

Musk could shake up KY's U.S. Senate race

\$10M donation to Morris boosts outsider hopeful

Lucas Aulbach

Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Love him, hate him, respect him, ridicule him — when it comes to Elon Musk, no one can deny he brings a gravitational pull to anything he touches.

The richest person in the world brought that gravitational pull to the Bluegrass State on Jan. 19 when news broke that he'd contributed \$10 million to Fight for Kentucky, a PAC backing Lexington executive Nate Morris in the state's 2026 U.S. Senate race.

Morris, running as a political outsider and the antithesis to retiring U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell, has consistently trailed in the polls behind the two other Republican frontrunners, U.S. Rep. Andy Barr and former Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron. But he took a victory lap in a Jan. 19 appearance on Donald Trump Jr.'s "Triggered" podcast hours after the donation was reported.

Morris is "delighted to have Elon's support," he said, telling the president's son Musk's donation "speaks volumes for the kind of campaign we're going to run and most importantly, how we're going to stand with your father when we get in the U.S. Senate."

Barr and Cameron lead Morris in name recognition, but the former chair of Rubicon Technologies was the talk of the political world after landing the co-sign from Musk, who has not publicly commented on the donation.

Barr's campaign manager, Blake Gober, put out a scathing statement hours after the contribution was made public, arguing that more time in the spotlight will turn more people away from Morris' campaign. Nathanael Hirt, campaign manager for Cameron, called Morris "a pretty good con man" and offered a tongue-in-cheek congratulations to "the local Kentucky TV stations on the windfall of cash about Fake Nate headed their way."

Meanwhile, Charles Booker, a Democratic former state representative who's also running for McConnell's seat, attacked Musk for propping up "this wannabe Trump who's trying to be the next JD Vance" in a social media post calling for campaign donations.

"The richest person on the planet is trying to drown out the voices of the people," Booker said, citing a recent poll that found he and Morris would be neck-and-neck among voters if they advanced to the general election. "Elon knows I can win this, but what he doesn't know is the people of Kentucky ain't for sale."

Whether they support him or not, political strategists on both sides of the aisle who spoke with The Courier Journal saw some truth in Booker's message.

Jake Cox, for instance, likely has very little in common politically with the Democratic candidate — after all, Cox was U.S. Sen. Rand Paul's campaign manager in 2022, helping him land a decisive win over Booker, the Democratic nominee. But he isn't convinced Musk's millions will tilt many voters toward Morris, either.

"If money and unlimited funds had an impact on races, then we would be talking about U.S. Senator Amy McGrath and we'd be talking about Governor Kelly Craft," Cox said, referring to two former candidates who lost Kentucky races despite fundraising advantages. "I think ultimately it helps and



Elon Musk boards Air Force One in March 2025 during his time with President Donald Trump's administration. Musk is backing Nate Morris in Kentucky's U.S. Senate race. NATHAN HOWARD/REUTERS



Nate Morris speaks with reporters in August 2025 at the Kentucky State Fair. Elon Musk recently donated \$10 million toward a PAC backing Morris in Kentucky's U.S. Senate race. MICHAEL CLEVINGER/COURIER JOURNAL

definitely is something of a shot in the arm for the Morris campaign. But at this time, I don't see it making a significant difference that actually shifts the race one direction or another."

In Cox's eyes, endorsements will make a bigger difference.

Barr has support from U.S. Rep. Hal Rogers, who's represented Eastern Kentucky at the Capitol since 1981 — "he's going to have the resources and assets in a neck of the woods that's tough to get to" — and has rolled out a consistent stream of endorsements from elected officials around the commonwealth, including 20 state representatives and eight current state senators. Cameron's endorsements lean heavily on Kentucky law enforcement leaders, building on relationships he established as attorney general.

"To be honest with you, I think that's one area that Nate really needs to improve on," Cox added. "Nate, right now, has a lot of great national endorsements but not a single person who will make an actual difference here in Kentucky. You look at Elon Musk, you look at (U.S. Sen.) Jim Banks, you look at any number of guys from outside of the state — they may help with fundraising, they may help with general name ID, but they're not going to be activating a vot-

ing base that will actually be able to go out and vote on Election Day."

Morris, who made a fortune running Rubicon Technologies before stepping down as chair in 2023, has largely self-funded his campaign, with personal contributions of \$3 million and \$1.4 million since he entered the race in the summer.

A \$10 million boost to a supporting PAC doesn't hurt. But Musk, for all of his financial power, hasn't always helped the candidates he's supporting.

He spent more than \$200 million backing President Donald Trump's re-election in 2024 and later joined the administration as a special advisor while the Department of Government Efficiency initiative examined national spending (and recommended massive cuts to some social services agencies and other federal organizations).

Trump won, as you may remember. But months later, Musk put \$20 million toward the campaign for a Republican candidate for Wisconsin's state Supreme Court — and that candidate lost handily, with some members of both parties blaming Musk for energizing Democrats ahead of the election.

There's a primary to get through before the general election. But Kelsey Coots, a Democratic consultant who ran

for Kentucky auditor in 2019, doesn't think the party is going to need anything to motivate blue voters to get to the polls in November.

"I think Democrats are already motivated," Coots, cofounder of Blue Dot Consulting, said. "Not only are we having a lively primary, but with everything that's happening at the federal level, people are going to be ready to vote. Elon, of course, brings another level of awareness to the race, and potentially national money for Democrats when folks see that he's playing, but if you're asking if the regular Kentucky Democrat is going to be more motivated to vote, I think we're all about as motivated as we can be."

Coots, too, has doubts about national money turning a state race, pointing toward the 2024 ballot initiative to pass "Amendment 2," which would have let the Kentucky legislature spend tax dollars on nonpublic education. It was backed by Republicans and drew millions for ads by supporters and opponents, but it was eventually soundly defeated at the ballot box.

"Kentuckians value authenticity and I think they want leaders that they can trust. Somebody parachuting in to tell us what we need, in my opinion, won't play well," Coots said. "While the money will help the candidate obviously with name ID and some other things, I just think out-of-state billionaires can't buy Kentucky voters."

Tres Watson, former spokesman for the Republican Party of Kentucky, is friends with each of the three leading GOP candidates and keeps a close eye on elections. PAC money should help, he said, but there's reason to hesitate.

That \$10 million check will get split up on consulting and other fees, Watson said, with probably closer to \$6 million or \$7 million to go toward ads. Kentucky is "a hard state to buy media in because we're bordered by so many states," he added — if you're spending money on ads outside of the Lexington market, you're buying commercial time in states like Indiana and Tennessee.

"I don't think the money goes as far as people think it does," Watson said. "But also you have to have the candidate to back. And the question still is, can they get the messaging right to get some momentum behind Nate Morris?"

Watson, like Barr, said Morris' harsh shots at McConnell at the start of his campaign "hit a sour note with a lot of Kentuckians." And while Morris has said he's not concerned with the numbers, recent polls touted by campaigns behind Barr and Cameron have said he's still trailing both candidates, though the poll from Cameron found Morris' favorability rising.

"The money's great," Watson said. "But if you don't have the right message behind it — which to this point in time, I don't think they have — what value does that give the money?"

If he's concerned, Morris isn't showing it. He told Trump Jr. on Jan. 19 he's traveled the state since launching his campaign and has received donations from plenty of donors, locally and nationally, who are "sick of the McConnell machine."

"It is not the easiest thing to challenge the McConnell mafia right here in the Bluegrass State, but we've done it," Morris said. "We've gone straight for the jugular with Mitch and his cronies, and that's what has to happen to bring change here in Kentucky and to bring a new perspective."

Reach Lucas Aulbach at laulbach@courier-journal.com.

FCC: Equal-time laws also apply to talk shows

BrieAnna J. Frank

USA TODAY

Television talk shows do not have a blanket exemption from laws requiring stations to offer equal broadcast opportunities to political candidates, the Federal Communications Commission said in new guidance Jan. 21.

Experts told USA TODAY that such laws, which date back decades but have not been broadly enforced against TV stations, infringe upon the First Amendment rights of broadcasters to make their own editorial decisions.

"The FCC is not intended to be, and is not empowered to be, the nation's speech police," said Robert Corn-Revere, chief counsel at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.

President Donald Trump's administration has criticized several talk show hosts, including Seth Meyers, Stephen Colbert and cohosts of "The View." In September, FCC Chair Brendan Carr made comments interpreted by some as a threat to pull ABC station

licenses if Jimmy Kimmel weren't fired over remarks he made on the air about Charlie Kirk's assassination.

USA TODAY reached out to the FCC and the National Association of Broadcasters for comment.

The Communications Act of 1934 required FCC licensees, in radio and later television, to offer equal opportunities to all legally qualified candidates for a public office to appear on their broadcasts. The law was amended in 1959 to exempt newscasts, news interviews, news documentaries and on-the-spot coverage of news events.

The FCC's public notice said that under President George W. Bush's administration in 2006, the agency decided that the interview segment of "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" qualified for the news interview exemption.

But that decision has been interpreted and applied too broadly in the years since, the FCC said in the new guidance, leading to widespread notions that all daytime and late-night talk

shows are exempt from the equal opportunity requirement.

"This is not the case," the notice said.

Rather, the agency said, such decisions are "fact specific" and exemptions are "limited to the program that was the subject of the request."

Narrowing the definition of what qualifies as news to exclude talk shows could have "really dramatic implications for the First Amendment," said Jenna Leventoff, senior policy counsel at the American Civil Liberties Union.

Her organization supports a broader definition given the vast array of options people now have for keeping up with current events, whether it be traditional news outlets, social media or talk shows, she said.

Institute for Free Speech President David Keating similarly said that the 1934 law was based on the then-limited number of public airwaves. Such rationales are "obsolete" due to the dramatic shifts in the media landscape, he said.

Equal opportunity requirements are thus "constitutionally dubious" in the modern context. Courts could settle the matter if a lawsuit arises, Keating said.

In the meantime, he said talk shows may steer clear of booking political candidates in light of the FCC's notice.

"The viewers, I think, and the public will be worse off as a result," he said.

Though the notice references only television, Corn-Revere said such policies would equally apply to radio. That would mean conservative talk radio is also bound by equal opportunity requirements.

The extent to which the FCC will take talk shows to task over such requirements is yet to be seen, but Leventoff said "the damage can be done, even without enforcement."

"Sometimes the threat is enough to chill speech," she said.

USA TODAY's coverage of First Amendment issues is funded through a collaboration between the Freedom Forum and Journalism Funding Partners. Funders do not provide editorial input.