

POWERBACK.us

A Mechanism for Small Donor Leverage in the Age of Campaign Finance Capture

Executive Summary

Election campaign finance in the United States no longer reliably produces accountability. Instead of enabling representation, it has settled into a system where political outcomes are shaped disproportionately by concentrated capital and institutional inertia. Money is given upfront. Action is optional. Delay carries little visible cost.

POWERBACK.us (“POWERBACK”) proposes a narrow intervention that changes when political money becomes usable. Rather than offering donors faith alone, it allows small-dollar contributors to unite around a single, explicit legislative outcome as the condition of their support.

Contributors commit resources before they can observe whether commitments will be honored, while campaigns receive immediate benefit. POWERBACK changes that timing by releasing funds only if a defined legislative action occurs. If it does not, the funds do not return to the contributor.

This irreversibility is intentional. Refunds would erase the stakes. POWERBACK makes inaction legible by attaching a durable cost to delay or refusal.

The system operates entirely within existing campaign finance law and is deliberately constrained in scope. It is transparent, law-abiding, and deliberately narrow, beginning with a single legislative objective: **H.J.Res.54**, the We the People Amendment to overturn the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United v. FEC* decision.

Introduction: The Problem

Campaign finance law has not eliminated corruption; it has legalized and normalized it. Key structural failures include:

- Asymmetric influence favoring large donors and institutional money
- Prepayment without performance or accountability
- Fragmented small-dollar participation
- Legislative gatekeeping that prevents votes on widely supported policies

The result is an extractive political economy where money flows continuously, but accountability has run dry.

Campaign Finance as an Incentive System

Modern campaign finance is shaped by a decisive imbalance in timing. Contributors must commit resources before they can observe whether political promises will be honored, while candidates and campaigns receive immediate benefit from that commitment.

Campaign finance functions as an incentive mechanism. Current law permits contributions that are unconditional, symbolic, and detached from measurable outcomes. This creates a moral hazard: elected officials can accept funds while deferring, diluting, or avoiding substantive action.

Limits of Existing Responses

Legal reform depends on captured institutions. Electoral challenges are slow, costly, and tend to consume contributions just to keep campaigns alive. Protest generates attention but rarely alters incentive structures. None of these responses directly modify how political capital is deployed, and therefore have proven powerless.

The POWERBACK Mechanism

POWERBACK introduces conditional political capital. Contributor funds are collected upfront, held in a segregated account outside campaign control, and released only when

predefined conditions are met. Conditions are public, binary, and externally verifiable, such as whether a bill receives a floor vote.

Money moves on events, not intent.

The mechanism is:

- Non-discretionary
- Collective rather than individual
- Transparent by default
- Designed to comply with campaign finance law.[1]

POWERBACK is not persuasion, prediction, or charity. It is a way to change incentives without changing the law. In the current form, released funds can only go to incumbents' authorized campaign committees.

Irreversible Commitment

POWERBACK starts from a simple constraint: political donations are not reversible or risk-free. In the existing campaign finance system, money is given upfront with no enforceable requirement that representatives act on the commitments used to solicit it. When action never comes, contributors absorb the loss quietly and the system moves on unchanged.

POWERBACK makes that cost explicit and real. Celebrations are non-refundable by design. If the required legislative action occurs, the funds are released to the Representative. If it does not, the funds do not return to the contributor.

When a Celebration fails to resolve, the funds support POWERBACK so the platform can continue operating, meet legal obligations, and expand to other political arenas. This fallback is built in. It preserves the meaning of participation.

Legitimacy here simply means consent and moral support. Campaign donations are one way political actors receive that consent. By refusing to reward delay or inaction, even at personal cost, contributors using POWERBACK withdraw it. Refunds would erase the stakes.

Irreversibility is what gives the signal weight.

Operational Clarifications

Deposit vs. trigger: Contributors pay up front at deposit. The mechanism does nothing at deposit except hold the funds. The system “wakes up” only when the trigger event occurs (for example: a recorded floor vote).

Timing is real-time, not post-election: This is not a bonus paid after an election outcome. Funds can be released shortly after the trigger occurs, including within 24 hours when verification is available.

When conditions aren’t met: If a condition is not met by the close of a Congressional term, funds do not return to a contributor’s bank account. They support POWERBACK so the platform can continue operating, meet legal obligations, and expand to other political arenas.

Recipients are conditional, not automatic: An incumbent is not a recipient by default. Earmarking means “this committee receives the funds if the condition is met.” Until the trigger occurs, there is no recipient.

Eligible recipients: POWERBACK only allows earmarking to incumbents in races that are actively contested. An incumbent is eligible only when they face a challenger who is registered, funded, and actively campaigning. This ensures the incentive is real: the incumbent has something to lose if they ignore the trigger.

Mechanism Design and Network Effects

Campaigns can pool money easily. Individual small-dollar contributions are typically absorbed without consequence. When contributors coordinate around a single condition, money stops functioning like background noise and becomes a visible signal.

As the pool grows, it becomes legible to campaigns, opponents, and the press because it is public, time-bound, and tied to a single verifiable event. A pooled, withheld amount makes inaction visible enough that it must be accounted for, even though each contributor would be negligible alone.

How POWERBACK Differs from ActBlue and WinRed

ActBlue and WinRed process and transmit political donations. Once a contribution is made, funds are transferred to the campaign.

POWERBACK performs the same payment and routing functions but applies a conditional release structure. Funds remain linked to a defined legislative outcome until that outcome occurs. If the condition is satisfied, funds are released. If it is not, they follow the predefined fallback path.

Under traditional processing, contributions are unconditional. Under POWERBACK, disbursement is conditional.

An Example of the POWERBACK Mechanism

Consider a group of ten thousand unassociated (i.e., not coordinating with any campaign) contributors who each pledge fifty dollars toward a clearly defined condition: a public floor vote on a specific piece of legislation. The funds are collected upfront into a dedicated POWERBACK account, and the running total is displayed live on POWERBACK.us, forming a visible pool of five hundred thousand dollars.

The funds are secure and verifiable, but unavailable to any campaign until the condition occurs. Contributors designate the recipient committees upfront under predefined rules. If the vote is scheduled and held, the funds can be released shortly after the vote, once the trigger is publicly verifiable. If the vote is blocked or delayed indefinitely, the funds remain withheld.

Who can receive released funds (and why)

POWERBACK is built for officeholder accountability. Because the conditions are official legislative acts, releases in this form can only go to incumbents' authorized campaign committees. This is not a term-limits strategy or a challenger-funding program. It is "pay after the job is done," applied to the people currently holding the job.

Clarification: What POWERBACK Is Not

POWERBACK is not a prediction market, a betting platform, or a form of gambling. Contributors are not wagering on the likelihood of political outcomes, speculating on probabilities, or seeking profit from the success or failure of events.

In prediction markets, contributors risk capital in exchange for potential financial upside based on forecasting accuracy. POWERBACK involves no such mechanism. Funds are not staked against odds, redistributed based on outcomes, or used to reward correct guesses. There is no concept of winning, losing, or payout beyond the conditional release of funds to their originally intended destination.

Likewise, POWERBACK is not betting on political failure or success. Contributors do not benefit financially from inaction, delay, or refusal. The informational value of non-occurrence is political and civic, not monetary.

POWERBACK should therefore be understood as a system of coordinated, conditional participation, not outcome speculation. It does not compel action, guarantee results, or punish refusal. It simply refuses to reward inaction. Its purpose is to restore agency and visibility to lawful political participation, not to monetize uncertainty or transform governance into a game.

Evidence and Analogous Systems

POWERBACK draws from escrow protocols, collective action theory, network economics, and campaign finance data showing responsiveness to funding signals rather than public opinion alone.

From Fragmentation to Alignment

Campaign finance rewards signals that are organized, persistent, and legible. Institutional money typically arrives that way. Small-dollar participation does not. POWERBACK pools conditional commitments around a single verifiable act. When the act occurs, funds move. When it does not, the withheld total becomes a public record of the gap between rhetoric and action.

Risks and Constraints

POWERBACK makes no claims over existing political institutions. It operates openly within them. The risks it faces are therefore not exotic or speculative, but familiar ones that arise where accountability is questioned. They are the social, legal, and structural reflections of the pressures that allow the current system to operate without consequence.

Regulatory uncertainty: Although POWERBACK is structured to avoid coordination, coercion, or candidate involvement, campaign finance law is complex and unevenly interpreted.[2] There is ongoing risk that novel forms of conditional participation may be misunderstood or challenged, even when they operate squarely within existing legal boundaries.

Adoption thresholds: The mechanism's effectiveness scales with mass participation. Small pools still function symbolically, but larger pools are required to produce meaningful visibility. Early-stage efforts may therefore feel slow or anticlimactic, particularly to contributors accustomed to immediate feedback.

Institutional resistance: POWERBACK does not flatter incumbents. It makes delay, obstruction, and avoidance easier to see. Political institutions that benefit from ambiguity and diffuse accountability may resist transparency, decline engagement, or attempt to reframe non-participation as irrelevance rather than intent.

Misinterpretation: There is an inherent risk that critics will mischaracterize POWERBACK as coercive or transactional. Clear communication is essential to distinguish conditional participation from enforcement or entitlement.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Campaign finance corruption persists not because citizens lack concern, but because the system strips them of agency at the moments it matters most. POWERBACK does not promise victory. It promises clarity.

By changing when money becomes available, POWERBACK allows people to commit without rewarding delay or bad faith. Legislative action releases funds. Inaction produces a visible outcome. Both are informative.

POWERBACK is not a replacement for elections, law, or protest. It is a complementary instrument designed to intervene where rhetoric, reform, and traditional donations repeatedly fail.

The project begins with a deliberately narrow scope: a single bill, **H.J.Res.54**, the We the People Amendment. Constraining scope reduces ambiguity, simplifies verification, and ensures early participation produces legible outcomes.

Expansion beyond a single bill is contingent on demonstrated clarity, legal durability, and contributor understanding. The core rule remains unchanged: funds are released only when an observable legislative condition occurs.

In a system that thrives on ambiguity, POWERBACK insists on observable outcomes. That insistence is its contribution, and its challenge.

References

[1] **Federal Election Commission.** *Agency Financial Report, Fiscal Year 2023* (Nov. 15, 2023), “[Mission and Organizational Structure](https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/FEC-FY-2023-Agency-Financial-Report.pdf).” (PDF)
<https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/FEC-FY-2023-Agency-Financial-Report.pdf>

See also: Federal Election Commission. [Filing candidate reports](https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/filing-reports/). (Web)
<https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/filing-reports/>

[2] **Federal Election Commission.** *Help for candidates and committees – Taking in receipts*, “[Remedying an excessive contribution](https://www.fec.gov/help-candidates-and-committees/candidate-taking-receipts/remedying-excessive-contribution/).” (Web)
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