

The campaign fraud scandal around California Republican Duncan Hunter, explained

A damning indictment comes a few months from Election Day, and Rep. Hunter is on the ballot.

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Vox, Aug 22, 2018



Duncan Hunter has been indicted with campaign finance violations. *Joe Raedle/Getty Images*

California Republican Rep. Duncan Hunter and his wife, Margaret Hunter, were indicted Tuesday, charged with [using \\$250,000 in campaign funds on personal expenses](#), including a vacation to Italy, private school tuition, and dental work.

In addition to campaign finance violations, Hunter, who was among the first lawmakers to endorse Donald Trump's presidential bid, is also charged with wire fraud and falsifying documents — allegations that are the result of a more than year-long Justice Department investigation into the lawmaker's finances. His arraignment is scheduled for Thursday in San Diego.

Hunter, an Iraq and Afghanistan war veteran who was first elected to Congress in 2008 to represent a traditionally conservative district covering most of San Diego County, has repeatedly claimed he is innocent. His lawyer called all inappropriate expenses “mistakes” that were “strictly inadvertent and unintentional” last year, and Hunter has repaid the campaign [roughly \\$60,000](#).

But the damning indictment outlines a financially irresponsible family using campaign money to fund a luxurious lifestyle: using \$600 in campaign funds to [fly a pet rabbit in a plane's passenger's cabin](#), big bar and restaurant tabs (including more than \$400 for 30 tequila shots) in both Washington, DC, and San Diego, and expensive family vacations.

It all comes just months before a hugely important midterm election, in which Democrats hope to unseat more than 24 Republican lawmakers — and Hunter is one of them. Already House leadership has called to remove Hunter from his committee assignments, voluntarily or not, once the House returns to Washington in September.

In November, Hunter will face Democrat Ammar Campa-Najjar, who worked in Obama's Department of Labor and who has repeatedly out-fundraised him, in the general election. The nonpartisan [Cook Political Report has changed the district's rating](#) from Solid Republican to a much more competitive Leans Republican.

The FBI investigation has been looming large over Hunter's career for some time, posing a risk to his reelection bid. Even his Republican colleagues were reportedly encouraging him to drop out. He didn't, and now he faces serious charges just months before Election Day.

The indictment highlights repeated misuse of campaign funds

The FBI has been investigating the Hunters for more than a year, with a grand jury questioning former aides, lobbyists, and family members. On Tuesday, a [47-page indictment](#) outlined a family that was spending beyond its means and illegally using campaign funds to support an expensive lifestyle.

"Throughout the relevant period, the Hunters spent substantially more than they earned," the indictment reads, citing more than 1,000 bank overdraft fees in a seven-year time span and the family repeatedly maxing out credit cards. At the center of the indictment is Hunter's wife, whom the lawmaker installed as his paid campaign manager because the family "needed the extra money," the indictment states.

The misuse of campaign funds extends to the purchase of video games; more than \$25,000 in family vacations to Italy, Hawaii, Las Vegas, London, and other destinations; more than \$15,000 in airline tickets for the family, friends, and the pet rabbit; food and alcohol; holiday gifts; and more.

According to the indictment, these purchases were often concealed to the campaign treasurer as miscellaneous expenses or campaign activities or even reported as fraudulent. For example, the indictment reads:

- The Hunters bought personal clothing at a golf course "so that the purchase could be falsely reported to the Treasurer as 'balls for the wounded warriors'"

- The family would disguise purchasing video games by falsely telling their bank that the purchases were “fraudulent charges” — reporting that to the Federal Election Commission and the public
- Hunter and his wife used campaign funds to buy items as small as “a ring pop” from Target, as well as Pittsburgh Steelers tickets, tickets to see the play *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and family groceries, which they would say were campaign-related.

The treasurer repeatedly warned Hunter and his wife that campaign money could not be used for “a leisure outing at which the discussion occasionally focuses on the campaign.” In response, Hunter allegedly tried to accuse his treasurer of creating a “paper trail” on him and his wife.

Hunter has also faced an investigation in Congress; on August 31, 2016, the [Office of Congressional Ethics](#) referred Hunter’s case to the House Ethics Committee, claiming that he had “reported expenditures that may not be legitimate and verifiable campaign expenditures attributable to bona fide campaign or political purposes.”

Hunter’s office has chalked up some of these expenses as mistakes, and the lawmaker has maintained his innocence, while acknowledging some misuse. According to a report in [Politico from February](#), Hunter sold his home and moved his wife and kids to pay back some of the improper campaign fund uses. He, for the most part, lives in his Capitol Hill office.

Hunter was an early Trump supporter with a bad-boy reputation on the Hill

The ongoing review of Hunter’s finances and repeated scandals have made a name for the San Diego lawmaker in Washington. He’s the son and grandson of two prominent Republican lawmakers; his father, Duncan L. Hunter, was a 2008 presidential candidate and former chair of the House Armed Services Committee.

The younger Hunter’s legacy, however, seems to have taken a very different turn.

In Washington, Hunter has long been dogged by serious [legal and ethics scandals](#). He’s known as the “vaping” Congress member, who has been accused of having inappropriate extramarital relationships with women, drinking on the job, and other unprofessional conduct, all of which his office has denied.

Hunter was among the first Republican lawmakers to endorse Trump’s presidential bid — part of what the Washington Post called at the time the “Trump Caucus.” New York Republican Rep. Chris Collins, who [was arrested earlier this month on insider trading charges](#) and has since dropped his reelection bid, was the other.

Hunter has often followed Trump on politics; he sponsored a bill cracking down on so-called sanctuary cities, has approved of [Trump’s use of executive authority](#) and joined the president’s war against African-American NFL players protesting police

brutality, censuring [Colin Kaepernick's decision to kneel during the national anthems](#) offensive to the troops.

Despite his loyalty to Trump, however, his Republican colleagues on Capitol Hill have [seen him as too much of a liability](#).

In light of the indictment, House Speaker Paul Ryan said in a statement that Hunter will be at least temporarily removed from his committee assignments until the case is resolved, calling the indictment “deeply serious.” Hunter sat on the House Armed Services, Transportation and Infrastructure, and Education and the Workforce committees.

Hunter's scandals make his once-safe Republican district competitive

Democrats are hoping to end Hunter's congressional career altogether this year.

Hunter's suburban district alone is hardly competitive. Covering most of San Diego County, it's an R+11 suburban district. Registered Republicans outnumber registered Democrats 42 percent to 27 percent, and Trump won there by 15 points.

But Democrats have been keeping close tabs on the growing ethics and legal scandals around Hunter and hope changing demographics can turn the district blue.

Even if Hunter chooses to drop his reelection bid, his name will remain on the ballot in California unless a judge orders otherwise, and Republicans will be unable to nominate another candidate. But he doesn't appear poised to do so.

“I am not going anywhere,” Hunter said in a statement, calling the indictment politically motivated. “We are seeing this with President Trump; we are seeing this with my case.”

Democrat Ammar Campa-Najjar, who came in second in California's top-two primary system and will be on the ballot in November, is looking increasingly like a formidable challenge in the general election. Campa-Najjar has been out-fundraising Hunter, with more than \$1 million in campaign donations. He has just over \$200,000 in cash on hand. Hunter has more than \$350,000.

A former Obama aide and US Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and Department of Labor employee, Campa-Najjar — whose parents are Mexican and Middle Eastern — supports fixing Obamacare, working toward Medicare-for-all, and passing a clean DREAM Act. He's also part of a growing cohort of candidates who are not taking any corporate or PAC donations.

“Today's indictment confirms just how deep this corruption can reach when someone like Duncan Hunter Jr. is in it for himself instead of representing the people,” the Democratic candidate said in a statement in light of Hunter's indictment.

In a year when Democrats are trying to highlight corruption in a Republican-led government as a main campaign message, Hunter's legal troubles might be enough for Democrats to bring the blue wave to a traditionally conservative Southern California district.