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Donations Create a Tricky Balance for Oil-State Politicians

By **DAVID M. HERSZENHORN** and **ERIC LICHTBLAU**

WASHINGTON — The outburst by Representative Joe L. Barton of Texas in support of BP underscored the potential peril for lawmakers forced to respond to crises involving industries vital to their regions, and whose bountiful donations finance their political campaigns.

Democrats continued to make use of Mr. Barton's apology to BP, using it to portray Republicans as beholden to big oil. Mr. Barton, the senior Republican on the Energy and Commerce Committee, worked as a consultant to Atlantic Richfield Oil and Gas Company before being elected to Congress. He has long been one of the top beneficiaries of campaign donations from big energy companies, cornerstones of the Texas economy.

But in going after Republicans, the Democrats' attacks gloss over a more complicated picture.

The largest beneficiary of campaign donations from BP in the 2008 election cycle, for instance, was **President Obama**, who took in \$77,000 from company executives and its political action committee. This year, Senator **Blanche Lincoln**, Democrat of Arkansas and chairwoman of the Agriculture Committee, leads all candidates with \$286,000 in donations from oil and gas companies.

And while Democrats have pounced on Mr. Barton for accusing Mr. Obama of conducting a "shakedown" by demanding that BP set up a \$20 billion fund for oil spill claims, a number of Democratic lawmakers — especially those from oil-producing Gulf states — have struggled to balance their criticism of BP with support for the industry.

Officials like Senator [Mary L. Landrieu](#) and Representative Charlie Melancon, both Democrats of Louisiana, have demanded accountability for BP and reparations for individuals and businesses who may face financial catastrophe. But they have also fought to lift the moratorium on [offshore drilling](#) imposed by the Obama administration after the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion, saying it is crippling the local economy.

“Fifty-seven days ago this country was using 20 million barrels of oil a day,” Ms. Landrieu said on the Senate floor this week, responding to a speech by Mr. Obama from the Oval Office. “Today, 57 days later, 11 lives lost, the rig at the bottom of the ocean, we are still using 20 million barrels a day. The president did not say to people last night to park their cars and walk to work.”

Ms. Landrieu continued, “We have to understand we have to continue to drill for oil and gas.”

Both Ms. Landrieu and Mr. Melancon, who is running for a Senate seat, receive substantial donations from the oil and gas industry, which is hardly surprising given the industry’s big presence in Louisiana. For her campaigns, Ms. Landrieu has taken in \$751,000 since 1996, while Mr. Melancon has received \$312,000 since 2004.

A day after infuriating even his own party’s leaders with his remarks, Mr. Barton would not agree to an interview. But a Barton spokeswoman said it was similarly no surprise that a representative from Texas with a senior job on the Energy and Commerce Committee would be the beneficiary of oil and gas companies.

“Joe Barton gets oil money and energy money, well, damn straight,” said the spokeswoman, Lisa Miller. “It probably doesn’t come as a shock to anybody that Texas congressmen, Democrats and Republicans, receive energy money. But how he feels about BP is not related obviously to his campaign contributions because he is extremely critical of BP.”

Ms. Miller pointed out that Mr. Barton had a big role in Congressional inquiries into a 2006 BP oil spill in Alaska and a 2005 explosion at a BP refinery in Texas that killed 15 workers. Ms. Miller said that hearings led by Mr. Barton contributed to the forced retirement of BP’s chief executive, John Browne. He was replaced by [Tony Hayward](#), the C.E.O. Mr. Barton apologized to on Thursday.

Mr. Barton was also critical in obtaining major tax breaks for the oil industry in 2004. He has received \$1.4 million since the 1990 cycle from individuals and political action committees in the oil and gas industry, according to the [Center for Responsive Politics](#).

The nuances of big oil's relationship to Washington was immaterial to Democrats who intensified the onslaught that began on Thursday after Mr. Barton's apology, and his subsequent apology for the apology.

Besides painting Republicans as defenders of big oil, Democrats used Mr. Barton's comments to deflect attention, if briefly, from the Obama administration's difficulties in managing the response to the huge oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

"If the [G.O.P.](#) wins back the House, Barton is the guy who could be in charge of regulating the oil industry," the [Democratic National Committee](#) wrote in a fund-raising pitch. "We're whipping together an ad as fast as possible to make sure voters know exactly whose side Barton and the G.O.P. are on and to demand they stop apologizing to big oil, but we need your help to get it on the air."

In a sign of the political sensitivity around the oil spill, Republicans joined in criticizing Mr. Barton. Representative Jo Bonner, Republican of Alabama, called on Mr. Barton to resign his committee post on Friday, joining Representative Jeff Miller, Republican of Florida.

The tightrope walk faced by elected officials from oil and gas states is similar to the New York delegation's struggles when it comes to legislation to regulate Wall Street banks, or the New Jersey delegation's sensitivity on legislation related to the pharmaceutical industry.

"You've got this conflict for these folks where they acknowledge the spill is a problem but, with the significant support they get from the industry, are a heck of a lot more reluctant to take aggressive legislative action against the company," said Tyson Slocum, who runs the energy program at [Public Citizen](#), a political research and advocacy group.

Besides Ms. Landrieu and Mr. Barton, lawmakers from big energy states include Senator [David Vitter](#), Republican of Louisiana; Senator [James M. Inhofe](#), Republican of Oklahoma; and Senator Lisa Murkowski, Republican of Alaska.

Ms. Murkowski, who has received \$434,000 from the industry since 2002 and whose state

economy is particularly linked to the industry, last month blocked the Senate from considering a measure that would raise the liability limit for an oil company's legal exposure to \$10 billion from \$75 million, saying it could hurt smaller companies and produce "unintended consequences."

For the last decade, the oil industry has been one of the most powerful lobbying constituencies in Washington. It has spent nearly a billion dollars on federal lobbying since 1998, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, making it the sixth-biggest industry in terms of expenditures.

In the current election cycle, the oil and gas industry has contributed \$12.8 million to Congressional candidates, with 71 percent of it going to Republicans.