Controversy and small-donor campaign contributions

Hien An Ngo

February 9, 2026

1 Objective (5 points)

The Members of Congress who received the highest share of their campaign funds from small donors in 2024 were former Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.), Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), and Bernie Sanders (D-Vt.). Most often, the candidates who receive the strongest support from small, individual donors are usually high-profile or controversial. Some, like Rep. Ocasio-Cortez and Sen. Sanders, have pledged to reject contributions from corporate PACs, naturally driving up their proportion of small donor contributions. Others, like former Rep. Greene, are known to use controversy and divisive language to drive contributions from their supporters.

I'm interested in exploring the dynamics that drive strong small-donor fundraising. Campaigns often cite their low average contribution amounts as evidence of strong grassroots fundraising. I want to ask, how do candidates drive small-donor contributions? Candidates like Rep. Greene and Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Oh.) are known for stoking controversy and even attacking their own party to drive their campaign donations. Can we find evidence that candidates receive increases in small-donor support when their language and messaging turn more negative and inflammatory?

My objective is to perform sentiment analysis on the campaign messaging of candidates who had the strongest small-donor fundraising in the 2024 campaign cycle and compare this to their campaign contributions. I'm considering either analyzing candidates' tweets or emails.

2 Outcome (5 point)

I plan to present the results on an interactive dashboard displaying time-series trends in messaging tone and small-donor fundraising. The final report will integrate quantitative findings with illustrative case examples from selected campaigns.

3 Impact (5 points)

As a whole, Members of Congress only received about 27.6 percent of their campaign contributions from small donors during the 2024 election cycle. Small-donor contributors are defined as donating under 200 dollars in a single cycle. Most members have their campaigns funded by corporate PACs, interest groups, and large donors. Many political scientists, as well as voters, have studied whether donations from business groups and wealthy individuals make politicians more beholden to the interests of their donors than to those of their constituents. Further understanding the methods of how candidates can drive small-donor contributions is relevant to addressing the money-in-politics problem U.S. elections face.

4 Literature Review (25 points)

1. SoRelle Wyckoff Gaynor & James G. Gimpel (2024) study in "Small Donor Contributions in Response to Email Outreach by a Political Campaign" whether the content of campaign emails changes the outcomes of contributions. The authors show, using text analysis, that emails help to mobilize an already friendly base.

2. Maria Petrova, Ananya Sen, and Pinar Yildirim in "Social Media and Political Contributions: The Impact of New Technology on Political Competition" study whether U.S. congressional candidates who adopt Twitter use see increases in donations, and whether this effect differs between new and experienced politicians. The authors found that new candidates did see growth in donations after adopting Twitter.

3. In "Do Small Donors Cause Political Dysfunction?", Ian Vandewalker discusses whether small donors, who are often more partisan than general voters, drive further polarization of candidates. Vandewalker argues that small donors are essential to the Democratic practice.

4. Bouton, Castanheira, Drazen in "A Theory of Small Campaign Contributions" build a theoretical foundation to understand why small donors, who are usually less capital-rich than large donors, donate to campaigns. The authors explore what motivates them and analyzes the cost/benefit analysis for small donors.

5. Richard H. Pildes in "Participation and Polarization" shows that while small-donor financing and matching programs are widely celebrated for increasing political participation and reducing corruption, they may unintentionally intensify political polarization because donors tend to be more ideologically extreme than average voters.

5 Novelty (10 points)

In my capstone, analyzing the sentiment of social media posts and comparing them to candidates' contribution history can show how small donor contributions might be related to how candidates communicate their issues on social media. I haven't seen any literature yet using X posts.

6 Data Source(s) (10 point)

Campaign contributions Federal Election Commission The data types I anticipate using from the FEC are dates and integers. The data is very reliable, but I've had issues with the usability before. Because of how the data is filed, it can be quite difficult to make sure donations are unique. The majority of donations these days are facilitated through platforms WinRed and ActBlue and then funneled to candidates' individual committees or other partisan committees. I anticipate running into issues with cleaning/working with this data and plan to work with my current internship organization, OpenSecrets, to resolve these issues. OpenSecrets specializes in cleaning and making available campaign finance data.

Campaign texts Option 1 – X posts (tweets) I would use the X API to gather posts from the top ten Members of Congress who had the highest proportion of their contributions come from small donors in the 2024 cycle.

Option 2 – Campaign emails Datatype: Strings Usability: I've requested the archive manager to access the data.

Option 3 – Official emails from congressional offices Datatype: Strings Usability: I've also requested the archive manager to access the data.

7 Approach (20 points)

1. I will select the tenth highest Members of Congress who received the largest proportion of their campaign funds from small donors.

2. Two primary datasets will be constructed: a. Daily or weekly small-donor contribution totals and counts will be obtained from the Federal Election Commission. Small donors will be defined as contributors giving $200 or less per election cycle who are non-itemized. b. Collection of X posts from the ten congress members selected, ranging from the beginning to the end of the 2024 election cycle.

3. Data cleaning and pre-processing: I will perform steps to ensure consistency across the campaign messaging and contribution data, including standardizing identifiers, deduplicating posts/contributions, and stripping posts to basic text.

4. I'm still uncertain about my approach to how I'll perform sentiment analysis on the posts. I'm looking at these examples right now: `https://github.com/Hungreeee/Twitter-Sentiment -Classification`.

8 Timeline (10 points)

Week 1: Acquiring data. Cleaning FEC data. Week 2: Cleaning and pre-processing X data. Merging datasets. Week 3: Exploratory data analysis and prototype how to perform sentiment analysis. Week 4-5: Work on sentiment analysis of X posts. Week 6: Select model. Week 7: Perform main analysis. Week 8: Validate and test. Week 9-10: Build dashboard and write conclusions.

9 Possible Challenges (10 points)

1. Collecting X posts. I'm looking through ways to go about collecting candidates' X posts, and their doesn't seem to be a simple way besides using the X API. 2. I'm not very confident about how I'll classify posts by their tone, but I will look at past examples on how to go about it. It seems like there are a few examples online.

References

Gaynor, S. W., & Gimpel, J. G. (2024). Small donor contributions in response to email outreach by a political campaign. *Journal of Political Marketing, 23*(1), 51–73. `https://doi.org/10.108 0/15377857.2021.1910611`https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2021.1910611

Magleby, D. B., Goodliffe, J., & Olsen, J. (2018). *Who donates in campaigns? The importance of message, messenger, medium, and structure.* Cambridge University Press. `https://doi.org/ 10.1017/9781108554428`https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108554428

Petrova, M., Sen, A., & Yildirim, P. (2020). *Social media and political contributions: The impact of new technology on political competition.* arXiv. `https://arxiv.org/abs/2011.029 24`https://arxiv.org/abs/2011.02924

Pildes, R. H. (2020). Participation and polarization. *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law, 22*(2), 341–372. `https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/jcl/vol22/iss2/1`https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/jcl/vol22/iss2/1

Vandewalker, I. (2024). *Do small donors cause political dysfunction?* Brennan Center for Justice. `https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/do-small-donors-cause-political-dysfunction`https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/do-small-donors-cause-political-dysfunction