attended a Democratic National Committee fundraiser in Los Angeles that was closed to the media and was headed to another DNC event at the La Jolla home of billionaire and former Qualcomm Chairman Irwin Jacobs.

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