

# Billionaire mogul Sheldon Adelson looks for mainstream Republican who can win in 2016

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Tomohiro Ohsumi/Bloomberg - Billionaire Sheldon Adelson, chairman and chief executive officer of Las Vegas Sands Corp.

By Matea Gold and [Philip Rucker](#), Tuesday, March 25, 4:09 AM [E-mail the writers](#)

Casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, who along with his wife plowed more than \$92 million into efforts to help mostly losing candidates in the 2012 elections, is undertaking a new strategy for 2016 — to tap his fortune on behalf of a more mainstream Republican with a clear shot to win the White House, according to people familiar with his thinking.

In 2012, Sheldon and Miriam Adelson spent so much of their money on long-shot candidate Newt Gingrich that they helped extend an ugly intraparty fight that left the eventual nominee, Mitt Romney, severely bruised by the time he faced President Obama in the general election.

This time, the Adelsons are plotting their investments based not on personal loyalty, but on a much more strategic aim: to help select a Republican nominee they believe will have broad appeal to an increasingly diverse national electorate.

The change in attitude comes amid early jockeying by a lengthy list of aspiring Republican presidential contenders to win the affections of the billionaire, who is in the beginning stages of assessing the field.

“The bar for support is going to be much higher,” said Andy Abboud, Adelson’s top political adviser and an executive at the Adelson-run Las Vegas Sands Corp. He added, “There’s going to be a lot more scrutiny.”

This strategy would favor more established 2016 hopefuls such as former Florida governor Jeb Bush, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and Ohio Gov. John Kasich. All four will descend this week on Adelson’s luxury hotel in Las Vegas, the Venetian, for an important step in what some are calling the “Sheldon Primary.”

Officially, the potential 2016 candidates will be at the Venetian for the spring meeting of the Republican Jewish Coalition, which begins Thursday with a golf outing followed by a [VIP dinner featuring Bush](#) and hosted by the Adelsons in the private airplane hangar where Adelson keeps his fleet.

But some of the most important events will occur between the poker tournament, Scotch tasting and strategy workshops. That’s when Adelson is scheduled to hold casual one-on-one chats — over coffee, at dinner or in his private office — with the prospective candidates.

Victor Chaltiel, a GOP donor and an Adelson friend who sits on the board of Las Vegas Sands, said at this early stage in the 2016 sweepstakes, Adelson is “neutral” and has his eye on a number of potential candidates, including Bush and Christie.

“He doesn’t want a crazy extremist to be the nominee,” Chaltiel said. “He wants someone who has the chance to win the election, who is reasonable in his positions, who has convictions but is not totally crazy.”

Chaltiel said Adelson is concerned about the impact the George Washington Bridge traffic scandal in New Jersey has had on Christie’s political image. He also said Adelson admires Bush and believes he has the unique potential to do what Romney could not: win over a large number of non-white voters. Bush, whose wife is Mexican American, speaks fluent Spanish.

“Jeb Bush, because he’s bilingual, because of his wife, he has a better chance to reach out and get more access to the minorities,” Chaltiel said.

Shawl Steel, a Republican National Committee member and prominent California-based fundraiser, called Adelson “a very rational guy” who has learned his lesson from 2012.

“He wants to have the guy or the gal who’s most likely to put a coalition together to win in November,” Steel said. “The candidate will have to have a strong résumé — no sudden lightning-new guy — will have to build a formidable fundraising apparatus and really be emotionally tethered to bringing in middle-class Latinos, Asian Pacifics, Jews and blacks like never before.”

Adelson’s approach in evaluating the next batch of candidates has significant implications not just for those vying for his support, but also for the Republican Party as a whole.

In 2012, the Adelsons emerged — perhaps more than any other donors — as potent symbols of the remade campaign-finance landscape, in which a small handful of the ultra-wealthy could alter the trajectory of a race.

While other conservative donors, such as the industrialist brothers Charles and David Koch, can inject substantial financial firepower into campaigns, Adelson is perhaps the most

highly sought-after because of his willingness to dip into his personal fortune to back candidate-specific super PACs.

The \$15 million the Adelsons gave to Winning Our Future, the pro-Gingrich super PAC, financed a brutal television ad campaign against Romney that prevented the establishment front-runner from locking up the nomination in the early round of primaries.

Once Gingrich dropped out of the race, the Adelsons embraced Romney and poured \$30 million into the leading pro-Romney super PAC, Restore Our Future. In all, the couple reported giving \$92.8 million to super PACs in 2012, making them by far the biggest individual donors of the cycle, based on money that gets reported to the Federal Election Commission, [according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics](#).

The Adelsons also reportedly donated tens of millions of dollars to politically active nonprofit organizations, including Karl Rove's Crossroads GPS, as well as to groups affiliated with the Koch-backed political network, which do not disclose their donors.

Despite the poor showing in 2012, Adelson [told the Wall Street Journal](#) after the election that he was not turned off of political spending — and in fact would devote even more resources in the upcoming cycles. “I don't cry when I lose,” he said. “There's always a new hand coming up.”

This week's meetings in Las Vegas will not be Adelson's first encounter with the crop of 2016 hopefuls. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.), for instance, was the featured speaker at an RJC meeting last spring.

“Certainly the ‘Sheldon Primary’ is an important primary for any Republican running for president,” said Ari Fleischer, a former White House press secretary under President George W. Bush who serves with Adelson on the RJC's board. “It goes without saying that anybody running for the Republican nomination would want to have Sheldon at his side.”

Most of the prospective candidates have made a point of reaching out to Adelson with phone calls and personal visits when they come through town. The conversations are not overt pitches for financial backing yet, but rather solicitations of Adelson's thoughts on the economy and Israel as well as strategy for the 2014 midterm elections, according to a person familiar with the discussions.

Adelson, who is worth an estimated \$37.9 billion, according to Bloomberg, is a staunch supporter of Israel. Adelson has expressed little interest in some of the social issues that motivate the GOP base. But he is driven by what he has said he sees as Obama's socialist agenda. He is a fierce opponent of organized labor and is currently [embroiled in a fight to ban online gambling](#).

Adelson also is [lending his weight](#) to a bid by Las Vegas to host the 2016 Republican National Convention.

Adelson has a personal friendship with one possible candidate: former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee. In late November, Adelson introduced Huckabee at the Zionist Organization of America's annual dinner in New York City, where Huckabee received the Adelson Defender of Israel Award. There, the casino magnate called him "a great person, a great American and a great Zionist." But it remains to be seen whether their friendship would translate into financial support should Huckabee run.

A senior strategist who has advised past GOP nominees said the 2016 hopefuls "are just falling at his feet."

"It's a bunch of people out scrounging for the same dollars, and Sheldon represents the largest or second-largest box of money," said the strategist, who requested anonymity to speak candidly.

Adelson will not be the only major bundler for prospective candidates to visit with in Las Vegas. [The RJC board](#) also includes private-equity executive Lewis Eisenberg; hedge fund founder Paul Singer; Washington insider and lobbyist Wayne Berman; former RNC chairman Ken Mehlman; and former ambassadors Sam Fox and Mel Sembler.

"Running for president requires a broad, wide base of voters and people who are willing to donate money," said Jack Oliver, a former Bush campaign adviser and finance director. "Anyone running for president on the Republican side would love to have Sheldon as a part of their team, and he's incredibly important."