

Lilliputians at the Gate: Small Individual Campaign Donations and Political Polarization in Western State Legislatures

Todd Lochner
Lewis & Clark College
tlochner@lclark.edu

Ellen Seljan
Lewis & Clark College
eseljan@lclark.edu

Madeleine MacWilliamson
Lewis & Clark College

Valerie Naborksa
Lewis & Clark College

Abstract

Scholars seek to understand campaign donor behavior and its effects on candidates. Researchers generally agree that individual donors are more ideologically extreme than most organizational donors but disagree as to whether small individual donors (those giving less than \$200 per cycle) are especially correlated to extremist candidates. We study the relationship between small individual donors and legislators' NPAT and CFscores for the California, Washington, and Oregon legislatures between 2016 and 2022. We find both that individual donors correlate to more partisan legislators in general and that the correlation between donors and politically polarized legislators is even greater for small individual donors than for large individual donors in most cases.

Introduction

As Gulliver can attest, one Lilliputian is no big deal but collectively they can be quite a force (Swift [1726] 2003). Funny, then, that this centuries-old work of Anglo-Irish satire so aptly symbolizes a present debate in political science: the extent to which small individual campaign donors are a force of good or ill, if even a force at all. In the post-*Citizens United* world with the Supreme Court hostile to limitations on the flow of money in elections, some legislators and reformers seek to recalibrate, rather than restrict, the flow itself. Because one cannot ban large contributions, one should counterbalance them with more small donors. For example, the For the People Act of 2019 would have provided a six-to-one match for small individual donations, yet the signature Democratic proposal was ultimately blocked by the threat of a Republican filibuster in the 117th Congress. New York City provides an eight-to-one match for donations under \$250 (Pildes 2024). Seattle has a public financing voucher to incentivize small donors (Albert and La Raja 2026). For reformers, the “democratization” of election funding is one way to ease the political dysfunction that besets us and level the electoral playing field.

Yet other observers note that small donors are not necessarily an unalloyed good. Candidates are incentivized to respond to campaign donors to obtain the resources necessary to secure an election

(Barber 2016), but not all donors have similar interests. Individual donors are more ideologically polarized than the average voter (Albert and La Raja 2026; Barber 2016; Bonica 2013; Hill and Huber 2017; La Raja 2024; Pildes 2020). Anecdotal evidence of federal campaigns finds that small individual donors tend to give to more extreme candidates such as Representative Ocasio-Cortez or Senators Sanders and Warren (Pildes 2019; 2020), and some incumbents such as Michele Bachmann used social media and inflammatory rhetoric to raise vast amounts of small contributions (Culbertson et al. 2019). Yet other research cautions that while individuals as a group are more ideologically polarized than PACs, large and small individual donors are not very different in their policy preferences (Malbin 2013). The evidence is limited and mixed as to whether small donors are ideologically different from large donors (Albert and La Raja 2026; Pildes 2020) and whether the campaign contributions of small donors correlate to politically extreme candidates who might themselves be a source of political polarization.

To help answer these questions, we offer a modest account of the relationship between small individual donations and political polarization in the California, Washington, and Oregon state legislatures. Are individual donors in the aggregate more likely to give to politically polarized candidates than organizational donors? Are small individual donors more likely than large individual donors to give to politically polarized candidates? We answer these questions by analyzing the relationship between campaign contributions and political ideology among state legislators in California, Washington, and Oregon between 2016 and 2022. Consistent with most of the literature, we find that individual donors are more likely to correlate with extreme legislators than organizational donors. We also find that small donors are usually more likely to correlate with polarized legislators than large individual donors. These results vary between the states, suggesting that California's robust campaign finance ecology may swamp the small donor effect, whereas Washington state's strict campaign finance regulations may possibly amplify it. We begin with a review of the literature relating to donor behavior, describe our methodology, report results and conclude with a brief discussion.

Literature Review

Scholars generally define political polarization as ideological convergence within parties coupled with greater ideological distance between parties, as measured by each party's median member (Barber and McCarty 2015; Persily 2015). Unsurprisingly, many scholars also use the term extremism to denote politicians at extreme ends of the political spectrum. As Diamond et al. (2024, 3) note, "[p]olitical extremism is thus both a handmaiden and a key driver of political polarization." Few engage in serious debate as to the presence of increased polarization at the federal level (McCarty et al. 2006; Richardson and Milyo 2016). Data availability has historically hampered state-level analysis (Jordan and Bowling 2016), though we now know that polarization has increased in state governments as well (Jordan and Bowling 2016; Shor and McCarty 2022). This polarization has numerous negative consequences, such as decreased citizen trust in legislatures (at least when the opposing party is in control) (Banda and Kirkland 2018; Richardson and Milyo 2016), increased gridlock (Diamond et al. 2024; Kousser 2010), and greater difficulty in passing timely budgets (Birkhead 2016; Oklobdzija 2017).

To what extent might donor behavior affect political polarization?¹ Donors merit consideration because candidates are incentivized to respond to contributors to obtain the resources necessary to secure election and reelection (Barber 2016). Assuming that these contributors donate rationally, their actions may possibly shape the decision-making of legislators.² For example, political action committees usually are driven by a desire for legislative access rather than ideological concerns, including in the non-voting stages of the legislative process (Ansolabehere et al. 2003; Austen-Smith 1995; Bonica 2013; Hall and Wayman 1990; McCarty et al. 2006). In turn, this motivation inclines these PACs to support more moderate candidates (Barber 2016; La Raja 2024). Other ideological, single-issue PACs are associated with more polarized legislative behavior (Grumbach 2020, 25). Also, party contributions to their candidates traditionally had a dampening effect on polarization, yet this impact has weakened over time as party organizations themselves have weakened (La Raja 2024; McCarty 2015).

Individual donors merit particular attention given that they are a sizable, at times predominant, source of contributions to candidates in many elections. For example, congressional candidates often raise over three times the contributions from individuals than from PACs (Ansolabehere et al. 2003, 109; see also Barber et al. 2017). And while it is true that some citizens know very little about their state representatives, levels of citizen knowledge differ (Prior 2005); individual donors are far more politically sophisticated than nondonors (La Raja and Schaffner 2015). Compared to organizational donors, individuals tend to donate for more ideological reasons (Bonica 2013) and are themselves more ideologically polarized than are nondonor partisans or voters more generally (Albert and La Raja 2026; Barber 2016; Bonica 2013; Hill and Huber 2017; La Raja 2024; Pildes 2020; Pildes 2024), though this may vary by type of election (see Barber et al. 2017 for a discussion of U.S. Senate elections). Experimental research suggests that although donors care about ideology and strategic electoral considerations, they often are more likely to give to candidates who are more extreme than themselves rather than more moderate candidates—and this asymmetric response “is greatest among the most extreme donors” (Meisels et al. 2024, 852). Indeed, “extreme donors are also the least willing to penalize those [candidates] more extreme than themselves while harshly penalizing those who are more moderate” (Meisels et al. 2024, 867). Some evidence demonstrates a correlation between individual donors and political polarization of candidates (La Raja 2024), and, in some cases, donor preferences have a better correlation with incumbent voting records than do the preferences of the incumbent’s constituents (Barber 2016; see also Canes-Wrone and Miller 2022). Such correlation can vary by the type of individual donor. Notably, individual donors who give to both candidates and interest groups (whom Grumbach terms “interest group activists”) exacerbate legislator polarization, while individuals affiliated with party committees do not (Grumbach 2020; see also Rhodes et al. 2018). Not all scholars agree, however. Harden and

¹ Although our focus is exclusively on the relationship between donor behavior and polarization, we acknowledge that there are many other possible contributors to polarization. Commonly assumed culprits like primaries and redistricting systems may not be as important as originally envisioned (Abramowitz 2008; Masket et al. 2012; McGhee et al. 2014). Whether party competition increases polarization also is contested (Coffey 2007; but see Shor et al. 2010). Polarization of state legislative chambers is highly correlated to variation in the median ideal points of voters across electoral districts (Shor and McCarty 2011), which itself may be due to geographic self-sorting of voters or the nationalization of state elections (Garlick 2017; Shor and McCarty 2022). As the population becomes more ideologically heterogeneous, parties themselves become more homogeneous and polarized (Gerber and Lewis 2004; Kirkland 2014). Income inequality may be another factor (Garand 2010; McCarty et al. 2006).

² This need not always be true, of course. A study of the House of Representatives and the Senate from 1992 to 2000 found that PAC donations were not effective at gaining access to legislators (Ansolabehere et al. 2003, 114), a point on which scholars disagree.

Kirkland (2016) argue that campaign donations have “little influence on the extremity of individual legislators or polarization of legislative parties” (145–46). Finally, ideologically extreme candidates are more likely to rely on individual contributors than are moderate candidates (Barber 2016; Johnson 2010; La Raja and Schaffner 2015).

Before turning to the rationale for focusing on small individual donors, it is useful to clarify how “small donors” are defined both operationally and conceptually. Consistent with much of the existing literature, we operationalize small donors as individuals who contribute less than \$200 to a specific candidate during an election cycle based on FECA reporting rules (Barber 2016; Ferguson et al. 2024; La Raja 2024; Pildes 2019, 2020).³ This threshold reflects longstanding reporting rules in federal elections and has been widely adopted in empirical research, in part because contributions below this amount are not always individually itemized in campaign finance records (Barber et al. 2017). Conceptually, however, the designation “small donor” does not imply that such contributors are uniformly low-engagement or low-capacity political actors; research in fact suggests they are not (Albert and La Raja 2026). A donor who gives \$100 to multiple candidates may, in aggregate, contribute significant sums and exhibit high levels of political sophistication. Likewise, a \$100 contribution may carry different strategic weight in states with lower overall fundraising levels than in states where candidates raise substantially larger sums. Our definition therefore captures the *size of individual contributions to a given campaign*, rather than donors’ total giving across races or the relative value of contributions across states. This approach aligns with prior work that treats small donations as a distinct mode of participation—often associated with different motivations, solicitation strategies, and relationships to candidates—while acknowledging that the meaning of “small” is contextual and does not map perfectly onto donor capacity or engagement.

Inasmuch as research demonstrates that the nature of the donor may correlate to varying degrees with political polarization, why focus on *small* individual donors? Two reasons. First, small donors are becoming increasingly important to campaign financing. For example, in 2016 small donors accounted for only about 6% of money raised by federal House candidates; by 2018 that had increased to 16% due to the growth of web-based donation platforms such as ActBlue (Pildes 2019) as well as entrepreneurial appeals by incumbents on social media (Culberson et al. 2019). By the 2020 cycle, small donors gave \$4 billion dollars to federal campaigns (Vandewalker 2024). As Albert and La Raja (2026) observe, federal campaign finance increasingly has become a story about the rise of both small donors and SuperPACs. Although we do not analyze donations to “conduit” entities like WinRed and ActBlue, over half of the donations to those entities between 2005 and 2020 were from individuals who gave less than \$200 (Bouton et al. 2022). Albert and La Raja (2026) note that the influence of small donors is less prevalent at the state legislative level, yet there are exceptions. In Texas, gubernatorial campaigns saw a rapid growth of small donors relative to other sources, although this may be due to “nationalized” elections involving prominent candidates such as Beto O’Rourke and a very large pool of Texan expatriates residing in other states (Ferguson et al. 2024).

Second, some evidence suggests that small donors may prefer especially ideologically extreme candidates. Pildes (2020) argues that small donors are uniquely amenable to internet solicitations

³ Some researchers have adjusted this \$200 FECA standard for inflation, allowing for comparison over time (Albert and La Raja 2026).

based on viral moments, outrage, and celebrity culture, and that they have disproportionately funded candidates such as Representatives Ocasio-Cortez, Nunez, Scalise, and Meadows in the House as well as Senators Sanders and Warren (see also Bouton et al. 2022). Culberson et al. (2019) found that small donors reward extremists, but only in incumbent candidates, and points to Michele Bachmann's ability to raise \$1 million after making comments about the need to investigate Congress for "anti-Americans" (997).⁴ Further, the fact that these politicians can rely on small donors decreases the influence parties and party leaders have on them, exacerbating party fragmentation (Pildes 2024). On the other hand, other scholars find that small individual donors are not more ideologically polarized relative to large individual donors (Joe et al. 2008; La Raja 2024)⁵ or argue that the largest sources of party fragmentation and political polarization are unrelated to small donors (Vandewalker 2024).⁶ Bouton et al. (2022, 29) paint a slightly different picture of small donors, suggesting that while small donors are less influenced by the ideological leanings of candidates, they are more likely to be driven by a "salience modulated" expressive motive where "the presence of a candidate as either a 'champion' or a 'nemesis' of the donor's party significantly increases the salience of the race, and hence the expressive value of a contribution." In short, the evidence at present is both limited and mixed. To assist this debate, we propose the following two research questions:

RQ1: Do state legislators who receive a higher proportion of their campaign funding from individual donors have more polarized ideologies relative to candidates funded by other sources?

RQ2: Do state legislators who receive a higher proportion of their campaign funding from small individual donors (those giving less than \$200 per cycle) have more polarized ideologies relative to candidates funded by other sources, including larger individual donors?

We wish to emphasize one important point: we do not make a causal claim. Campaign contributions may shift politicians' ideological positions, but it may also be that ideologically extreme candidates are better able to activate particular donor networks. Nonetheless, the absence of causal identification does not render these results uninformative. Following Spirling and Stewart's (2025) framework of Inference to the Best Explanation, our contribution is to bring new facts to bear on competing explanations for the sources of political polarization. These explanations differ in whether donors influence candidates, donors select candidates, or candidates strategically mobilize donors. While our results do not adjudicate definitively among these mechanisms, they demonstrate that fundraising coalitions and ideology are systematically aligned across donor types and across multiple measures of ideology. That alignment is substantively important because fundraising affects candidate viability and electoral success: even if donors respond to ideology rather than cause it, a financing regime that advantages some donor types over others may shape which candidates win office and thus the ideological composition of legislatures (Grumbach 2020; Barber 2016).

⁴ Pildes (2024, 8) admits that this phenomenon isn't new: "[C]andidates have learned that the spigot of internet-fueled small donations gets turned on by extreme, attention-seeking behavior. This should come as no surprise; the same was true in the days of direct mail campaigns."

⁵ Albert and La Raja (2026) find that although there are many demographic and partisan similarities between large and small individual donors, there are some important differences as well, such as willingness to support norm-breaking candidates.

⁶ See also La Raja (2024, 266), who notes that Republican Super PACs sometimes fund less experienced and more extreme candidates in primaries.

We focus our study on the California, Oregon, and Washington state legislatures for two reasons. First, we wanted to examine state legislatures because most of the current research on the effects of small donors tends to focus on federal campaigns. Theory suggests that as races become nationalized, thereby sparking media celebrity, small donors become activated to give (Bouton et al. 2024; La Raja 2024; Pildes 2020). Put simply, candidates with national name recognition like Representatives Ocasio-Cortez or Greene are disproportionately likely to receive small donations. While we may see this celebrity effect for statewide candidates in very large states, such as some gubernatorial elections in Texas (Ferguson et al. 2024), we do not expect that most state legislators in California, Washington, or Oregon are widely known amongst the national small donor class. This suggests that our research questions should be confirmed weakly at best, as state legislatures are the “hard case” where we would least expect to see a strong correlation between small donations and political polarization. Still, these three state legislatures are among the most polarized in the nation according to Shor and McCarty (2022). If there is a relationship between small donors and polarization, these are states where we would expect to see it.

Second, variance in these three states’ campaign finance laws helps to provide insight into the extent to which, if any, differing contribution limits affect the possible small donor/polarization dynamic. Oregon is one of the handful of states that does not limit personal or organizational contributions to state candidates (Stapilus 2023). Large individual donors may give generously and directly to individual campaigns rather than having to disaggregate donations between direct contributions, PAC contributions, independent expenditures, and “dark money.” Should former Nike CEO Phil Knight wish to donate millions of dollars directly to a state legislator’s campaign, he may do so (in fact he has done so, giving \$2.5 million to the Republican gubernatorial candidate in 2018 [Maplight 2019] and \$5.25 million to gubernatorial candidates opposing Democratic candidate Tina Kotek in 2022 [Jaquiss 2022; Stapilus 2022]). This is important theoretically; as Ferguson et al. (2024) explain, states that allow unlimited individual contributions may disincentivize small donor behavior because a candidate’s time is more efficiently spent focusing on extremely large donors (see also Albert and La Raja 2026). If this claim is correct, we should expect to see that small donors matter the most in Washington and the least in Oregon, with California falling in the middle.⁷

Methodology

Our empirical strategy is to evaluate the correlational relationship between various campaign finance contribution streams and political ideology. We collected data on state legislators elected in California, Oregon, and Washington from 2016 to 2022, adhering to specific criteria. First, only legislators affiliated with the two predominant political parties were included. Second, legislators had to have raised a minimum of \$3,500 in campaign contributions in a given election cycle. This number was chosen because Oregon’s \$3,500 threshold represents the highest among the three states for triggering the requirement to file detailed campaign finance disclosures. Our sample comprised 1,203 observations, representing 572 distinct legislators. Reflective of the three states’ blue political landscapes, our sample exhibited a skew towards Democratic legislators (346 distinct cases for Democrats, 226 for Republicans).

⁷ For a description of each state’s contribution limits, see National Conference of State Legislatures (2023).

The dependent variable we analyzed is political ideology, measured in two ways. One measure is first-dimension NPAT scores, which rely on the NPAT (National Political Awareness Test) survey to bridge ideal point estimates across states and anchor roll-call-based ideology scores in a common space. These scores, estimated by Shor and McCarty (2011), are ubiquitous in the State politics literature (Barber 2016; Richardson and Milyo 2016; Grumbach 2018; Culberson et al. 2019; Polborn and Snyder 2017). Shor and McCarty (2011) adapted the Poole and Rosenthal (2001) NOMINATE framework to every U.S. state legislature, releasing common-space ideal-point estimates for the 1993–2018 period. Because the present study analyzes roll-call behavior beyond 2018, we generated new ideal points for the additional years using the *wnominate* package in R. Complete roll-call records for regular sessions in California, Oregon, and Washington were obtained from the Plural Policy interface of the Open States database (Open States 2024), including the years already covered by Shor and McCarty. Our supplemental estimates were projected onto the Shor-McCarty common space by running state-specific regressions of their original scores on our estimates, including cubic spline terms. We used those prediction equations to estimate and fill any missing values in observations from 2018 onward.

We complement our roll-call-based estimates with a second metric of legislative ideology: the dynamic CFscores from the Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME) (Bonica 2024). CFscores infer the ideological positioning of a candidate from the ideal points of campaign donors, with dynamic scores capturing year-to-year shifts. Notably for this paper, small individual donors are anonymous in disclosures and thus do not influence these estimates. Recent scholarship emphasizes that CFscores and NPAT scores tap into related but distinct facets of ideology. Donor-based measures reflect the preferences of a legislator’s financial coalition and tend to locate politicians further toward the ideological poles than do roll-call-based scales, which are attenuated by party discipline and agenda control (Bonica 2024). CFscores also correlate more strongly with out-of-chamber behaviors such as social media rhetoric, whereas NPAT scores remain stronger for predicting actual floor votes (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2017; Kistner et al. 2025). Descriptive statistics for this variable and all others appear in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

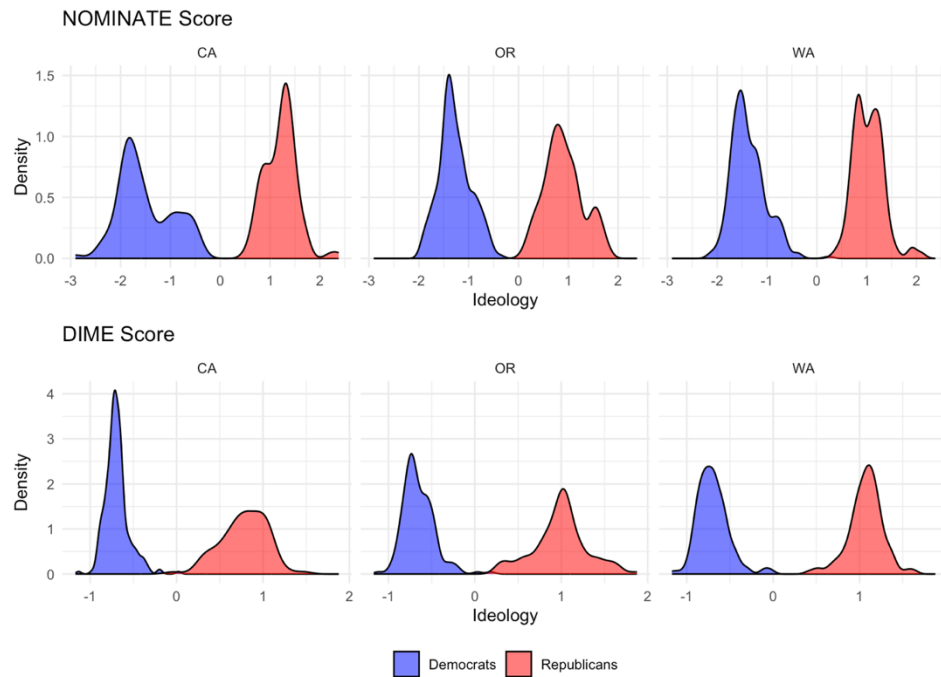
	Mean	SD	Min	Max
NPAT Score	-0.5	1.25	-2.91	2.38
CFscore	-0.06	0.84	-1.17	1.88
Proportion Individual Donors	0.21	0.17	0	0.98
Proportion Small Donors	0.05	0.06	0	0.43
Proportion \$200–500 Individual Donors	0.04	0.04	0	0.28
Proportion \$500–1K Individual Donors	0.03	0.04	0	0.24
Proportion 1K+ Individual Donors	0.09	0.1	0	0.64
Proportion PAC Donors	0.36	0.17	0	0.95
Proportion Labor Donors	0.09	0.11	0	0.63
Proportion Business/Other Donors	0.3	0.18	0	0.99
Proportion Party Donors	0.04	0.13	0	0.9
Log of Total Cash Contributions	12.47	1.13	9.54	15.4
% Dem. District	0.58	0.15	0.24	0.91
% White District	0.62	0.21	0.03	0.92

Table 2. Number of Observations

	N	%
Democrat	759	63.1
Republican	444	36.9
Not Leadership	1158	96.3
Leadership	45	3.7
Non-Incumbent	278	23.1
Incumbent	925	76.9
Lower Chamber	948	78.8
Upper Chamber	255	21.2
2016	301	25
2018	304	25.3
2020	301	25
2022	297	24.7
CA	397	33
OR	311	25.9
WA	495	41.1

Figure 1 below presents the distribution of ideology scores for Democrats and Republicans across the three states we study. While the scores are strongly correlated overall ($r = 0.93$), the relationship weakens considerably when analyzed within each party. Among Democrats, the correlation between the two measures drops to $r = 0.29$, and among Republicans, it falls to just $r = 0.03$. This pattern mirrors findings by Barber (2022), who observed a similar decoupling of these ideological measures in the contemporary U.S. Congress—though in that context, the divergence was more pronounced for Democrats ($r = 0.02$), whereas Republican scores remained moderately correlated ($r = 0.6$). Employing both measures in tandem offers a more nuanced understanding of how campaign finance aligns with legislative ideology.

Figure 1: Distribution of NPAT and CFscores by Political Party and State



Our key independent variables measure variation in campaign finance contribution portfolios. Campaign contribution data was collected from public records made available by the Oregon Secretary of State's Oregon Elections System for Tracking and Reporting (ORESTAR), the California Secretary of State's CAL-ACCESS database, and the Washington Public Disclosure Commission. We make no differentiation between contributions raised for primary or general elections, focusing instead on the aggregate contributed in the two calendar years including and preceding the legislator's November general election. We focus only on cash expenditures, excluding in-kind contributions or independent expenditures. Cash contributions are the aggregate of funds identified as cash contributions, plus forgiven loans, and less returned or refunded contributions. Based on available cross-referenced donor type classifications available from each state's data source, cash contributions were categorized by their source: individuals, labor organizations, political groups, political parties, and businesses or miscellaneous sources, the latter including self-financing and contributions from family members.

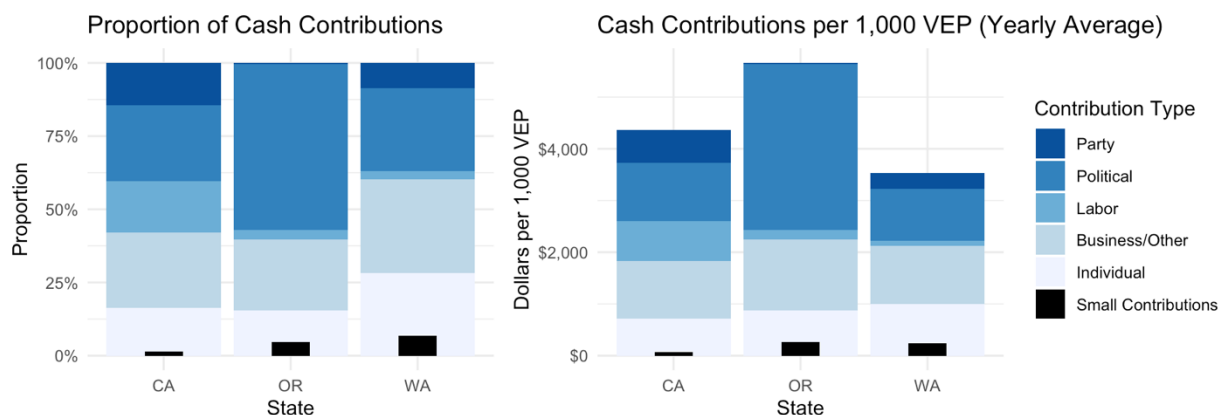
Our analysis centers on cash contributions from individual donors, with additional attention on the size of those contributions. We construct key independent variables that measure the proportion of individual donations falling into four distinct brackets: under \$200, \$200–\$500, \$500–\$1,000, and over \$1,000. These categories reflect the amount an individual gives to a single candidate, rather than their total contributions across races or cycles within the state. For state-specific regressions where such contributions are legally permitted, we further disaggregate large contributions into \$1,000–\$3,000, \$3,000–\$10,000, and above \$10,000. Across all models, we focus on the share of

funds originating from each donor tier, rather than the number of donors, as donor counts—particularly for small donors—cannot be reliably estimated from available data.⁸

It is useful to have a sense of how campaign finance contribution portfolios vary across the states in this study. Most striking is the vast difference in total and median contributions by state. California stands apart, averaging nearly \$112 million in cash contributions per cycle, compared to just under \$18 million in Oregon and \$19 million in Washington. Normalizing contributions by the size of the electorate underscores differences between states while placing them on a comparable scale. Averaged across cycles, California candidates raise approximately \$4,500 per 1,000 voting-eligible residents, compared to roughly \$6,000 in Oregon and \$5,700 in Washington. Thus, when accounting for electorate size, campaign fundraising activity actually remains substantially more intensive in Oregon and Washington than in California.

Figure 2 summarizes how these aggregate differences translate into distinct campaign finance portfolios across the three states. The left panel reports the share of campaign contributions by donor type, while the right panel presents the corresponding dollars raised per 1,000 voting-eligible residents, averaged across election cycles. Across California, Oregon, and Washington, campaign finance portfolios reveal distinct patterns in donor reliance. Labor contributions account for a substantial portion of candidate funding in California—averaging roughly 17–18 percent of total cash—compared to just over 3 percent in Oregon and under 3 percent in Washington. Party contributions also vary, comprising about 6–7 percent of funding in California and roughly 5 percent in Washington, but less than 1 percent in Oregon. In contrast, individual contributions make up a larger share of total funding in Washington (28 percent) than in Oregon (16 percent) or California (16 percent), a notable difference given that Washington imposes the strictest limits on individual donors among the three states.

Figure 2: Composition and Volume of Campaign Contributions by State



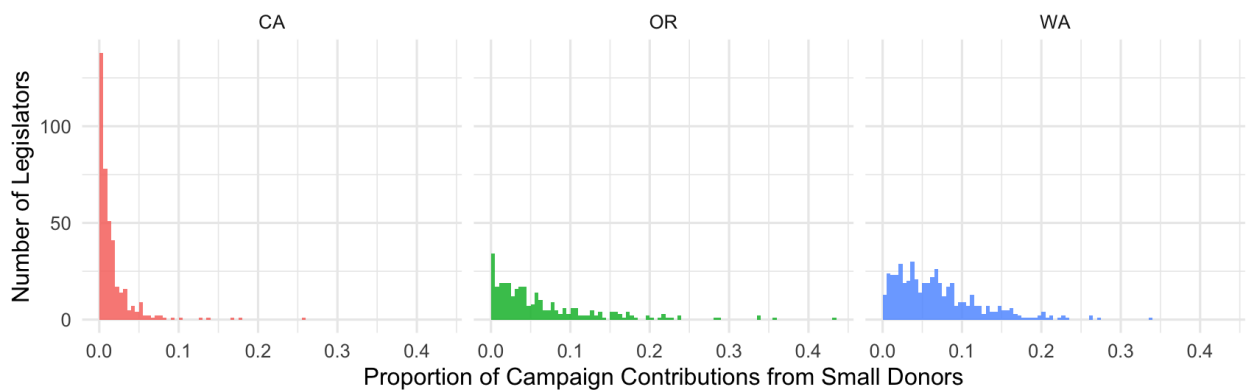
Small donor reliance differs even more markedly across the states in both proportional and per-electorate terms. When measured as a share of total contributions, candidates in Washington and Oregon receive a substantially greater proportion of their funding from individuals contributing less than \$200—averaging 6.8 percent and 6.3 percent, respectively—compared to just 1.6 percent

⁸ Donations under \$100 are anonymous and are aggregated by the date of donation. A \$100 cash donation on any given day could theoretically be from either a single donor, or 100 donors giving one dollar each.

in California. Expressed in per-electorate terms, this gap is even more pronounced: small donors contribute approximately \$242 per 1,000 voting-eligible residents in Washington and \$259 in Oregon, but only about \$66 per 1,000 voting-eligible residents in California. Thus, although California candidates raise more money from small donors in absolute terms due to the state's much larger fundraising environment, small-donor participation plays a far more prominent role in Oregon and Washington when scaled to the size of the electorate.

At the other end of the spectrum, California candidates derive a substantially larger share of their funding from large individual contributions, reinforcing the extent to which California's campaign finance system remains dominated by high-dollar individual and organizational donors. Full distributions of legislators' reliance on small donors, measured as a share of total cash contributions, appear in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Distribution of Small-Donor Reliance Among Legislators by State



A multivariate regression (available in the supplementary materials) confirms that several factors significantly predict small donor reliance. Legislators who raise more money overall are substantially less likely to rely on small donors; for each unit increase in the log of total cash raised, the small-donor share drops by over one percentage point. Incumbents and legislative leaders also have significantly less reliance on small donors—3.4 and 1.7 percentage points less, respectively—suggesting that institutional power is associated with broader and higher-dollar donor networks. Republican legislators, the minority party in each of our states of study, have significantly less reliance on small donors than Democrats—about 1.6 percentage points less.

We run all analyses using Ordinary Least Squares regression with each measure of political ideology as a separate dependent variable. Robust standard errors are clustered by unique legislator IDs. We run models separately for Democrats and Republicans, as polarization is rarely symmetric across political parties (Butler 2009; Shor and McCarty 2022). To account for unobserved differences across time and states that might influence campaign finance patterns or ideology, we include both state and year fixed effects. We also factor in whether the candidate is running for the upper legislative chamber, is an incumbent, or is a member of chamber leadership. Finally, our model also considers district-specific details like the racial composition (percentage of white population) and political leanings (percentage of votes for the Democratic candidate in the last presidential election).

We begin by examining the relationship between political ideology and legislators' reliance on different types of campaign donors, treating each donor category as a share of total cash raised. Measuring donor types as proportions allows us to capture differences in *donor composition*, our primary quantity of interest, rather than differences in overall fundraising success. To reduce multicollinearity and establish a clear baseline category, we exclude PAC contributions, which are the donor type least consistently associated with ideology across models.

Table 3 presents the results based on separate regressions for Democrats and Republicans and for two ideological measures: roll-call-based NPAT scores and donor-based CFscores. Overall model fit is substantial—particularly for Democrats and in the CFscore models—indicating that campaign finance portfolios and electoral context together explain a meaningful share of ideological variation.

Several control variables warrant brief discussion. Because donor shares may be correlated with overall fundraising capacity and reflect underlying campaign resources, all models include the log of total cash contributions. Total fundraising emerges as the most consistent moderating influence on ideology. In the roll-call NPAT models, higher total fundraising is associated with more moderate legislators in both parties (Democrats: $\beta = 0.103$, $p < 0.01$; Republicans: $\beta = -0.142$, $p < 0.001$), and this relationship also appears among Republicans in the CFscore model ($\beta = -0.057$, $p < 0.05$). These patterns suggest that candidates with broader fundraising coalitions may face incentives to appeal to more centrist constituencies, regardless of party or donor composition. Incumbency is likewise associated with greater moderation, while leadership status and chamber exhibit weaker and less consistent relationships once fundraising levels and donor composition are taken into account.

Party district composition is strongly related to ideology, and its association is notably consistent for Democrats. Across both NPAT and CFscore models, Democrats representing more Democratic districts are uniformly more liberal. Among Republicans, however, the relationship varies by ideological measure. In the roll-call NPAT models, Republicans from more Democratic districts appear more moderate, whereas in the donor-based CFscore models, higher Democratic district share is associated with more conservative donor profiles. This divergence likely reflects fundraising strategies rather than legislative behavior, as Republicans in Democratic-leaning districts may rely more heavily on national or ideologically committed conservative donors.

Table 3: Predicting Ideology from Aggregate Campaign Finance Portfolios

	NPAT Democrats	CFscore Democrats	NPAT Republicans	CFscore Republicans
Individual Donors	-0.577*** (0.126)	-0.305*** (0.050)	0.068 (0.164)	0.478*** (0.098)
Labor Contributions	-1.324*** (0.301)	-0.640*** (0.094)	-2.066** (0.636)	-0.977* (0.497)
Business/Other Contributions	-0.004 (0.126)	0.159** (0.052)	0.058 (0.190)	-0.082 (0.141)
Party Contributions	0.101 (0.175)	-0.280*** (0.080)	-0.030 (0.192)	0.259* (0.123)
Log Total Contributions	0.103** (0.036)	0.012 (0.014)	-0.142*** (0.033)	-0.057* (0.023)
% Dem. District	-1.894*** (0.197)	-0.123+ (0.071)	-1.299*** (0.369)	0.578* (0.289)
% White District	-0.175 (0.157)	-0.105* (0.047)	0.365 (0.249)	0.125 (0.171)
Leader	-0.227** (0.078)	-0.035 (0.026)	-0.042 (0.053)	-0.004 (0.062)
Incumbent	-0.011 (0.034)	0.022 (0.017)	0.008 (0.041)	-0.104*** (0.027)
Num.Obs.	756	690	442	414
R2	0.471	0.378	0.332	0.430
RMSE	0.44	0.13	0.31	0.21

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by Legislator ID.

Table omits the intercept and state-year fixed-effect dummies.

Reference (omitted) contribution type = PAC contributions.

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Individual contributions show strong and consistent associations with political ideology, particularly within the Democratic Party. Among Democrats, higher reliance on individual donors is significantly associated with more liberal legislators, both in terms of NPAT ($\beta = -0.577$, $p < 0.001$) and CFscores ($\beta = -0.305$, $p < 0.001$). Among Republicans, by contrast, the relationship between individual donors and ideology is only significant in the CFscore model, where a greater share of individual contributions is associated with more conservative candidates ($\beta = 0.478$, $p < 0.001$).

Labor contributions are also linked to ideological polarization in both parties, particularly among Democrats. Greater reliance on labor donors is strongly associated with more liberal ideology in both Democratic models (NPAT: $\beta = -1.324$, $p < 0.001$; CFscore: $\beta = -0.640$, $p < 0.001$), and also among Republicans (CFscore: $\beta = -0.977$, $p < 0.05$), though again these associations are weaker and less consistent. In contrast, business and other contributions have more limited ideological associations. In the Democratic CFscore model, these contributions are associated with more moderate legislators ($\beta = 0.159$, $p < 0.01$), but no significant relationships are found in other models.

Party contributions show divergent effects depending on the ideological measure used. In the CFscore models, greater party support is associated with more ideologically extreme legislators in

both parties (Democrats: $\beta = -0.280$, $p < 0.001$; Republicans: $\beta = 0.259$, $p < 0.05$), challenging the view that increased party funding serves as a moderating force (La Raja and Schaffner 2015). However, because party contributions are not significantly associated with ideology in the NPAT models, this pattern may reflect differences in donor alignment rather than actual ideological polarization.

We turn now to our main prediction on small donors. In the analysis that follows we disaggregate individual campaign contributions by donor size. Across all four models—using both roll-call-based (NPAT) and donor-based (CFscore) ideology scores for Republicans and Democrats—we find evidence that a higher share of small donor contributions is associated with more ideologically extreme legislators. Results appear in Table 4.

Table 4: Regression Analysis of NPAT and CFscore Ideology Scores

	NPAT Republicans	CFscore Republicans	NPAT Democrats	CFscore Democrats
Small Donors	0.908 (0.710)	0.709* (0.315)	-1.453** (0.474)	-0.920*** (0.191)
\$200–500 Individual Donors	-0.663 (1.288)	0.858 (0.528)	1.503* (0.693)	-0.236 (0.339)
\$500–1K Individual Donors	-0.183 (0.738)	0.121 (0.407)	-0.968 (0.698)	-0.579+ (0.306)
\$1K+ Individual Donors	0.045 (0.275)	0.315 (0.211)	-0.863*** (0.241)	-0.046 (0.073)
Labor Contributions	-2.052** (0.648)	-1.367** (0.489)	-1.362*** (0.299)	-0.638*** (0.082)
Business/Other Contributions	0.039 (0.193)	-0.117 (0.140)	-0.015 (0.125)	0.086+ (0.046)
Party Contributions	-0.066 (0.200)	0.218+ (0.114)	0.074 (0.175)	-0.309*** (0.077)
% Dem. District	-1.331*** (0.368)	0.602* (0.251)	-1.900*** (0.190)	-0.157* (0.070)
% White District	0.358 (0.253)	0.206+ (0.123)	-0.167 (0.157)	-0.104* (0.042)
Leader	-0.037 (0.054)	-0.001 (0.065)	-0.218** (0.077)	-0.031 (0.024)
Incumbent	0.003 (0.039)	-0.109*** (0.025)	-0.018 (0.035)	0.013 (0.017)
Num.Obs.	443	414	759	690
R2	0.337	0.429	0.479	0.409
RMSE	0.28	0.21	0.31	0.13

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by Legislator ID.

Table omits the intercept and state–year fixed-effect dummies.

Reference (omitted) contribution type = PAC contributions.

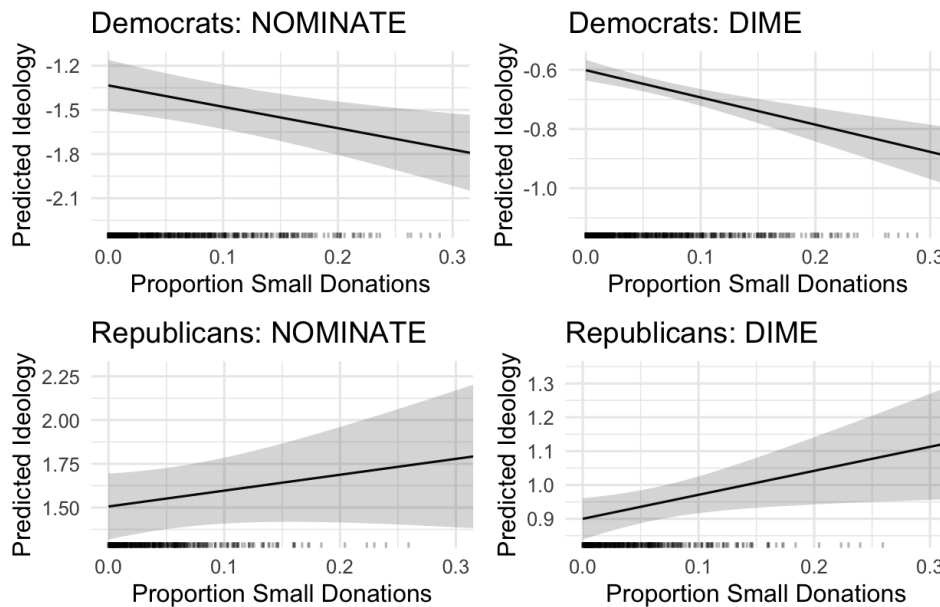
Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The effects are strongest for Democrats, where small donor share is significantly associated with greater liberalism in both the NPAT ($\beta = -1.456$, $p < 0.01$) and CFscore models ($\beta = -0.920$, $p < 0.001$). Among Republicans, the relationship points toward greater conservatism, though statistical significance appears only in the CFscore model ($\beta = 0.709$, $p < 0.05$). The weaker effect within this

party may be a consequence of our earlier finding that members of this party are less reliant on small donors relative to Democrats in these states. It is also plausible that the null effect for Republicans in the NPAT model reflects their status as a minority party in these legislatures, where limited agenda control means their roll-call behavior is less responsive to small-donor pressures, even as those donors remain visible in the ideological profile captured by the CFscores.

To gauge the substantive size of these effects, we compare changes in predicted ideology scores at two points in the distribution. A typical shift, from the 1st to the 3rd quartile in small donor share, corresponds to a 0.10-point increase in NPAT measured liberalism for Democrats and a 0.04-point increase in conservatism for Republicans. A near full-range shift, for example from 0% to 20% of reliance on contributions from small donors, is of course much larger: Democrats move 0.29 points leftward in roll call scores, while Republicans move 0.182 points rightward. In the CFscore models, the same full-range shift predicts a 0.184-point move toward liberalism for Democrats and a 0.142-point move toward conservatism for Republicans. These patterns are visually depicted in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Predicted Ideology Shifts as Reliance on Small Donors Increases (OLS Estimates)

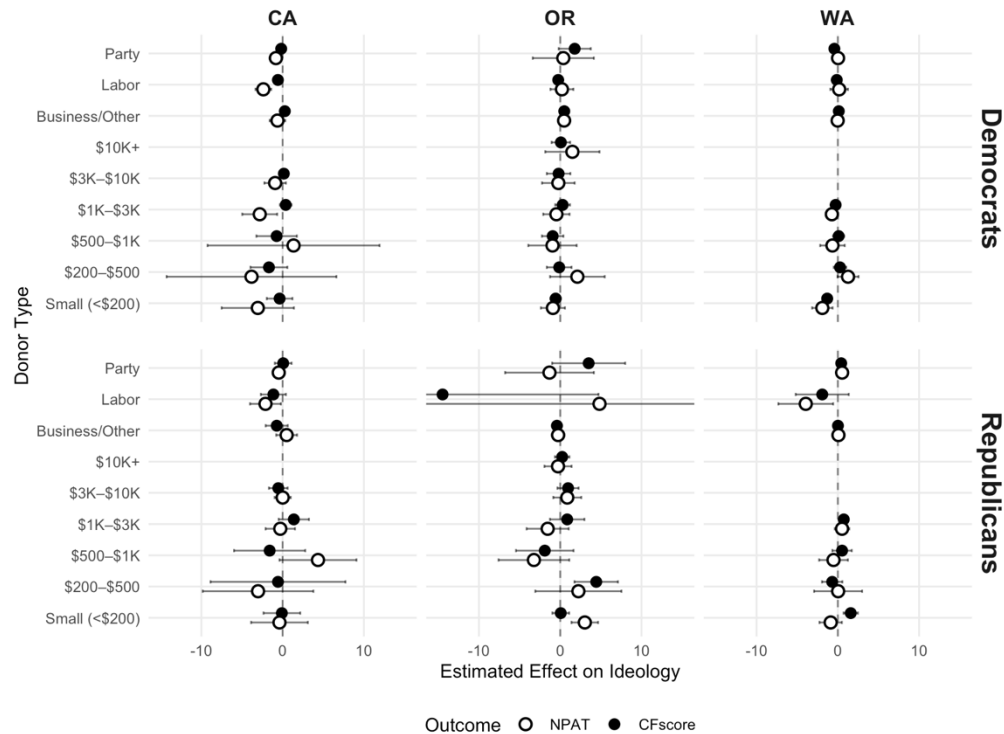


By contrast, contributions from larger individual donors (e.g., those giving \$200–500, \$500–1,000, or \$1,000+) exhibit inconsistent and mostly insignificant relationships with legislator ideology, especially for Republicans. Among Democrats, some divergence appears: \$200–500 donations are associated with greater liberalism in the roll call model ($\beta = 1.502$, $p < 0.05$), while \$1,000+ contributions are associated with moderation ($\beta = -0.866$, $p < 0.001$).

State by state regressions continue to show polarizing effects of small donors, with some notable variation between states. These results appear as coefficient plots in Figure 5. Among Democrats, small donor share is significantly liberalizing in Washington for both measurements of ideology ($\beta = -1.91$ NPAT, $\beta = -1.31$ CFscore, both $p < .01$). The other states are only significant for one measurement each, with a large effect size in California ($\beta = -3.10$ NPAT, $p \approx .06$), and more marginal in Oregon ($\beta = -0.57$ CFscore, $p \approx .10$). The stronger and more consistent effects in

Washington suggest that small donors may exert greater influence where legal limits on large contributions heighten their relative importance. By contrast, in Oregon’s unregulated environment they are more easily overshadowed by large givers, while in California, the state’s expansive donor population and campaign economy provide many alternative fundraising avenues, which can dilute the relative impact of small donors.

Figure 5: Donor Composition and Legislator Ideology by Party and State



Note: Points show coefficient estimates from separate regressions by state and party; horizontal bars indicate 95% confidence intervals. Outcomes include NPAT and CFscore ideology estimates. All models include controls for chamber, incumbency, leadership status, race, year fixed effects, and total campaign cash raised (logged), with standard errors clustered by legislator.

For Republicans, results are less consistent across measures and states, not surprising given the relatively weaker pooled results and reduced reliance on small donors. Small donors are unrelated to ideology in California across both measures, the state where small donor reliance is weakest. Small donors are significantly related to conservative CFscore ideology in Washington ($\beta = 1.59$, $p < 0.001$) and strongly associated with roll call ideology in Oregon ($\beta = 3.02$ NPAT, $p < 0.001$).

Turning to the highest-dollar contributors yields a useful contrast to the small-donor results. In Washington, where \$1,000 represents the statutory upper ceiling, coefficients for the top bracket consistently point in the same polarizing direction as small donors, albeit with smaller magnitudes and intermittent statistical significance. In California, a state more reliant on five-figure donations, the \$3,000–\$10,000 tier shows no clear or consistent association with ideology. Finally, in Oregon, which imposes no contribution caps, the \$10,000-plus bracket appears somewhat moderating for both parties, though falls short of conventional significance thresholds. This latter finding is consistent with anecdotal evidence from the state, where a well-known billionaire donor has regularly supported moderate candidates.

Discussion

Political polarization produces many unfortunate consequences such as loss of citizen trust in legislators, increased gridlock, and greater difficulty in passing budgets. Scholars consequently have studied polarization extensively yet have given varying, sometimes competing explanations for this dynamic at both the state and federal levels. Given that legislators respond to the preferences of their donors, and that donors themselves have different strategies and interests when funding candidates, it stands to reason that some types of donors may be especially willing to donate to polarized legislators. To date, however, the research has been mixed as to whether small individual donors are especially likely to give to more partisan candidates.

Our analysis of the California, Washington and Oregon legislatures confirms both research questions and also advances our understanding of the relationship between small donors and candidate extremism. Consistent with other researchers, we do not make a causal claim—it may be that small donors make legislators more extreme and partisan, or it may be that politically polarizing legislators are especially good at activating smaller donations. It is nonetheless true that demonstrating correlation between small donations and political polarization provides insights into present political equilibria (Stirling and Stewart 2025; Grumbach 2020) and helps our understanding as to the type of campaign donation regime we might wish to have (Albert and La Raja 2026; Barber 2016).

We find that individual donors, relative to other donor types, contributed only a modest share of legislators' campaign funds, particularly in California where large individual and organizational contributions dominate. Nonetheless, in response to RQ1, reliance on individual donors is associated with more ideologically extreme legislators relative to those funded by other sources, consistent with the existing scholarly literature. Greater dependence on individual donors is significantly associated with more liberal Democrats across both NPAT and CFscores; for Republicans, this relationship is statistically significant only for CFscores. Total funds raised emerge as the most consistent moderating factor, which likely helps explain why incumbents and legislative leaders are less reliant on small donors.

Turning to RQ2, a greater share of small individual donor contributions is likewise associated with more ideologically extreme legislators in these state legislatures. This pattern holds for Democrats across both NPAT and CFscore models; once again, statistical significance for Republicans appears only in the CFscore model. Contributions from large individual donors display an inconsistent and largely insignificant relationship with legislator ideology. When results are disaggregated by state, the polarizing effect of small donors is most evident among Washington state Democrats, while the relationship holds in California only for NPAT scores and more weakly in Oregon. For Republicans, small donor contributions are significantly associated with CFscore ideology in Washington and NPAT roll-call scores in Oregon, but not in California.

Consistent with other scholars (e.g., Albert and La Raja 2026), it seems clear that small donors are far less present in state rather than federal elections. Recall that many scholars find that small donors engage in expressive giving and are uniquely activated by high-profile media and social media events, particularly on nationalized issues, so one would expect their influence to be less in state and local races. But that does not mean that small donors are inconsequential. Small donors are not spreading their donations across all candidates equally; a small percentage of legislators are

receiving disproportionate support from these donors, and those legislators tend to be ideologically extreme. This matters for three reasons. First, sometimes a small subset of extremists can directly affect policymaking, such as when they undermine necessary supermajority votes. As Oklobdzida observes when examining California's history of state government shutdowns, roughly twenty states have similar supermajority requirements to pass budgets or tax increases and "[e]vidence from California seems to indicate that pleasing donors comes before even maintaining the basic functions of the state for some lawmakers" (2017, 220). Even majoritarian decision making can be undermined by a few extremists in closely divided state legislatures. Second, when extremist legislators are incentivized to take hyper-partisan stances to appeal to extremist donors, such strategies can shape the policy agenda. Why not completely defund the police? Why not treat providing abortions as a capital offense in every circumstance? Idiosyncratic policies need not actually be adopted to move the needle of permissible policy debate for better or ill. Third, as Albert and La Raja's (2026) research demonstrates, small donors are somewhat more likely to favor "norm breaking" candidates. There doesn't need to be an entire party delegation of election denialists, conspiracy theorists, or partisan pugilists to shape our understanding of permissible political behavior. An anecdote from Oregon is instructive. In 2020, an Oregon legislator who opposed COVID-19 restrictions opened a locked door at the state capitol building so that far-right protestors could disrupt a special legislative session. He was ultimately expelled and charged with two criminal misdemeanors (Wilson 2022). Democratic norms prevailed in this instance, but such norms are not indestructible. A little extremism can go a long way.

More concretely, the importance of small donors is partially a function of a state's campaign finance regime. We found that Washington state exhibited the strongest correlation between small donors and political polarization, California less so, and Oregon in the middle. This leads us to suggest that scholars such as Albert and La Raja (2026) and Ferguson et al. (2024) are correct—the campaign finance ecology shapes the extent to which small donors may influence, or be influenced by, politically partisan legislators. There is on average five times the amount of money spent by candidates in California than in these other states, and that sheer volume of funding, particularly given the strength of more traditional funding sources such as labor unions, may minimize the small donor-legislator nexus. Similarly, small donations probably matter less in Oregon given the state's lack of contribution limits. It is quite reasonable to suggest that when contribution limits are nonexistent, candidates will modify their fundraising strategies to target larger donors. Washington state, with its less expensive campaigns and its strict campaign finance laws, bears the brunt of the small donor effect.

The persistent association between reliance on small donors and ideological extremity is substantively meaningful. If small-donor-oriented reforms are intended to moderate politics by broadening participation, our findings suggest that such reforms may instead strengthen the fundraising position of already ideologically committed candidates. Even absent definitive causal evidence, observing that small-donor reliance consistently coincides with polarization raises important questions about the equilibrium effects of campaign finance regimes that privilege small contributions. Like Albert and La Raja (2026), we come not to bury small donor regimes such as public funding matches, but rather to explore the consequences of adopting these populist policies.

To that end, the patterns documented here point toward several promising directions for future, more causally-oriented research. One approach would exploit plausibly exogenous changes in campaign finance rules—such as the introduction or expansion of small-donor matching programs, or changes in contribution limits or disclosure requirements—to examine whether shifts in donor composition precede changes in candidate ideology or legislative behavior. Additionally, future work could extend the analysis backward to the primary stage of elections, expanding the unit of analysis from legislators to candidates, including those who never reach office. By leveraging institutional changes in campaign finance regulations, such research could assess whether reforms that privilege certain donor types affect who chooses to run, who survives primary competition, and ultimately which ideological profiles are selected into office. Together, these designs would help distinguish donor influence from candidate selection while clarifying the mechanisms through which fundraising regimes may shape political polarization. For now, our research helps to bolster the viewpoint that small individual donors do share a relationship with politically polarized legislators. Perhaps one should be careful what one wishes for—Lilliputians can be rather raucous at times.

References

- Abramowitz, Alen. 2008. "Don't Blame Primary Voters for Polarization." *The Forum*, 5 (4): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1540-8884.1210>.
- Albert, Zachary, and Raymond J. La Raja. 2026. *Small Donors in US Politics: Myth and Reality*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ansolabehere, Stephen, John M. de Figueiredo, and James M. Snyder Jr. 2003. "Why is There So Little Money in U.S. Politics?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 17 (1): 105–130. <https://doi.org/10.1257/089533003321164976>.
- Austen-Smith, David. 1995. "Campaign Contributions and Access." *The American Political Science Review*, 89 (3): 566–581. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2082974>.
- Banda, Kevin K. and Justin H. Kirkland. 2018. "Legislative Party Polarization and Trust in State Legislatures." *American Politics Research*, 46 (4): 596–628. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X17727317>.
- Barber, Michael J. 2016. "Ideological Donors, Contribution Limits, and the Polarization of American Legislatures." *The Journal of Politics*, 78 (1): 296–310. <https://doi.org/10.1086/683453>.
- Barber, Michael J., Brandice Canes-Wrone, and Sharece Thrower. 2017. "Ideologically Sophisticated Donors: Which Candidates Do Individual Contributors Finance?" *American Journal of Political Science*, 61 (2): 271–288. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12275>.
- Barber, Michael J., and Nolan McCarty. 2015. "Causes and Consequences of Polarization." In *Solutions to Political Polarization in America*, edited by Nathaniel Persily, 15–59. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Barber, Michael J. 2022. "Comparing Campaign Finance and Vote-Based Measures of Ideology." *The Journal of Politics*, 84 (1): 613–619. <https://doi.org/10.1086/715247>.
- Birkhead, Nathaniel. 2016. "State Budgetary Delays in an Era of Party Polarization." *State and Local Government Review*, 48 (4): 259–269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160323X16687813>.
- Bonica, Adam. 2013. "Ideology and Interests in the Political Marketplace." *American Journal of Political Science*, 57 (2): 294–311. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23496598>.
- Bonica, Adam. 2024. *Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections: Public version 4.0* [Computer file]. Stanford University Libraries. <https://data.stanford.edu/dime>.
- Bouton, Laurent, Julia Cagè, Edgard Dewitte, and Vincent Pons. 2022. "Small Campaign Donors." *NBER Working Paper No. 30050*. National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w30050>.

- Butler, Daniel M. 2009. "The Effect of the Size of Voting Blocs on Incumbents' Roll-Call Voting and the Asymmetric Polarization of Congress." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 34 (3): 297–318. <https://doi.org/10.3162/036298009788897763>.
- Canes-Wrone, Brandice, and Kenneth M. Miller. 2022. "Out-of-District Donors and Representation in the US House." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 47 (2): 361–395. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12336>.
- Coffey, Daniel. 2007. "State Party Activists and State Party Polarization." In *The State of the Parties: The Changing Role of Contemporary American Parties*, edited by John C. Green and Daniel J. Coffey, 75–91. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376518861_State_Party_Activists_and_State_Party_Polarization.
- Culberson, Tyler, Michael P. McDonald, and Suzanne M. Robbins. 2019. "Small Donors in Congressional Elections." *American Politics Research*, 47 (5): 970–999. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X18763918>.
- Diamond, Larry, Edward B. Foley, and Richard H. Pildes. 2024. "The Election Reform Imperative." In *Electoral Reform in the United States: Proposals for Combating Polarization and Extremism*, edited by Larry Diamond, Edward B. Foley, and Richard H. Pildes, 1–23. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers. <https://moritzlaw.osu.edu/sites/default/files/2024-12/Chapter%201.pdf>.
- Ferguson, Grant L., James G. Gimpel, Mark E. Owens and Daron R. Shaw. 2024. "The Surge of the Small Donorate in U.S. Elections: A View from Texas Statewide Campaigns." *Political Geography*, 114: 103191. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2024.103191>.
- Garand, James C. 2010. "Income Inequality, Party Polarization, and Roll-Call Voting in the U.S. Senate." *The Journal of Politics*, 72 (4): 1109–1128. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381610000563>.
- Garlick, Alex. 2017. "National Policies, Agendas, and Polarization in American State Legislatures: 2011 to 2014." *American Politics Research*, 45 (6): 939–979. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X17719719>.
- Gerber, Elisabeth R., and Jeffrey B. Lewis. 2004. "Beyond the Median: Voter Preferences, District Heterogeneity, and Political Representation." *Journal of Political Economy*, 112 (6): 1364–1383. <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/424737>.
- Grumbach, Jacob M. 2018. "From Backwaters to Major Policymakers: Policy Polarization in the States, 1970–2014." *Perspectives on Politics*, 16 (2): 416–435. <https://www.doi.org/10.1017/S153759271700425X>.
- Grumbach, Jacob M. 2020. "Interest Group Activists and the Polarization of State Legislatures." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 45 (1): 5–34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12244>.

- Hall, Richard L., and Frank W. Wayman. 1990. "Buying Time: Moneyed Interests and the Mobilization of Bias in Congressional Committees." *The American Political Science Review*, 84 (3): 797–820. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1962767>.
- Harden, Jeffery J., and Justin H. Kirkland. 2016. "Do Campaign Donors Influence Polarization? Evidence from Public Financing in the American States." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 41 (1): 119–152. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12108>.
- Hill, Seth J., and Gregory A. Huber. 2017. "Representativeness and Motivations of the Contemporary Donorate: Results from Merged Survey and Administrative Records." *Political Behavior* 39: 3–29. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-016-9343-y>.
- Joe, Wesley Y., Michael J. Malbin, Clyde Wilcox, Peter W. Brusoe, and Jamie P. Pimlott. 2008. "Do Small Donors Improve Representation? Some Answers from Recent Gubernatorial and State Legislative Elections." The Campaign Finance Institute. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=6902b22177392e2fb2a5b05893ef3ba86cc34cbe>.
- Johnson, Bertram. 2010. "Individual Contributions: A Fundraising Advantage for the Ideologically Extreme?" *American Politics Research*, 38 (5): 890–908. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X09357500>.
- Jordan, Soren, and Cynthia J. Bowling. 2016. "Introduction: The State of Polarization in the States." *State and Local Government Review*, 48 (4): 220–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160323X17699527>.
- Kirkland, Justin H. 2014. "Ideological Heterogeneity and Legislative Polarization in the United States." *Political Research Quarterly*, 67 (3): 533–546. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24371890>.
- Kistner, Michael R., Michael Heseltine, Robert Alvarez, Maya Fitch, Lucas Lothamer, and Elizabeth N. Simas. 2025. "Measuring Partisanship and Representation in Online Congressional Communication." Working Paper 2025–02, University of Houston. https://www.uh.edu/hobby/cpp/events/texmeth/papers/measuring_partisanship_and_representation.pdf.
- Kousser, Thad B. 2010. "Does Partisan Polarization Lead to Policy Gridlock in California?" *California Journal of Politics and Policy*, 2 (2). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2mt5t0md>.
- La Raja, Raymond J., and Brian F. Schaffner. 2015. *Campaign Finance and Political Polarization: When Purists Prevail*. University of Michigan Press.
- La Raja, Raymond J. 2024. "Campaign Finance." In *Electoral Reform in the United States: Proposals for Combating Polarization and Extremism*, edited by Larry Diamond, Edward B. Foley, and Richard H. Pildes. Lynne Rienner Publishers. <https://moritzlaw.osu.edu/sites/default/files/2024-12/Chapter%207.pdf>.

- Malbin, Michael. 2013. "Small Donors: Incentives, Economies of Scale, and Effects." *The Forum*, 11 (3): 385–411. <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2013-0050>.
- MapLight. 2019. "Money in the 2018 Oregon Elections." June 5, 2019. <http://www.commoncause.org/oregon/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2019/06/Money-in-OregonElections.pdf>.
- Masket, Seth, Jonathan Winburn, and Gerald Wright. 2012. "The Gerrymanderers Are Coming! Legislative Redistricting Won't Affect Competition or Polarization Much, No Matter Who Does It." *Political Science & Politics*, 45 (1): 39–43. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096511001703>.
- Meisels, Melissa, Joshua D. Clinton, and Gregory A. Huber. 2024. "Giving to the Extreme? Experimental Evidence on Donor Response to Candidate and District Characteristics." *British Journal of Political Science*, 54: 851–873. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123423000650>.
- McCarty, Nolan. 2015. "Reducing Polarization by Making Parties Stronger." In *Solutions to Political Polarization in America*, edited by Nathaniel Persily, 136–146. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/solutions-to-political-polarization-in-america/F64F7378D05DA67E8DF266E14E73669F>.
- McCarty, Nolan, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2006. *Polarized America: The dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*. The MIT Press.
- National Conference of State Legislatures. 2023. *State Limits on Contributions to Candidates: 2023-2024 Election Cycle*. May. <https://documents.ncsl.org/wwwncsl/Elections/Contribution-Limits-to-Candidates-2023-2024.pdf>
- Oklobdzija, Stan. 2017. "Closing Down and Cashing In: Extremism and Political Fundraising." *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, 17 (2): 201–224. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532440016679373>.
- Open States Project. 2024. "Roll-Call Vote Records for U.S. State Legislatures." Data set. Accessed January 29, 2024 through Plural Policy API (<https://api.pluralpolicy.com/openstates/v1/>).
- Persily, Nathaniel, ed. 2015. *Solutions to Political Polarization in America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pildes, Richard H. 2019. "Small-Donor-Based Campaign-Finance Reform and Political Polarization." *Yale Law Journal Forum*, 129: 149–170. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/yljfor129&div=10&id=&page=>.

- Pildes, Richard H. 2020. "Participation and Polarization." *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law*, 22 (2): 341–408.
<https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/upjcl22&div=13&id=&page=>
- Pildes, Richard H. 2024. "Campaign Finance and Political Polarization." SSRN.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5032309>
- Polborn, Mattias K., and James M. Snyder, Jr. 2017. "Party Polarization in Legislatures with Office Motivated Candidates." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 132 (3): 1509–1550.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjx012>.
- Poole, Keith T., and Howard Rosenthal. 2001. "D-Nominate after 10 Years: A Comparative Update to Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll-Call Voting." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 26 (1): 5–29. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1154162>.
- Prior, Markus 2005. "News vs. Entertainment: How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout." *American Journal of Political Science*, 49 (3): 577–592. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2005.00143.x>.
- Richardson, Lilliard, and Jeffrey Milyo. 2016. "Giving the People What They Want? Legislative Polarization and Public Approval of State Legislatures." *State and Local Government Review*, 48 (4): 270–281. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160323X17697150>.
- Rhodes, Jesse H., Brian F. Schaffner, and Raymond J. La Raja. 2018. "Detecting and Understanding Donor Strategies in Midterm Elections." *Political Research Quarterly*, 71 (3): 503–516. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912917749323>.
- Shor, Boris, and Nolan McCarty. 2011. "The Ideological mapping of American legislatures." *American Political Science Review*, 105 (3): 530–551.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055411000153>.
- Shor, Boris, and Nolan McCarty. 2022. "Two Decades of Polarization in American State Legislatures." *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy*, 3 (3–4): 343–370.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1561/113.00000063>.
- Shor, Boris, Christopher Berry, and Nolan McCarty. 2010. "Bridge to Somewhere: Mapping State and Congressional Ideology on Cross-Institutional Common Space." *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 35 (3): 417–448. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25750392>.
- Spirling, Arthur, and Brandon M. Stewart. 2025. "What Good Is a Regression? Inference to the Best Explanation and the Practice of Political Science Research." *Journal of Politics* 87 (4). <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/734280>.
- Swift, Jonathan. (1726) 2003. *Gulliver's Travels*. Penguin Books.

- Stapilus, Randy. 2022. "Betsy Johnson Attracted Voters in Regions Where She Has Strong Ties." *Oregon Capital Chronicle*, November 28.
<https://oregoncapitalchronicle.com/2022/11/28/betsy-johnson-attracted-voters-in-regions-where-she-has-strong-ties/>.
- Stapilus, Randy. 2023. "Will Oregon Legislators Follow-through and Enact Campaign Finance Reform?" *Oregon Capital Chronicle*, February 3.
<https://oregoncapitalchronicle.com/2023/02/03/will-oregon-legislators-follow-through-and-enact-campaign-finance-reform/>.
- Tausanovitch, Chris, and Christopher Warshaw. 2017. "Estimating Candidates' Political Orientation in a Polarized Congress." *Political Analysis* 25 (2): 167–187.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/pan.2017.5>.
- Vandewalker, Ian. 2024. "Do Small Donors Cause Political Dysfunction?" Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law.
<https://search.issuelab.org/resources/43734/43734.pdf>.
- Wilson, Conrad. 2022. "Oregon Voters Worry about Deep Divisions While Blaming Political Rivals." *Oregon Public Broadcast*, May 5.
<https://www.opb.org/article/2022/05/05/political-partisanship-worries-oregon-voters-governorsrace/>.

Supplementary Materials

Table A1: Predictors of Candidates' Reliance on Small Donors.

Dependent Variable: Proportion Small Donors

(Intercept)	0.171*** (0.044)
Log Total Contributions	-0.012*** (0.003)
Republican	-0.016* (0.006)
% Democrat District	0.031 (0.021)
% White District	0.046*** (0.013)
2018	0.001 (0.003)
2020	0.004 (0.004)
2022	0.001 (0.004)
Leader	-0.017** (0.005)
Incumbent	-0.034*** (0.004)
Senate	-0.006 (0.004)
OR	0.016* (0.008)
WA	0.018* (0.008)
Num.Obs.	1203
R2	0.307
RMSE	0.05
Std.Errors	Legislator ID

p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A2. Regressions Within States for Democratic Legislators

	NPAT CA	CFscore CA	NPAT WA	CFscore WA	NPAT OR	CFscore OR
Small Donors	-3.097+	-0.372	-1.908**	-	-0.901	-0.565+
	(1.591)	(0.553)	(0.618)	1.308***	(0.725)	(0.318)
\$200–500 Individ. Donors	-3.468	-1.684	1.255*	0.266	2.109	-0.127
	(5.055)	(1.105)	(0.631)	(0.375)	(1.586)	(0.718)
\$500–1K Individ. Donors	1.000	-0.738	-0.663	0.100	-0.951	-0.931
	(5.182)	(1.225)	(0.749)	(0.338)	(1.427)	(0.633)
\$1K–3K Individ. Donors	-2.759**	0.384	-0.734*	-0.274+	-0.472	0.296
	(1.050)	(0.348)	(0.306)	(0.156)	(0.761)	(0.425)
\$3K–10K Individ. Donors	-0.912	0.150			-0.232	-0.201
	(0.637)	(0.176)			(0.809)	(0.570)
\$10K+ Individ. Donors					1.496	0.079
					(1.404)	(0.482)
Labor Contributions	-2.360***	-	0.164	-0.132	0.211	-0.249
	(0.476)	0.582***	(0.533)	(0.184)	(0.661)	(0.223)
Business/Other Contrib.	-0.626	0.271+	-0.024	0.117+	0.475	0.497**
	(0.466)	(0.143)	(0.143)	(0.065)	(0.346)	(0.160)
Party Contributions	-0.813*	-0.176	0.028	-0.427**	0.378	1.779*
	(0.374)	(0.130)	(0.347)	(0.141)	(1.594)	(0.829)
Log Total Contributions	0.086	0.010	0.199***	0.020	0.053	-0.008
	(0.068)	(0.025)	(0.057)	(0.037)	(0.055)	(0.018)
% Dem. District	-2.696***	-0.236*	-1.213***	-0.123	-1.429***	-0.150
	(0.384)	(0.111)	(0.230)	(0.094)	(0.249)	(0.157)
% White District	-0.141	-0.149**	-0.077	-0.164	-0.599	0.131
	(0.204)	(0.050)	(0.268)	(0.100)	(0.485)	(0.169)
Leader	-0.489***	-0.068*	-0.184**	-0.067	-0.063	-0.033
	(0.086)	(0.033)	(0.065)	(0.055)	(0.133)	(0.054)
Incumbent	-0.086	-0.031	-0.029	0.025	-0.014	0.045
	(0.067)	(0.025)	(0.051)	(0.030)	(0.066)	(0.028)
Num.Obs.	296	253	284	267	179	170
R2	0.634	0.458	0.428	0.478	0.372	0.471
RMSE	0.33	0.10	0.26	0.13	0.25	0.13

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by Legislator ID.

Table omits the intercept and year fixed-effect dummies.

Reference (omitted) contribution type = PAC contributions.

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Table A3. Regressions Within States for Republican Legislators

	CFscore		CFscore		CFscore	
	NPAT CA	CA	NPAT WA	WA	NPAT OR	OR
Small Donors	-0.340	-0.094	-0.880	1.587** *	3.024***	0.063
	(0.920)	(0.609)	(0.662)	(0.419)	(0.610)	(0.382)
\$200–500 Individ. Donors	-3.089	-0.571	0.036	-0.693	2.235	4.431***
	(3.071)	(3.756)	(1.451)	(0.614)	(2.234)	(1.106)
\$500–1K Individ. Donors	4.518**	-1.598	-0.531	0.520	-3.240	-1.902
	(1.590)	(1.541)	(0.860)	(0.579)	(2.037)	(1.642)
\$1K–3K Individ. Donors	-0.228	1.377	0.516	0.730**	-1.547	0.857
	(0.868)	(0.884)	(0.444)	(0.261)	(1.202)	(0.967)
\$3K–10K Individ. Donors	-0.017	-0.534			0.868	0.965
	(0.469)	(0.547)			(0.809)	(0.605)
\$10K+ Individ. Donors					-0.274	0.239
					(0.643)	(0.336)
Labor Contributions	-2.052**	-1.139+	-3.946*	-1.920	4.833	-14.477+
	(0.758)	(0.630)	(1.547)	(1.507)	(14.256)	(8.028)
Business/Other Contrib.	0.496	-0.726	0.072	0.014	-0.260	-0.407
	(0.610)	(0.642)	(0.295)	(0.127)	(0.383)	(0.291)
Party Contributions	-0.508	0.068	0.526+	0.414** *	-1.323	3.500*
	(0.350)	(0.485)	(0.281)	(0.123)	(1.859)	(1.521)
Log Total Contrib.	-0.106+	- 0.143**	-0.182**	-0.056+	-0.074	0.017
	(0.056)	(0.051)	(0.066)	(0.033)	(0.052)	(0.035)
% Dem. District	-0.972	-0.017	-1.766***	0.151	-1.446**	-0.307
	(0.940)	(0.896)	(0.460)	(0.410)	(0.472)	(0.349)
% White District	0.356	0.119	0.195	-0.019	0.625	-0.328
	(0.276)	(0.322)	(0.370)	(0.122)	(0.976)	(0.716)
Leader	-0.155+	-0.095	-0.098	0.166**	-0.047	-0.077
	(0.080)	(0.090)	(0.257)	(0.059)	(0.073)	(0.071)
Incumbent	0.039	-0.100	0.059	-0.042	-0.035	-0.094
	(0.071)	(0.062)	(0.060)	(0.028)	(0.089)	(0.070)
Num.Obs.	100	92	211	206	132	116
R2	0.580	0.317	0.275	0.476	0.430	0.530
RMSE	0.20	0.22	0.25	0.14	0.28	0.21

Notes: Robust standard errors clustered by Legislator ID.

Table omits the intercept and year fixed-effect dummies.

Reference (omitted) contribution type = PAC contributions.

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.