

# Daniel Cameron says McConnell network is backing Rep. Barr instead

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Daniel Cameron had something to say.

Four days after [launching his campaign to replace Sen. Mitch McConnell](#), a longtime mentor who had on the same day announced he wouldn't seek an eighth term, Cameron wanted to clearly register a disagreement with McConnell.

Clad in his usual zip-up puffer vest, Cameron spoke direct to camera about the legendary senator's votes against President Donald Trump's most controversial cabinet picks.

“What we saw from Mitch McConnell in voting against Pete Hegseth, Tulsi Gabbard and RFK was just flat out wrong. You should expect a senator from Kentucky to vote for those nominees to advance the America First agenda,” Cameron said in the [video posted to social media](#).

Those Feb. 24 comments effectively ended Cameron's longtime alliance with McConnell, according to Cameron, his team and other Kentucky political insiders.

Cameron, in an interview with the Herald-Leader last week, said donors tied to McConnell and people in the senator's orbit have made that clear to him.

“It's evident as the day is long,” he said. “I've had enough of those conversations or made enough of those phone calls to recognize that.”

It's a dynamic that has shaped his path in the U.S. Senate GOP primary for McConnell's seat, where he's one of three leading candidates.

[McConnell is synonymous](#) with Cameron's quick rise in Kentucky politics, moving [from obscurity into the attorney general's office](#) in 2019.

That perch set Cameron up for political success. He gained national GOP attention in 2020 for his investigation into the police killing of Breonna Taylor — attracting [mass protests over his handling](#) of the case — and delivered a highly-regarded speech defending Trump at the Republican National Convention.

That alliance stretches as far back as Cameron's time as an [intern in the senator's office in 2006](#), through his years as general counsel to McConnell, up to his [losing 2023 gubernatorial bid](#) and beyond.

Now, Cameron claims that McConnell's network is backing [Central Kentucky Congressman Andy Barr](#) for the GOP nomination to the U.S. Senate, which will be decided in this year's May 19 primary.

“It's probably the worst-kept secret in town that the McConnell team is helping the Barr team. (I've) heard that from donors that I've sat face-to-face with that told me that, as a McConnell donor, they're now supporting the Barr campaign,” Cameron said.

Cameron and McConnell's political teams have not spoken in any depth since February 2025. Rebutting Cameron's claim, McConnell made clear in a brief statement that he is not involved in the primary race to replace him. [Though a slate of Democrats are running](#), Republicans are heavily favored to keep the seat.

“Senator McConnell has not endorsed in this race nor does he plan on doing so,” a McConnell spokesperson wrote, not offering a response to other claims from Cameron and questions about their relationship.



*U.S. HEMP ROUNDTABLE*

Daniel Cameron and U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell at a University of Louisville football game

“I think some folks obviously weren't pleased by that public pronouncement and the contrast there,” Cameron said. “I think that had some bearing on people's decision-making when it came to this race. It's part of the process: when you put yourself out there, you know that if you make a decision, if you make a statement, some people will like it and some people won't.”

Cameron would not say if he had direct contact with McConnell or his team communicating displeasure after that video — only that “it's evident” that “not everybody agreed with me.”

Barr, leaving his Central Kentucky-based 6th Congressional District in his bid for the Senate, chalks up the support he's seen to hard work.

In a statement, Barr spokesperson Alex Bellizzi highlighted that Barr has more donors and [“major endorsements”](#) than both Cameron and Nate Morris, the third leading candidate in the race, combined.

“That is because Andy is the only candidate in this race with a proven record of standing with President Trump and helping him pass the MAGA agenda,” Bellizzi wrote. “Daniel Cameron already embarrassed Republicans by losing statewide to a Democrat even with President Trump's

endorsement, and Nate Morris has a record more fitting for a Democrat primary in California, so of course Kentucky conservatives are rallying behind Andy Barr.”

Even though Morris made bashing McConnell a hallmark of his early campaign — Barr and Cameron's criticism have been much more tame by comparison — [all three candidates have ties to McConnell](#) through the senator's internship program.

Trey Grayson, the [last Kentucky U.S. Senate GOP primary candidate endorsed by McConnell](#) in his loss to Sen. Rand Paul in 2010, is supporting Barr. He told the Herald-Leader that he was not aware of any “order from on high” to not support Cameron.

Instead, he thinks that many longtime donors and party insiders are simply picking who they think will win and who they know.

“Andy has known a lot of people because he's been in office for a long time, and he's been really active for about 20 years. Some of this is just looking at the race and seeing fundraising prowess for Barr and fundraising challenges for Cameron. Some of it is they've just known Andy longer,” Grayson said.

Some view Cameron's candor on the split between himself and his former mentor as a convenient narrative to explain away his lackluster fundraising; even though he's [leading in the polls](#), Cameron had [less than one-tenth of Barr's cash](#) in the last public filing and lacks the ability to self-fund like Morris.

The narrative could also attract the support of the “Liberty” wing of the Kentucky GOP, which [defines itself against McConnell's more traditional brand of conservatism and powerful interests](#) like the Chamber of Commerce.

But Cameron insists this is about standing up for his principles and continuing to prove he's “his own man,” a line he's been using since [his touted 2020 Republican National Convention speech](#), a retort to then-presidential candidate Joe Biden's appeal to Black people that “you ain't Black” if you didn't support him.

Rep. Savannah Maddox, R-Dry Ridge, a [former gubernatorial candidate](#) and central figure in the Liberty movement who is also an acolyte of Rep. Thomas Massie, made a similar comment when asked about her support for Cameron.

“(McConnell) is not backing Cameron, and I think the reason is because Daniel has made bold steps in terms of fighting for conservative values. He has emerged as someone who is not going to be the next go-along-to-get-along politician who will do the bidding of special interests and lobbyists,” Maddox said.

## **THE MCCONNELL-CAMERON RELATIONSHIP**

Since Cameron climbed from obscurity to [crowd out one ambitious state senator](#) and [defeat another in the 2019 primary for attorney general](#), much has been made of McConnell and Cameron's relationship. He cruised to office on the back of his personal charm, message discipline and a lot of help from McConnell's network.

People [falsely speculated that Cameron's wife](#), Makenze, was McConnell's granddaughter; they overanalyzed the fact that the notably stoic McConnell twice [hugged Cameron on stage](#); some insinuated, with racial undertones barely hidden, that Cameron didn't earn his way to anything.



*AUSTIN ANTHONY · KENTUCKY LANTERN*

Senator Mitch McConnell hugs Gubernatorial candidate Daniel Cameron during the 143rd Fancy Farm Picnic on Saturday, Aug. 5, 2023.

Through all that, the Cameron-McConnell alliance was a fact of Kentucky politics.

“I think it's safe to say that Cameron and McConnell had one of the closest public relationships that the two of them have had. For Cameron, it was the closest,” Al Cross, former political journalist and longtime observer of Kentucky politics, said.

Though Cameron pegs the February 2025 video as the pivotal moment, the real story might start in the lead up to the 2023 governor's race.

It's been a long-running rumor in Kentucky politics that Cameron, considered at one time a shoo-in to eventually replace McConnell in 2026, went against McConnell's wishes when he opted to run against Beshear.

“Apparently he goes against McConnell's advice and challenges Beshear. That's the beginning of the rupture right there,” Cross said. “McConnell remains supportive, but he clearly knew that Cameron had problems connecting with a broader electorate and raising money.”

A spokesperson for McConnell declined to comment on that narrative. Cameron's team maintains that no explicit message along the lines of “don't run for governor” was communicated to him, but it's possible that some were caught by surprise with his announcement.

McConnell's network appeared to be noncommittal in [the 2023 primary race](#) — Kelly Craft, the GOP megadonor and former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, was on the ballot — but fell back in with Cameron when he won the primary on the back of the Trump endorsement.

A [top McConnell adviser](#) and [his chief of staff got directly involved](#) in Cameron's general election bid against the popular incumbent Democrat.

What exactly is the “McConnell network?”

In his 40-plus years serving Kentucky in Washington, McConnell has made a lot of friends in both places. He's fostered strong relationships with donors, politicians and other power brokers.

Perhaps most importantly, his staff tend to stay fiercely loyal, and, when they leave, they often go on to do big things.



Then-Republican nominee for governor Daniel Cameron greets Sen. Mitch McConnell at the Graves County Republican Breakfast, Aug. 5, 2023. State Treasurer Allison Ball and Secretary of State Michael Adams look on. (Kentucky Lantern photo by Austin Anthony)

They're not for Cameron, the candidate claims — emphasizing he holds no grudges on the matter — citing his own years-long experience in McConnell's office and as a political mentee.

“The best way to capture it is, I've heard enough, and I've seen enough to know,” Cameron said, adding a donor told him “they've got to go with Barr because that's where a lot of the McConnell team is.”

It's long been acknowledged that candidates friendly with McConnell, taking the popularity hits that come with leading a political conference in Washington [even as he continued to win landslide general elections](#), might want to establish some distance.

But for some of those in McConnell's orbit, Cameron's video on the confirmation votes so close to McConnell's historic retirement announcement, was a step too far.

“I think there's a recognition of politics, and he's got to be his own guy and all that,” Grayson said. “But, given how much of a positive role McConnell has played in his career, even before politics, it seemed a little too much.”

I'm running for the U.S. Senate to defend your Constitutional rights and support President Trump's America First agenda.

I'm running to ensure you have a Senator in Washington reflecting your values and helping President Trump restore the promise of America. [pic.twitter.com/BfYYNyQVgA](https://pic.twitter.com/BfYYNyQVgA)  
— Daniel Cameron (@DanielCameronKY) [February 24, 2025](#)

## **POLITICAL DYNAMICS**

One of Cameron's key pieces of evidence for his claim is that donors previously aligned with McConnell are now backing Barr.

That claim has some merit.

Of the 31 Kentuckians that gave maximum contributions to McConnell's Bluegrass Committee, his most Kentucky-focused outside spending group, in the last two years, 10 of them gave big contributions to Barr's senate campaign as of Sep. 30, [according to records with the Federal Elections Commission](#). None had supported Cameron or Morris' campaigns as of that date.

Seven of the top 20 earning lobbyists in Frankfort — including the [top two](#), who have worked closely with McConnell — donated to Barr as of Sep. 30. Only one of those top 20 donated to Cameron and none contributed to Morris.

Cameron didn't go into specifics, but mentioned “a big fundraiser for Congressman Barr in Louisville,” to the Herald-Leader as evidence. One such fundraiser that made a splash at the time was Barr's June 18 event, which had big-name McConnell stalwarts like [banker Terry Forcht](#) and [former Republican Party of Kentucky chair Mac Brown](#) on the host committee list. Of the 22 families on that list, 10 had donated to McConnell or McConnell-aligned PACs in the last six years.

A counterargument from Barr supporters is that there is only so much GOP money in a small, traditionally Democratic state like Kentucky, Barr worked hard to get it, and Cameron's messaging amounts to sour grapes.

Grayson warned people away from coming to the conclusion that there's a one-to-one transfer from McConnell supporters to Barr. He said that the class of Kentucky Republicans closest to the state party that Barr has on his side just tend to like Barr the most.

“The reality is that a lot of McConnell people are just RPK people,” Grayson said. “Barr has been really good — and some of this is because he runs every two years — at keeping up with people.

“I think that one of Daniel's weaknesses is maintaining the relationships that he formed in his AG's and governor's races.”



*CHRISTIAN KANTOSKY · CKANTOSKY@HERALD-LEADER.COM*

Andy Barr, center, talks to his supporters during Fancy Farm Picnic on Saturday, Aug. 2, 2025, at St. Jerome Church in Fancy Farm, Ky.

Barr's [endorsement from Rep. Hal Rogers](#), the only congressman weighing in on the GOP primary race as of now, could also be playing a big factor. [Rogers](#) traditionally fundraises well, and his backing likely came with the financial support of many of his donors.

It's true also that Barr is racking up the most cash from in-state sources by a lot.

Starting with a \$3 million-plus cushion from his congressional campaign account, Barr has gone on to get 747 unique Kentucky donors to Cameron's 507, and Morris' 87, and Barr's Kentucky donors have donated much more than Cameron's. He's more likely to share donors with McConnell through sheer volume.

Cameron and Morris both have seen donations come in from some McConnell-linked donors, too. Former GOP candidates Stuart Ray and [Hal Heiner](#), as well as trucking entrepreneur Allan Parnell, all gave big donations to Cameron. Kenny Troutt, a billionaire who supported McConnell, has given to Morris' campaign.

## **LIBERTY ALIGNMENT**

In the days before his interview with the Herald-Leader, Cameron mentioned some elements of his rift with McConnell to Liberty-aligned platforms like the [Liberty Ladies Republican Club](#) and the [Kentucky's Voice](#) television program.

In a heated race, that Liberty coalition appears up for grabs. A couple Liberty-aligned legislators have appeared at events with Morris, who shares a campaign treasurer with Massie. Cameron is making inroads, with endorsements from Reps. Felicia Rabourn, R-Turners Station, and Candy Massaroni, R-Bardstown. Michael Faris, a candidate lacking statewide name ID or significant funds, has also found some success in building grassroots support with that crowd.

There is some political risk to courting this group.

Its de facto leaders, [Massie](#) and [Sen. Rand Paul](#), are both reviled by Trump. The president's endorsement, if granted, could be decisive given his [continued positive approval in Kentucky](#) and his 30-point win in 2024.

But Maddox doesn't see Cameron as making a political ploy. She just thinks he'll serve more like Massie and Paul than McConnell.

“I think when it comes to spending, in particular, that the philosophies are starkly different when you're looking at someone like Sen. McConnell versus Sen. Paul. And I believe that Daniel is going to be more aligned with Sen. Rand Paul and Congressman Thomas Massie in taking a hard line on wasteful spending,” Maddox said.



*SILAS WALKER · SWALKER@HERALD-LEADER.COM*

Rep. Savannah Maddox speaks about the CARR bill during the Interim Joint Committee on Judiciary in Frankfort, Ky, Friday, December 15, 2023.

If Cameron is saying this anywhere, it's not in public.

Asked at an event in early January if he'd serve more like Paul or McConnell, he answered simply: "I see myself serving as Daniel Cameron."

[Staunch social conservative](#) Rep. Josh Calloway, R-Irvington, like Maddox, is [another prominent Liberty legislator](#). When contacted on his drive from Frankfort to Irvington, not far from Cameron and Faris' hometown of Elizabethtown, he said he's remained neutral thus far.

"Nate, I've gotten to know him really well, and they haven't pushed hard because they know I live in Faris country. There are some things about Nate that I like, and I really like Daniel as a person, but they've pushed hard for an endorsement, and I just chose to hold out," Calloway said.

Calloway's wife, also in the car, chimed in to make her view clear.

"She loves Daniel Cameron," Calloway said. "She just feels like he's a sincere person, and that's lacking in a lot of politics."