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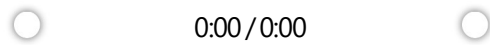
# McDonald's, Long Influential in U.S. Diets, Throws Its Weight Into Local Elections

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The freshest force in American politics wears striped socks, has fire-engine red hair and comes bearing french fries.

[McDonald's](#) for decades has exerted outsized influence on Americans' meals. Now the Golden Arches are playing a growing role in politics, as the company and its franchisees spend millions of dollars on donations to candidates for public office and political action groups, and have engaged in lobbying in at least 10 states, an analysis of filings shows.

In California, the Chicago-based company and its franchisees are seeking to unseat politicians who backed the state's new minimum wage law for fast-food workers. The chain's New York restaurant operators helped sponsor ads this year against state legislation that would allow workers to sue employers over wage, health and safety violations.

McDonald's has also hired a lobbyist in Colorado to track local

legislation.

McDonald's has [long lobbied on Capitol Hill](#) on issues like nutrition and employment, as one of the nation's largest private employers. But the company realized around 2022 when it started engaging more in California that it was years behind other companies in influencing local policymaking, said Michael Gonda, who oversees the chain's domestic government relations efforts.

Over the past decade, [progressive forces in several states](#) have advocated for legislative and regulatory measures to improve worker conditions and [pay](#). Unions and worker advocacy groups helped push [for a new law](#) to raise fast-food wages in California and create more industry oversight, which McDonald's and other chains said created an uneven playing field versus other types of restaurants and businesses.

Political spending from McDonald's, the [world's largest fast-food chain](#) by sales, has ballooned since the wage law was debated and enacted, campaign filings and company records show.

"California was a watershed moment," Gonda said.

## **Burger bash**

Since the beginning of 2023, the fast-food chain has given around \$2 million to candidates' political campaigns in California. Some of those funds last December went to Ronaldo Fierro, a Riverside, Calif., restaurant owner seeking election to the state legislature as a Democrat.

A political group backed by McDonald's operators spent \$188,000 against Fierro's opponent, Democratic Riverside City Councilwoman Clarissa Cervantes. Ads and mailers attacked her past work as a union organizer, including one featuring a burger with a \$100 bill stuffed inside, tying Cervantes to rising menu prices that followed the state's higher

fast-food wages. A separate mailing in March called Cervantes a “serial drunk driver.”

“I’ve been attacked by corporate special interests because I stand up to them,” Cervantes said in a mailer. She apologized during the campaign for her past DUI arrests and said she has completed treatment.

In the March primary, Cervantes trumped Fierro by about 200 votes. Fierro didn’t respond to requests for comment.

Following the 2022 wage law backed by union and worker groups, industry players eventually helped negotiate a \$20-an-hour compromise with the California bill’s backers. It took effect in April.

McDonald’s and other restaurant chains have said the higher California wages have rapidly increased their costs and cut into profits, with [operators increasing their menu prices](#) or slashing workers’ hours to try to compensate. The higher restaurant prices in California have depressed restaurant visits more than national averages, industry analysts said.

The chain spent around \$5.7 million on lobbying last year in California, making the company the state’s fourth-biggest such spender, according to an analysis of state records. The burger giant’s 2023 total was more than 23 times the amount it spent in California from 1999 through the end of 2022, the records show.

McDonald’s USA President Joe Erlinger said the company needs to more clearly communicate with local legislators about its business needs, and work with its franchisees in its advocacy efforts. The company needs to defend the franchising business model, which McDonald’s has increasingly viewed as under attack by organized labor along with national and state government entities, executives said.

“We’re working with them to help those legislators understand McDonald’s, the role we play not only in those communities, but across the U.S.,” Erlinger said at the [WSJ Global Food Forum](#) in June.

## **Big PAC**

Earlier this year, California McDonald’s operators helped form the California Alliance of Family-Owned Businesses political-action committee. The group of McDonald’s operators said the PAC plans to spend \$1.5 million on local political contests this year.

PAC founder and board member Scott Rodrick, [who owns around a dozen Northern California McDonald’s](#) restaurants, said the PAC has been involved in around half a dozen primary races so far, while hiring professionals to track state legislation. The group also intends to shovel at least a million dollars into California general election races in the fall.

“We will continue to get very aggressive and be proactive in identifying politicians that understand and will stand by small-business owners in California,” said Rodrick.

In Los Angeles County, more than \$625,000 of the PAC’s funds went toward mailers and attack ads targeting state Assemblyman Chris Holden, a sponsor of the 2022 fast-food minimum-wage bill who ran for the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors.

“While Sacramento politician Chris Holden saw the world on trips paid for by his special interest friends, L.A. County working families saw their cost of living skyrocket thanks to Holden,” said one of the mailers sponsored by the restaurant operators’ group.

Danielle Cendejas, Holden’s campaign strategist, said the attacks misconstrued his record of standing up for workers. Holden, a Democrat, lost the March race.

In the spring, as New York state lawmakers debated the legislation allowing workers to sue their employers, ads began popping up in local publications attacking it as overreach by Albany and the potential source of lawsuits. New Yorkers for Local Businesses, a new PAC supported by McDonald's franchisees, funded the ads and a lobbying effort opposed to the legislation.

New York Assemblymember Jo Anne Simon, one of the bill's sponsors, said the opposition by McDonald's operators was "unfortunate" and she intends to reintroduce the bill when the legislative session resumes in January.

Gonda said McDonald's plans to expand its lobbying and political outreach efforts across the country. This month, the company posted openings for jobs on its state and government relations team. It will take years to judge how successful its efforts are, Gonda said.

"Frankly we were too quiet for too long," he said.

*-Christine Mai-Duc contributed to this article.*

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