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Data leak reveals Canadians, Americans donated millions to fund convoy protests

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PUBLISHED YESTERDAY



A person waves a Canadian flag in front of banners in support of truckers, as truckers and supporters continue to protest COVID-19 vaccine mandates, in Ottawa, Ont. on Feb. 14, 2022. LARS HAGBERG/REUTERS

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Leaked data for the largest online fundraising campaign supporting the Ottawa protests reveal tens of thousands of Canadian and American donors have collectively contributed millions of dollars to the demonstrations.

The campaign, run by U.S.-based Christian fundraising website GiveSendGo, became the go-to donation portal for supporters of the self-described “freedom convoy” after GoFundMe, another U.S.-based fundraiser, cancelled a similar campaign that had accrued more than \$10-million, citing “the promotion of violence and harassment” on the streets of Ottawa.

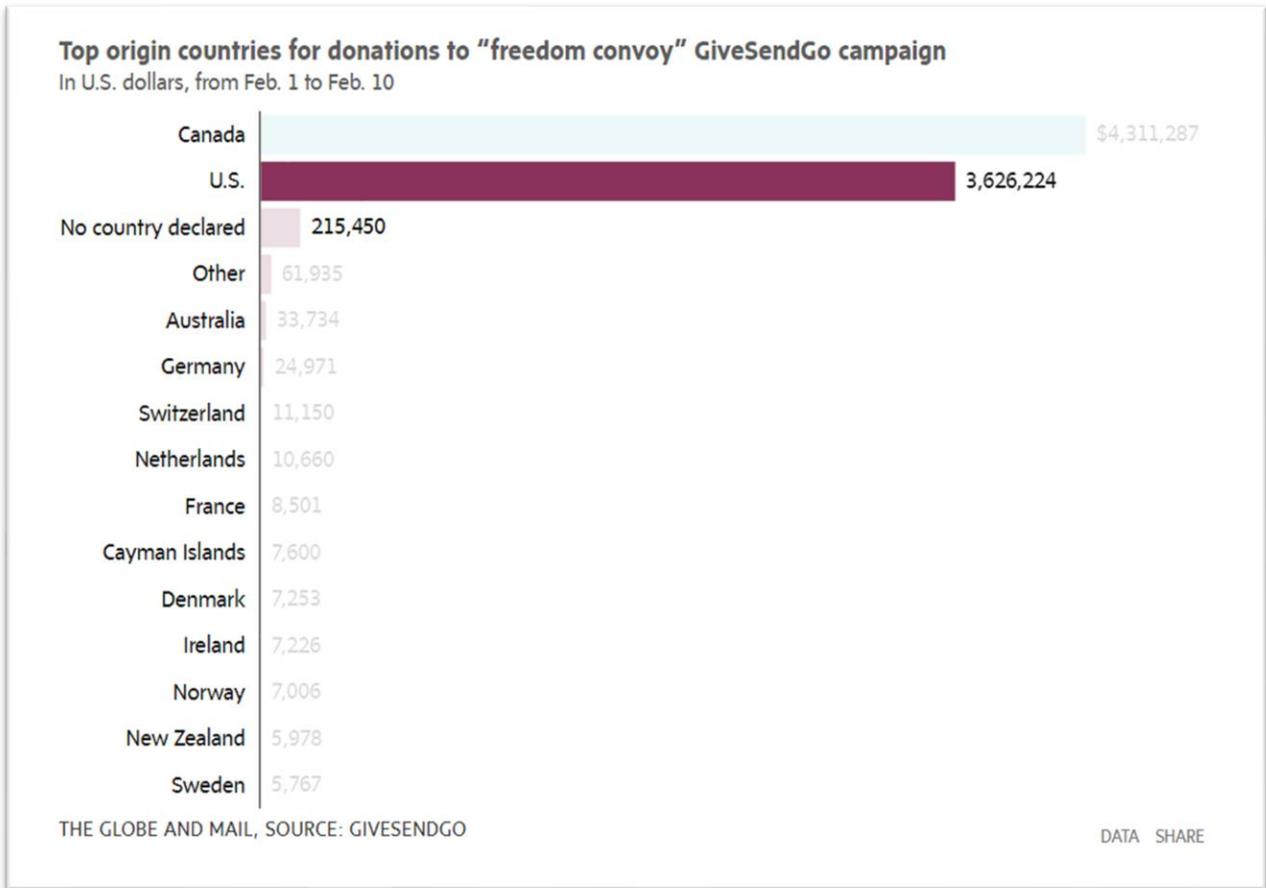
Before the website went down on Sunday, convoy organizers had raised nearly US\$10-million through GiveSendGo.

Hackers targeted the platform on the weekend, replacing the website with a video addressed to “GiveSendGo grifters and hatriots” and linking to a spreadsheet containing data on 92,844 donations to the convoy’s official fundraiser.

In total, the spreadsheet accounts for US\$8,421,806 in donations from Feb. 1 to Feb. 10. The data include names, e-mail addresses, IP addresses, amounts donated and messages of support for the demonstrators, among other details.

Data analysis shows that just over 50 per cent of donations were said to originate in Canada, totalling US\$4.3-million. Another 43 per cent, or US\$3.6-million, were said to originate from the United States. (Because of how GiveSendGo collected country data during donations, The Globe was unable to conclusively determine donors’ geographical locations.)

Top origin countries for donations to “freedom convoy” GiveSendGo campaign
In U.S. dollars, from Feb. 1 to Feb. 10



Sweden
New Zealand
Norway
Ireland
Denmark
Cayman
Islands
France
Netherlands
Switzerland
Germany
Australia
Other
No country
declared
U.S.
Canada
5,767
5,978
7,006
7,226
7,253
7,600
8,501
10,660
11,150
24,971
33,734
61,935
215,450
3,626,224
\$4,311,287

THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: GIVESENDGO

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American donors, however, outnumbered Canadians: 51,666 donations were registered as coming from the U.S., 56 per cent of the total. Canada, in contrast, was the stated country of origin for 36,202 donations.

The sheer number of donors suggests that organizers tapped into a community of “true believers” both in Canada and beyond, according to Stephanie Carvin, an international affairs professor at Carleton University.

“This movement raised more money in a week than all the political parties in Canada did in the fourth quarter combined,” she said. “This is not an insignificant amount of money.”

The donation data seem to confirm that funding for these protests is largely home-brewed in Canada and the U.S., Prof. Carvin continued, and is not coming from state actors such as Russia and China, as many have speculated.

“We have to understand this movement as Canadian with overt American influence,” she added.

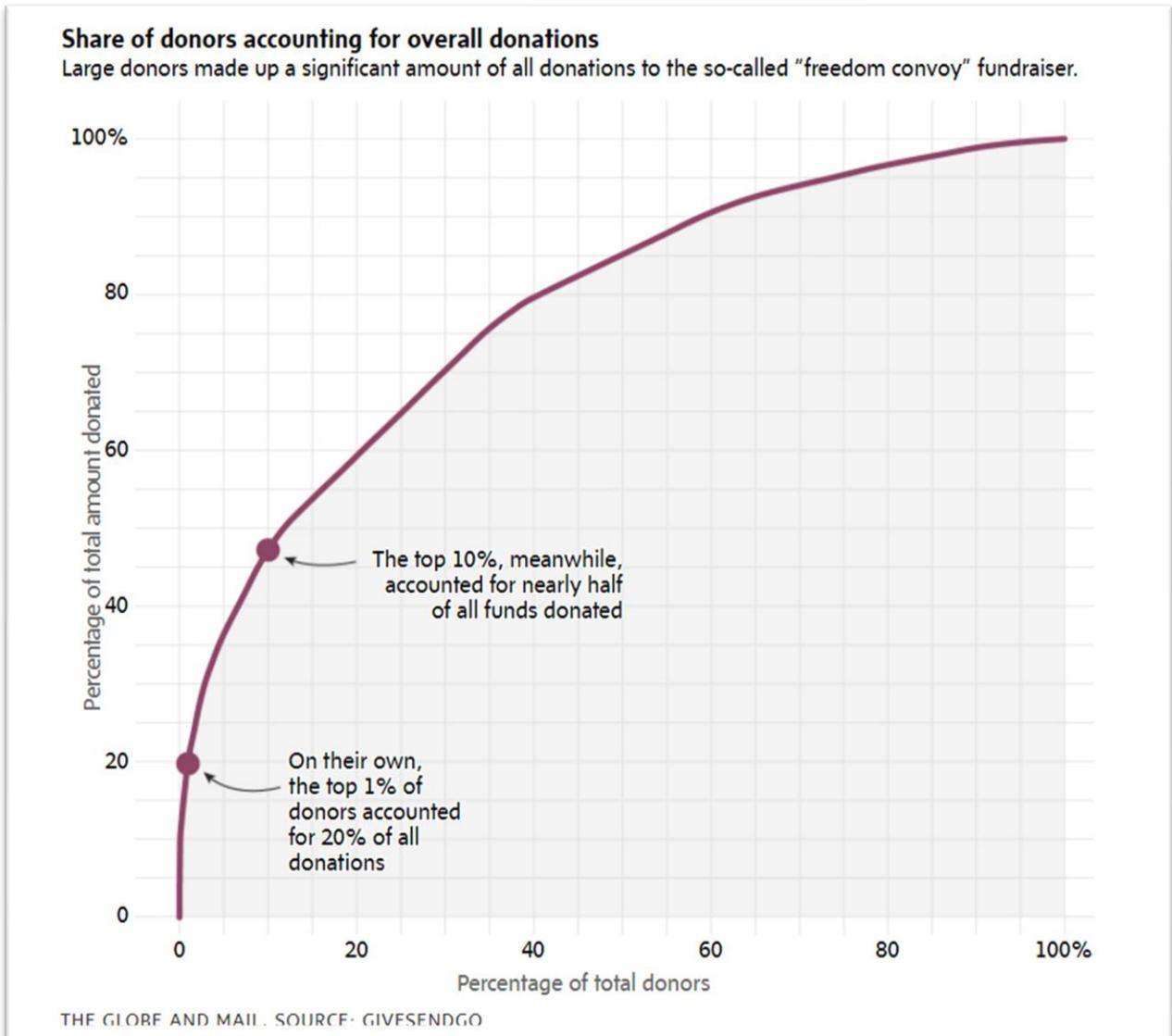
Many donations included messages of support for truckers and protestors. Nearly 1,500 directly referenced Justin Trudeau, while dozens referred to Donald Trump or “WWG1WGA,” a catchphrase used among adherents of a false, sprawling conspiracy theory known as “Q.”

“The biggest public misunderstanding of this protest is that it is about mandates and truckers,” Prof. Carvin said. “It is not. The origins of this movement date back to at least 2019. These are anti-government extremists who have espoused Islamophobic and anti-Semitic views.”

The data also seem to indicate how much GiveSendGo itself received from donors. According to the file, GiveSendGo had earned at least US\$572,748 in “tips” from donors by Feb. 10.

While the vast majority of individual donations were for amounts of US\$100 or less (81,402 donations in all), larger single donations accounted for a majority of the total amount donated. In all, US\$4,280,605 came from donations of more than US\$100.

Large donations were so significant that the top 1 per cent of donors accounted for 20 per cent of all donations. The top 10 per cent, meanwhile, accounted for nearly 50 per cent of all donations.



Many of those top donations noted e-mail addresses pointing to Canadian farms, a gun range and companies in the resource sector.

The largest single contribution, for US\$215,000, was completely anonymous, lacking even a country of origin. After that, the next largest donation was for US\$90,000, recorded as coming from a "Thomas M. Siebel" in the United States. The name and e-mail associated with that donation match those of an American billionaire and owner of an artificial-intelligence company.

Mr. Siebel did not respond to an e-mail from The Globe asking to confirm he had made the donation. The Globe also reached out to the listed e-mail addresses for 10 other top donors, most of whom gave upward of US\$10,000, but none responded by deadline. GiveSendGo also did not respond to a request for comment.

One Canadian donor, Brad Howland of Easy-Kleen Pressure Systems in Sussex Corner, N.B., confirmed that he had given \$75,000 to the fundraiser. “We are thankful to be blessed enough to support their efforts to do what they have to do in a peaceful way until the government removes the mandates to restore all our freedom as pre-COVID,” he said.

On Monday, the federal government invoked the Emergencies Act, granting itself sweeping powers to address the continuing convoy blockades, including new measures aimed at containing the funds flowing toward organizers.

Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland announced banks would be able to “immediately freeze or suspend” accounts without court orders, declared crowdfunding platforms would be required to report donations to financial monitoring agency FINTRAC and warned insurance could be suspended for vehicles used as part of the blockades.

“This is about following the money,” Ms. Freeland said during a news conference Monday. “This is about stopping the financing of these illegal blockades.”

Last week, the Ontario government obtained a court order limiting access to the funds organizers had raised through GiveSendGo, but the platform retorted on Twitter on Saturday that “the funds from the freedom convoy are not frozen,” and that it would find a legal mechanism for distributing funds to organizers.

Jessica Davis, president of Insight Threat Intelligence and former Canadian Security Intelligence Service analyst, told The Globe that the donations point to a growing form of political activity. Some people “might want to attend a protest or take action themselves, but for some reason, they just can’t do that,” Ms. Davis said. “So they’re committing financially to the cause.”

The consequence of that, Ms. Davis continued, is that that data is then potentially accessible to others.

“You can’t be a quiet supporter of the far right anymore,” she said. “That’s where I think this is going.”

With files from Temur Durrani and The Canadian Press.

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