

# [***Network political contributors have a long history. But are they more trouble than they're worth?***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BNJ-M3V1-JC5B-G44F-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

NEW YORK — One of the nation's most prominent news outlets has found itself in an [*embarrassing mess*](https://apnews.com/article/nbc-news-republican-committee-ronna-mcdaniel-483647e9eca547a981002e4179d3b2e5) over the hiring — and quick firing — of someone who isn't even a journalist in the first place.

Among other things, NBC News' brief employment of former [*Republican National Committee chief Ronna McDaniel*](https://apnews.com/article/ronna-mcdaniel-trump-rnc-stepping-down-presidential-2024-dde6c031db877008a348d0a31f04f278) has illustrated the role of political contributors in television news, and the frustration many executives feel in adequately representing the GOP point of view in the Donald Trump era.

NBC News' leadership felt it had secured a prize in the services of McDaniel to provide an insider's perspective on the Republican campaign. Yet they were taken aback and changed course Tuesday after network personalities like Chuck Todd and Rachel Maddow [*objected*](https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/wireStory/nbcs-chuck-todd-lays-network-hiring-former-rnc-108448122) to working with someone who had [*trafficked in election disinformation*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/26/us/politics/ronna-mcdaniel-trump-nbc.html).

Those bosses, starting with NBC Universal Chairman Cesar Conde, now face questions about their leadership and anger from Republicans, some of whom their journalists count upon as news sources heading into a presidential election.

“The reputation of a news organization will never rise on the hiring of a non-journalistic contributor,” said Mark Whitaker, a former NBC News senior vice president and Washington bureau chief. “But it can fall.”

**TRACING THE HISTORY OF PARTISANS ON THE AIR**

Televised political combat existed in earlier times, like Shana Alexander and James Kilpatrick's “point-counterpoint” segment on “60 Minutes” in the 1970s. ***Politics*** and journalism had its share of cross-fertilization with figures such as George Stephanopoulos and the late Tim Russert.

Yet the idea of building rosters of paid political contributors took off with cable news. MSNBC, CNN and Fox News Channel are, in large part, political talk channels and seek experts to help fill the time. News streaming has similar needs. Being on call to opine can be lucrative work; several reports had NBC agreeing to pay McDaniel $300,000 a year.

The networks say they strive for political balance. Even NBC News, whose MSNBC cable outlet appeals to liberals, has more than a dozen Republican contributors. Yet most of them — figures like former RNC chief Michael Steele, former Ohio Gov. John Kasich and Bulwark founder Charlie Sykes — either predate Trump in their active political work or oppose him, or both.

Finding someone with a MAGA pedigree has been more difficult. Former Trump chiefs of staff Reince Priebus and Mick Mulvaney had short tenures at CBS News; some CBS journalists privately objected to hiring Mulvaney. Priebus last year joined ABC News, where former Trump Homeland Security adviser Tom Bossert also is a contributor.

Former Trump communications director Alyssa Farah Griffin is at CNN, along with ex-Trump campaign adviser David Urban and Mark Esper, a former defense secretary in the Trump administration.

Many figures who have stepped outside of Trump's orbit, like Griffin, have turned against him. To some insiders and supporters, the simple act of becoming a network contributor makes you anti-MAGA. Even a generally reliable Trump defender such as Kayleigh McEnany, among a handful of former administration officials like Mike Pompeo now on Fox News' payroll, has been [*criticized by her ex-boss*](https://thehill.com/homenews/media/4027450-trump-slams-his-former-press-secretary-kayleigh-mcenany/) as being insufficiently loyal.

A Trump supporter has to wonder if it’s worthwhile to continually feel outnumbered and defensive on television and be forced to account for every wild statement the former president makes, GOP consultant Alex Conant said.

Networks, meanwhile, need contributors to speak authoritatively and get beyond talking points, said Mark Lukasiewicz, a former NBC executive who is now dean of Hofstra University's communications school.

“Journalists in a lot of newsrooms are starting to think more about the stakes, thinking about the costs of delivering a large audience and a platform to someone who doesn't fundamentally believe in a system that allows that platform to exist,” Lukasiewicz said. “I think there is a higher bar for somebody who is on the payroll of a journalistic institution, rather than just somebody you interview."

**MAKING CHOICES ABOUT WHO TO PUT ON THE AIR**

If publicly supporting, or at least not objecting to, Trump lies about a rigged 2020 election is a litmus test for a job as a network contributor — well, that would eliminate a lot of Republicans.

“To remain itself, the MAGA movement has to practice election denial, minimize the events of Jan. 6, and treat the news media as a hate object for pointing this out,” said Jay Rosen, a New York University professor and author of the [*Pressthink blog*](https://pressthink.org/). “Extending the hand of welcome is just too costly for a self-respecting newsroom with a public service charter, as NBC learned this week.”

Networks should retire this category of contributors and switch to a system relying on their own journalists and vetted, unpaid experts, he said. He has no expectations: in reality, they rarely compete by striking out on their own in this manner.

NBC's Conde made clear that while McDaniel didn't work out, the principle behind her hiring stands. The network remains committed to seeking diverse viewpoints, and will “redouble our efforts” to seek such voices, he said in the internal memo announcing her firing. Whether that will placate Republicans is uncertain at best.

Some of the personalities who publicly objected to McDaniel at NBC News, such as “Morning Joe” co-host Mika Brzezinski, said they don't object to airing conservative viewpoints but draw the line at people who actively tried to subvert the 2020 election.

That's not a nuance many Republicans perceived. Through its failure, an effort designed to make NBC News more inviting had the opposite effect.

“For Republicans who already think NBC is biased, this confirms everything,” Conant said.

Trump, in messages on his Truth Social platform, has [*tried to draw in*](https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/112165775224122530) NBC's corporate parent, Comcast.

“These sick degenerates over at MSDNC are really running NBC, and there seems nothing (Comcast) chairman Brian Roberts can do about it,” he wrote. There has been no public indication Conde and his management team has lost Comcast's support.

Still, the aftermath has increased public scrutiny on Conde and his management team: Rebecca Blumenstein, NBC News president-editorial; MSNBC President Rashida Jones; and Carrie Budoff Brown, senior vice president for ***politics***.

Among the questions: through two full days of NBC and MSNBC journalists and show hosts publicly condemning the McDaniel hiring, why didn't anyone in management step forward to explain the motivations behind it? The Washington Post on Wednesday [*raised questions*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/03/27/ronna-mcdaniel-nbc-msnbc-contract/) about Jones' role in recruiting the former Republican leader.

Margaret Sullivan, executive director of the Newmark Center for Journalism Ethics and Security at Columbia University, [*wrote in the Guardian*](https://www.theguardian.com/global/commentisfree/2024/mar/26/nbc-news-hires-ronna-mcdaniel-election-denialist) that NBC could “earn itself a lot of good will and recover from this blunder” by publicly apologizing.

There was no comment from NBC News on Thursday.

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