People Suck.
Build Around the Suck.

VOLUME 1

CAMPAIGN FINANCE



JMAC

SIDE ANGLE WORKS

People Suck.
Build Around the Suck.

Volume 1

Campaign Finance

JMAC

Side Angle Works

First digital edition

Version 1.0

Published October 7, 2026

Publication details

Volume 1: Campaign Finance

Author: JMAC

Publishing imprint: Side Angle Works

Copyright © 2026 Brian Phillips.

All rights reserved in copyrightable human-authored contributions. No claim is made to public-domain material, third-party works, or purely AI-generated elements.

First digital edition · Version 1.0

Published October 7, 2026.

Complete PDF and EPUB editions: free from sideangleworks.com. A paid print edition is planned separately.

Published digitally in PDF and EPUB by Side Angle Works.

Source credits appear in the chapter references. The following authorship note describes the substantial assistance from ChatGPT and Codex.

Corrections and questions: sideangleworks@gmail.com

A note on AI, authorship, and accountability

This manuscript was built with substantial assistance from OpenAI's ChatGPT and Codex. I used them as thinking partners and working tools: to challenge assumptions, compare drafts, organize research, surface counterarguments, trace sources, and sharpen language.

It would be dishonest to hide that collaboration. It would also be dishonest to hand responsibility for the work over to the tool. The questions, values, judgments, and final choices are mine. AI did not decide what matters, what is true, or what I am willing to stand behind. It can be useful, fast, persuasive, and wrong. Every claim still has to earn its place.

That is consistent with the argument of this book. If we want to understand an outcome, we have to make the choices, tools, and conditions that produced it visible—including those behind this manuscript. Tools and institutions should be built around predictable failure, including our own. I used AI to extend attention and expose blind spots, not to escape responsibility. I remain accountable for this manuscript and for any errors.

Contents

1. FIRST, WHAT ARE WE ASSUMING? 8
2. OKAY, SO WHAT IS THE SYSTEM? 9
3. HERE'S WHERE IT GOT WEIRD 10
4. THE LEGAL RULES SHAPING THE SYSTEM 11
5. FOLLOW THE MONEY—BUT DO NOT STOP THERE 13
6. DOES MONEY ACTUALLY MATTER? 14
7. WHAT DOES MONEY BUY FROM POLITICIANS? 16
8. THE TIME TAX 17
9. WHO GETS TO RUN? 18
10. THE ATTENTION MARKET 20
11. THE ENFORCEMENT GAP 21
12. THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINT 23
13. REFORM EXPERIMENTS 24
14. DEFINE SUCCESS BEFORE DESIGNING REFORM 26
15. FINE. LET’S BUILD ONE—THEN TRY TO BREAK IT 29
16. BREAK THE HYBRID 31
17. THE SMALLEST DESIGN THAT STILL RESISTS CAPTURE 32
18. DEFINE FAILURE BEFORE IMPLEMENTATION 34
19. WHAT WOULD PROVE US WRONG? 36
20. THE STATUS QUO GETS A DEFENSE 37
21. THE SUBSTITUTION TEST 39
22. FOLLOW THE ACCESS, NOT ONLY THE MONEY 40
23. CAMPAIGN FINANCE MEETS THE PRIMARY SYSTEM 41
24. WHERE DOES THE NEXT DOLLAR MATTER MOST? 42
25. THE SMALL-DOLLAR PARADOX 43
26. THE PARTY QUESTION 44
27. THE ACCOUNTABILITY MAP 45
28. ACCOUNTABILITY ARBITRAGE — WHEN ACTIVITY MOVES TO THE EASIER CHANNEL 47
29. THE CORRUPTION PROBLEM 49

30. THE PURPOSE HIERARCHY 51
31. WHAT WE KEEP, CHANGE, TEST, AND REJECT 53
32. THE HOSTILE TAKEOVER TEST 55
33. FREEZE THE MODEL AND WRITE THE DISSENT 57
34. WHERE THE MODEL LANDED 59
35. WHAT WE CAN SAY WITH CONFIDENCE 60
36. THE CAMPAIGN-FINANCE ANSWER 62
37. WHAT CAMPAIGN FINANCE TAUGHT US 63
38. HOW THE QUESTIONS BECAME A METHOD 66

How to read this book

Start with the question. You do not need to agree with my conclusion to follow how I got there.

Some passages describe what a source reports. Others compare explanations or propose a way a system could work. Those are different kinds of claims. A useful idea still needs testing; a result from one place does not automatically tell us what happens everywhere.

Ask what the evidence shows, what remains uncertain, and what would change the conclusion. The same questions apply to my work.

This volume stands on its own. The other books use different subjects to practice the same method: Outcome Anatomy.

Scope of this volume

This volume examines campaign finance, political influence, and proposed system designs. Legal examples refer to particular decisions and rules at the dates discussed. A legal holding, a research finding, and a proposed reform are not interchangeable. The analysis is not tailored legal advice for a campaign.

VOLUME 1 — CAMPAIGN FINANCE

THE QUESTION THAT STARTED IT ALL

The founding question was simple:

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WE TOOK MONEY OUT OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS?

At first, that sounded like a perfectly unrealistic question. Then we started pulling on it.

Pretty quickly, the question started arguing back. If money disappeared, campaigns would still need people, communication, attention, travel, data, organization, and a way to survive long enough for voters to notice them. So maybe the money was not the whole thing. Maybe it was carrying something else.

That was enough to make us suspicious of the easy version.

We did not have a name for the habit yet. We just started checking what the question was quietly asking us to assume.

1. FIRST, WHAT ARE WE ASSUMING?

Before deciding what to do about campaign money, we had to untangle the claims being made about it. Harmless, corrupting, necessary, and excessive are different judgments. Each needs its own explanation.

“Money buys elections.”

Maybe. But how? Does money persuade voters? Build name recognition? Help a candidate enter the race? Organize supporters? Survive attacks? Signal that a campaign is viable?

“Wealthy donors buy politicians.”

Sometimes explicit exchange may occur. But money can also support candidates who already agree with donors, affect who survives a primary, alter access, or shape which issues receive attention. Those are different mechanisms and require different remedies.

“Public financing fixes the problem.”

Only if the public system still gives campaigns what they need without simply replacing dependence on private money with dependence on government.

“More disclosure is always better.”

Only if the information improves accurate accountability more than it creates false attribution, harassment, or unnecessary exposure of ordinary political association.

“Less spending means healthier democracy.”

Not necessarily. A low-spending race may be uncompetitive. A high-spending race may reflect genuine competition, mass participation, or expensive communication markets.

None of that answered the question. It just made it a lot harder to answer lazily.

2. OKAY, SO WHAT IS THE SYSTEM?

Follow campaign money far enough and you find a much bigger machine. Money is one of the things moving through it.

The federal campaign-finance system includes candidates, individual donors, parties, PACs, outside-spending groups, nonprofits, self-financing candidates, vendors, media, platforms, regulators, courts, and voters.

Money moves through that system, but so do other scarce resources:

attention

information

organization

labor

legitimacy

access

authority

That was the first little click. We had started with “money in politics.” What we were actually looking at was political capacity: the resources and ability to run a campaign, reach voters, and compete.

A useful simplified chain is:

resources → capacity → communication and organization → attention → voter behavior → electoral outcome → governing authority

That chain contains feedback. Viability attracts resources. Resources increase viability. Attention attracts money. Money buys attention. Existing authority produces visibility that challengers must purchase.

That made money look different. It was not just spending. It was stored capacity to keep doing political things.

That does not make it good. It makes its function clearer.

3. HERE'S WHERE IT GOT WEIRD

DO NOT ELIMINATE A MECHANISM UNTIL YOU UNDERSTAND THE FUNCTION IT IS PERFORMING.

If candidate money disappeared tomorrow, campaigns would still require:

staff

communications

travel

voter contact

data

compliance

organization

fundraising infrastructure

advertising

Those functions would not disappear. Someone or something else would allocate them.

Government could allocate more.

Parties could allocate more.

Media could allocate more attention.

Platforms could become more important.

Celebrity could become more valuable.

Personal wealth could become more decisive.

Outside organizations could take over candidate-like functions.

Once we saw that, another thing became hard to unsee:

Removing the way limited resources are distributed does not make them unlimited. It changes who decides who gets them.

And just like that, the original question was already getting away from us.

4. THE LEGAL RULES SHAPING THE SYSTEM

We can draw a reform that looks wonderful on paper. If it needs power the Constitution does not allow, we have drawn something we cannot use. The legal rules belong in the design from the start.

The system distinguishes direct contributions—money given to a candidate or committee—from expenditures, meaning money spent on political activity.

Direct contributions may be limited more readily because they create a close candidate-donor relationship and a recognized risk of direct exchange—or of routing money around the rules.

Independent political advocacy receives stronger constitutional protection because restricting independent political speech gives government a different kind of power that can also be abused.

Outside voluntarily accepted public-financing conditions, candidate self-financing receives constitutional protection.

That creates an uncomfortable substitution problem:

severe limits on support from others can increase the relative value of personal wealth.

That makes independence a crucial legal boundary.

If outside spending receives greater protection partly because it is independent of candidates, the boundary between independent advocacy and candidate-controlled activity matters enormously.

Party activity occupies its own contested position between association, candidate support, coordination, and institutional accountability.

On June 30, 2026, the Supreme Court invalidated federal limits on coordinated political-party expenditures in NRSC v. FEC. Reform design can no longer treat those limits as a stable tool for containing party-candidate coordination.

The constitutional lesson is not that doctrine is an annoying barrier to ideal design.

Constraints reshape the system that evolves around them.

A constraint does not merely block one solution.

It changes which alternatives become attractive.

Legal note: The decision concerns federal political-party coordinated-expenditure limits. Base contribution limits, earmarking rules and disclosure requirements remain relevant. The Court’s majority considered those remaining safeguards sufficient to address circumvention; the dissent disputed their adequacy. That legal disagreement does not establish how effectively the safeguards work in practice.

Chapter references →

5. FOLLOW THE MONEY—BUT DO NOT STOP THERE

Federal campaign finance operates at enormous scale, but raw totals can mislead.

Candidate spending, party spending, committee transfers, and independent expenditures are different activities. Some headline totals overlap or measure transactions that should not be treated as equivalent.

Total spending can also hide who has the money and who controls it.

The same total can produce very different systems depending on whether resources are:

broadly distributed

concentrated among a few donors

concentrated in a few races

controlled by candidates

controlled by parties

controlled by outside organizations

available before viability

available only after viability is established

The project therefore shifted from:

How much money?

to:

WHO CONTROLS THE RESOURCE?

WHEN DOES IT ARRIVE?

WHAT FUNCTION DOES IT PERFORM?

WHAT CONSTRAINT DOES IT RELAX?

WHO BECOMES DEPENDENT ON WHOM?

Total quantity matters.

But distribution, timing, control, and dependency often explain more.

Chapter references →

6. DOES MONEY ACTUALLY MATTER?

The research did not support a cartoon in which the candidate who spends more automatically wins.

Spending and winning are entangled with candidate quality, prior support, competitiveness, fundraising ability, incumbency, and donor expectations.

A strong candidate may attract money, then use that money to become more competitive. Looking at the final spending total does not tell us where that loop began.

The more useful answer is: it depends on where the campaign is in the race.

Money can matter differently for:

an unknown challenger

an incumbent

a primary candidate

a famous candidate

an early campaign

a race already saturated with attention

For an unknown candidate, resources can buy the basic capacity to become visible and evaluable.

For a well-known candidate, another dollar may have much lower persuasive value.

The project proposes the Capacity Threshold Model as a hypothesis to test:

below the level needed to function

→ each new resource can matter a lot

near the point where a campaign starts looking viable

→ new resources can attract more support

well above the level needed to function

→ the hypothesis predicts that each additional dollar matters less

The point is simple: money can matter very differently depending on where the campaign starts.

The question is not simply whether money matters.

It is when, for whom, through which mechanism, and relative to what constraint.

Evidence note: Estimates of campaign spending effects depend on the election and the method used. A study of U.S. Senate races found roughly equal returns to incumbent and challenger spending after accounting for other factors, contrary to a simple challenger advantage. That historical result does not settle every race. The Capacity Threshold Model is this book's proposed explanation, not a research finding established across elections.

Chapter references →

7. WHAT DOES MONEY BUY FROM POLITICIANS?

The easy story is conversion:

donor gives money

→ politician changes position

That mechanism can exist.

It is not the only one, and often not the easiest one to prove with evidence.

Money can operate through selection:

donor supports an already-aligned candidate

→ candidate survives or wins

→ policy changes because the officeholder changed

The policy outcome may look similar even though nobody's preference was purchased.

Money can also affect access:

resource relationship

→ greater opportunity for contact

→ greater opportunity to supply information, urgency, and priorities

Access is not proof of a purchased policy outcome.

But it is an input into governing, and unequal access can shape which facts and demands reach decision-makers.

The project therefore adopted:

POWER DOES NOT REQUIRE CHANGING SOMEONE'S PREFERENCE IF IT CAN CHANGE WHO PARTICIPATES, WHO SURVIVES, WHO GETS HEARD, OR WHICH OPTIONS REMAIN VIABLE.

That is more precise than "money buys politicians."

It also creates clearer questions about what evidence would actually show influence.

Chapter references →

8. THE TIME TAX

Campaign money has another price:

the time required to obtain it.

Candidates and officeholders can spend substantial time fundraising, cultivating networks, attending events, and maintaining resource relationships.

The burden varies by office, candidate, election stage, party support, and fundraising model.

No responsible analysis should turn one anecdote or one estimate of daily fundraising time into a universal rule.

But the mechanism matters even when the exact average is uncertain.

Time spent acquiring resources is time unavailable for:

governing

constituent work

policy development

coalition building

field organization

rest

A financing system should therefore be judged not only by the dollars raised but by the time, attention, and relationships required to obtain them.

That became the Time-Tax Principle:

IF A REFORM CHANGES WHO FUNDS CANDIDATES BUT CANDIDATES STILL SPEND THE SAME OR MORE TIME CHASING RESOURCES, THE FUNDING SOURCE CHANGED BUT THE TIME COST DID NOT.

A program built around many small donations may broaden funding while demanding more fundraising work.

A program that automates support may save time while making candidates more dependent on whoever runs it.

The tradeoff must be measured, not assumed.

Chapter references →

9. WHO GETS TO RUN?

Elections do not begin when voters receive a ballot.

They begin when possible candidates decide whether they can enter, when donors and parties decide whether those candidates are viable, and when weakly resourced candidates decide whether they can continue.

Early resources can contribute to a viability loop:

resources

→ perceived viability

→ additional support

→ organizational survival

→ stronger viability

The reverse can occur:

insufficient early resources

→ perceived nonviability

→ weaker support

→ organizational contraction

→ withdrawal

Research on congressional campaigns links early fundraising to later fundraising and primary performance. Separate research links weak early fundraising to dropping out before the primary, particularly among experienced candidates.

But fundraising alone does not tell us what caused a candidate to become viable.

It can be both a cause of viability and a signal of qualities that already make a candidate viable: experience, community support, organizational ability, personal wealth, elite connections, or electoral fit.

The system reinforces what it recognizes.

Early donors, parties, endorsers, journalists, and activists observe one another. Their judgments can accumulate until an uncertain candidate appears inevitable—or disappears.

Campaign finance can therefore influence the candidate menu before voters exercise formal choice.

The Menu Test followed:

CHOICE CANNOT BE EVALUATED FULLY WITHOUT EXAMINING HOW THE AVAILABLE OPTIONS WERE PRODUCED.

The question is not merely whether voters can choose freely among candidates.

It is how those candidates became the choices.

Chapter references →

10. THE ATTENTION MARKET

Money is one way to purchase attention.

Attention and persuasion are not the same.

Communication may increase awareness, establish legitimacy, reach unfamiliar voters, or keep a candidate from disappearing even when its average persuasive effect is small.

Restricting purchased attention does not make attention abundant.

It increases the relative importance of attention allocated through:

media

platform algorithms

existing fame

party organizations

social networks

volunteer capacity

institutional endorsements

This creates another substitution problem.

A reform that reduces paid communication may unintentionally strengthen the actors who decide who receives unpaid visibility.

When there is not enough for everyone, someone has to decide who gets what.

Removing one way of making that decision does not make more available. It shifts the power to decide somewhere else.

Complete attention equality is not a realistic design target.

A better target is sufficient access to attention for credible competition, combined with accountability for institutions that allocate it.

The relevant question is:

WHO ALLOCATES ATTENTION AFTER THE REFORM, AND UNDER WHAT CONSTRAINTS?

Chapter references →

11. THE ENFORCEMENT GAP

Written rules and rules in practice are not identical.

A rule matters only if the obligation is clear, conduct is observable, violations can be detected, investigations occur, decisions arrive in time, consequences follow, review remains available, and expected behavior changes.

The Enforcement Chain is:

clear rule

→ observable behavior

→ detection

→ investigation

→ decision

→ timely consequence

→ review

→ deterrence

Every link matters.

A correct decision delivered after the relevant election may remain legally important while arriving too late to protect the process it governed.

The Federal Election Commission illustrates the design problem.

Its bipartisan structure and four-vote requirement protect against unilateral partisan control.

They can also make agreement difficult.

In its 2020 review, GAO reported that FEC officials described incomplete filing information, a backlog of enforcement matters, delays in completing audits, staffing shortages and a lack of enough commissioners to act. These were dated, reported challenges—not a finding that every enforcement delay had the same cause.

GAO also recommended updating how the FEC and Justice Department coordinate enforcement. The agencies signed a new

agreement in April 2023, and GAO closed that recommendation as implemented. A historical problem should not be presented as an unresolved one without checking what changed.

Those findings do not prove that every delay is partisan or every complaint meritorious.

They establish something more basic:

AUTHORITY ON PAPER DOES NOT GUARANTEE THE ABILITY TO ACT.

RULES DO NOT REGULATE BEHAVIOR. ENFORCEMENT SYSTEMS DO.

But speed is not the only value.

An enforcement system without clear rules, strong evidence standards, confidentiality, meaningful review, and limits on selective prosecution can become a political weapon.

Too many veto points can produce paralysis.

Too little distributed control can concentrate too much enforcement power in too few hands.

The objective is enforcement that is:

fast enough to matter

predictable enough to guide behavior

independent enough to retain legitimacy

constrained enough to survive hostile ownership

reviewable enough to correct error

Chapter references →

12. THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINT

Campaign-finance reform sits inside constitutional rules that protect political expression and association.

That creates genuine value conflicts.

Anticorruption can conflict with association.

Transparency can conflict with privacy.

Candidate control can conflict with independent speech.

Equality objectives can conflict with freedom from government allocation.

Party accountability can conflict with limits on coordination.

This analysis helps us examine how an outcome came about. It cannot pretend that evidence alone settles these conflicts over rights and values.

It can trace the rules, relationships, incentives, and decisions that shaped the result—and ask how changing them might produce a different one.

Constitutional doctrine determines which governmental means remain available.

Value judgment still determines how competing legitimate values should be weighed within that boundary.

That is not analytical failure.

It is clarity.

A constitutional constraint should therefore enter the design at the beginning, not appear as a disclaimer after the preferred policy has already been chosen.

THE LAW DOES NOT ANSWER EVERY SYSTEMS QUESTION.

BUT A SYSTEMS ANSWER THAT REQUIRES UNAVAILABLE LEGAL POWER IS NOT YET A WORKABLE DESIGN.

Chapter references →

13. REFORM EXPERIMENTS

Existing public-finance programs gave us something we could examine: what the rules changed, what stayed the same, and what happened afterward.

Public programs generally use grants, small-donor matching, or democracy vouchers.

Each changes a different part of the political market.

Matching increases the financial value of contributions candidates can obtain from ordinary donors.

Vouchers separate a limited amount of participation capacity from personal disposable income.

Grants provide resources after candidates satisfy qualification requirements.

New York City’s Campaign Finance Board reports on small-donor participation, public matching funds, and outside spending in its 2025 election review. These administrative observations do not isolate what would have happened without the program.

Public-financing designs also need to be tested against possible limits:

Can newcomers meet qualification requirements in time to run a credible campaign?

Funding can be too small or arrive too late.

Participation can vary sharply between elections.

Outside spending can remain substantial.

Administrators must verify eligibility, process claims, enforce conditions, and resolve disputes while the election is underway.

Public financing therefore does not eliminate dependency. It changes its structure.

The correct reform question became:

DOES THE INTERVENTION CHANGE THE BEHAVIOR-PRODUCING INCENTIVE, OR ONLY THE VISIBLE FUNDING SOURCE?

Public financing was neither savior nor failure.

Its effects depend on where support enters, how candidates qualify, how much is available, when it arrives, what conditions attach, which alternatives remain, and how actors adapt.

Chapter references →

14. DEFINE SUCCESS BEFORE DESIGNING REFORM

Decide what would count as success before the results arrive. Otherwise we can always find a number that makes our preferred reform look good.

More small donors can still leave candidates more dependent on organized groups united by political beliefs.

More public funding may coexist with fewer credible candidates.

Lower candidate spending may coexist with greater outside control.

More disclosure may coexist with less usable accountability.

So the project defined what success would mean before choosing a favorite reform. The list is long, but the point is simple: decide what counts before you see the result.

ACCESS AND COMPETITION

candidate entry

early viability

candidate dropout

uncontested races

candidate diversity

self-funding and incumbency advantage

access to sufficient attention

DEPENDENCY AND AGENCY — WHO CANDIDATES RELY ON, AND WHAT THEY CAN DECIDE FOR THEMSELVES

funding concentration and diversity

fundraising time

access distribution

outside, party, and organized-bloc dependency

candidate control over message and strategy

ACCOUNTABILITY AND ADMINISTRATION

clear funding sources and accurate identification of who is responsible

enforcement speed and neutrality

ability to understand and follow the rules

administrative burden

newcomer usability

ability to challenge and correct decisions

PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL POWER

participation breadth

geographic representation

message incentives

party, media, and platform power

voter information

freedom of political association

RESILIENCE AND ADAPTATION

circumvention—routing around the rules

resource substitution—using another resource or channel when one is restricted

hostile administration

program capture—powerful actors gaining control of the program for their own benefit

legal challenge

inflation

vendor concentration

single-point failure—one failure that can stop the whole system

Not every dimension can be reduced to a defensible numerical score.

But the criteria and expected direction of change can still be declared in advance.

CAMPAIGN-FINANCE REFORM CANNOT BE JUDGED BY WHETHER IT REDUCES MONEY.

It must be judged by who gains the ability to compete, who candidates must rely on, who gets heard, and who gains control over those choices.

Chapter references →

15. FINE. LET’S BUILD ONE—THEN TRY TO BREAK IT

Several reform families were compared:

minimal transparency and enforcement reform

small-donor matching

voucher systems

public resource floors—a basic level of publicly provided campaign support

party-centered models

near-zero private candidate finance

a hybrid distributed-dependency model—combining funding sources so candidates need not rely on any one of them

No model could win because it sounded democratic.

Each had to answer:

What political function does it preserve?

Who gains allocation power?

Who loses independent capacity?

What behavior adapts?

What happens under hostile administration?

What substitute channel will sophisticated actors find?

That produced the Political Capacity Substitution Test: when a rule blocks one route, what replaces it, and who gains power?

constraint

→ unmet political function

→ substitute resource or channel

→ new distribution of power

Restrict candidate fundraising and dependence may move to parties.

Restrict parties and it may move to outside organizations.

Restrict paid communication and it may move to media and platforms.

Make public finance exclusive and it may move to government qualification and payment decisions.

The design objective became anti-capture: preventing a narrow group from controlling who can compete, rather than trying to give everyone equal resources.

ANTI-CAPTURE STANDARD

Political resources necessary for meaningful competition should be distributed broadly enough that no narrow donor class, government authority, party institution, outside organization, media gatekeeper, or platform can routinely determine viability alone.

That implied:

NECESSARY REDUNDANCY PRINCIPLE

A healthy political system should give candidates several independent ways to obtain what they need to compete. If one route fails or falls under someone else's control, candidates should still have another way forward.

The target is not maximum redundancy.

It is enough independent routes to keep any one actor from controlling the resources candidates need to compete.

16. BREAK THE HYBRID

Do not ask how the system works when everyone behaves reasonably.

Ask how it behaves when powerful actors understand its rules better than its designers do.

Test the billionaire network, dominant incumbent, self-financing candidate, party cartel, national outrage machine, union, corporation, media celebrity, platform favorite, hostile regulator, coordination lawyer, and consultant network.

Then test inflation, delayed payments, fraud, manipulated qualification thresholds, and new layers of intermediary organizations. Test rule-following costs that deter candidates, overwhelming outside spending, legislative defunding, powerful interests taking over the program, and courts striking it down.

A system that survives only because everyone uses it reasonably is not robust.

GRACEFUL DEGRADATION TEST

When one part fails, falls under someone else's control, is delayed, is struck down by a court, or is manipulated, can the system still do its main job—or does that failure bring other parts down with it?

Mandatory spending caps weakened.

Monopoly public finance weakened.

Opponent-triggered matching failed constitutional review.

Highly discretionary qualification weakened.

Maximal disclosure weakened.

A smaller design survived better.

Chapter references →

17. THE SMALLEST DESIGN THAT STILL RESISTS CAPTURE

The smaller model kept:

a modest amount of early public support—or something comparable—to help credible candidates become viable

objective and accessible qualification thresholds

more help near the early viability bottleneck, then less as the campaign becomes able to stand on its own

ordinary capped private contributions

meaningful party support without making party approval necessary to survive

protected genuinely independent advocacy

source transparency people can actually use

coordination rules people can understand and enforce

simple compliance assistance

timely enforcement without easy partisan capture

scheduled evaluation and correction

The aim was not equal resources.

It was enough capacity to compete.

Support should help a credible candidate run a viable campaign, not guarantee competitiveness or counter every opposing dollar.

Qualification should demonstrate real support without reproducing the fundraising advantages the program is meant to reduce.

Support should arrive near the bottleneck.

Private contributions should remain available so candidates retain an independent route to resources and association.

Parties should be able to support candidates and accept public responsibility without becoming the sole gatekeeper.

After the Supreme Court’s 2026 decision invalidating federal coordinated-party-expenditure limits, reform cannot assume those limits will contain party-candidate coordination. The relevant questions now include attribution, circumvention, internal concentration, and candidate alternatives.

Independent advocacy should remain protected.

CANDIDATE AGENCY

A candidate should have enough resources and freedom to act that no single outside actor can routinely decide whether the campaign can keep going.

A reform should reduce a candidate's dependence on others while preserving the resources and control the candidate needs to run a campaign.

Four initial pillars emerged:

ACCESS

REDUNDANCY

TRANSPARENCY

RESILIENCE

Chapter references →

18. DEFINE FAILURE BEFORE IMPLEMENTATION

A reform should not wait until visible collapse to decide what failure looks like.

We need warning signs we can check before the system falls apart. That means watching where it could begin moving away from the purpose we gave it.

VIABILITY DRIFT

entry, dropout, uncontested races, qualification success, delayed support, self-funding advantage

DEPENDENCY DRIFT

funding controlled by fewer sources, growing dependence on outside groups or parties, dominance by organized voting or donor groups, reliance on outrage to attract support, and fundraising time rising again

ADMINISTRATIVE DRIFT

difficulty qualifying, cost of following the rules, usability for newcomers, payment errors, delayed or selective enforcement, room for officials to favor some candidates, and how often candidates choose not to participate

ACCOUNTABILITY DRIFT

unclear funding sources, money passing through many organizations, control that cannot be traced to a responsible actor, reliance on a few service providers, and resources concentrated in a few places

ADAPTATION DRIFT

candidates entering to take advantage of program rules, new organizations used to route around limits, hidden coordination, improved numbers without improved outcomes, and public support going to races where one side is already secure

SYSTEMIC DRIFT

fewer independent ways to keep a campaign viable, vulnerability to legal challenges, unstable public funding, one failure that can stop the whole system, infrastructure controlled by powerful interests

A measurement should not be adopted merely because it is easy to count.

It should help us understand a specific way the system could fail.

Thresholds should trigger investigation and review—not automatic policy reactions.

Once actors know which measure controls eligibility, funding, or program survival, they gain an incentive to optimize the measure rather than the purpose.

The measures themselves must therefore be checked: do they still track the real goal, or have people learned to improve the numbers without improving the outcome?

DO NOT WAIT FOR A SYSTEM TO FAIL VISIBLY.

Decide how to spot the system moving away from its purpose while you are still designing it.

19. WHAT WOULD PROVE US WRONG?

What evidence would make us give up this model?

We need an answer while we still like it.

If public support did not help credible candidates reach the minimum capacity needed to compete, its claim should weaken.

If qualification excluded the candidates facing the greatest entry barriers, it should be redesigned.

If administrative complexity produced little benefit while increasing government gatekeeping, the model should lose support.

If small-donor matching merely replaced wealthy-donor dependence with national ideological-network dependence, the claim should narrow.

If stronger parties concentrated control without making responsibility clearer or candidates more independent, the argument should weaken.

If disclosure produced little usable accountability but substantial privacy costs, expansion should stop.

If enforcement gained speed by sacrificing neutrality, accuracy, or review, speed should not count as success.

The status quo was allowed to win.

IF NO POSSIBLE EVIDENCE CAN MAKE YOU ABANDON A CONCLUSION, YOU DO NOT HAVE A CONCLUSION.

YOU HAVE A BELIEF.

Success criteria should be declared before results arrive.

Results showing no measurable benefit matter too. So do unintended effects, court decisions striking down the reform, and whether the changes can be undone.

The more irreversible, centralized, or coercive the intervention, the stronger the evidence required.

20. THE STATUS QUO GETS A DEFENSE

The current system is easy to caricature because its failures are visible.

Its strengths include decentralized resource channels, adaptability, freedom of political association, limited direct government allocation of viability, legal familiarity, outsider organization, independent advocacy, and insurgent mobilization.

Its weaknesses include early viability barriers, fundraising burdens, concentrated dependency, unclear funding sources, accountability gaps, and advantages for wealth, fame, incumbency, and existing networks.

The hybrid model could lower early barriers, diversify dependency, reduce fundraising burdens, strengthen candidate capacity, and improve accountability.

It also gives government power to decide who qualifies. It adds administrative work and transition costs, can be taken over by powerful interests, depends on continued public funding, creates new ways to misuse enforcement, and may be vulnerable to legal challenges.

The comparison cannot be:

a corrupt status quo

versus

an ideal reform

It must compare two imperfect ways of distributing the resources and power candidates need.

The core tradeoff is:

CONCENTRATED PRIVATE CONTROL OVER VIABILITY

versus

CONCENTRATED GOVERNMENT CONTROL OVER VIABILITY

A useful system must defend against both.

That comparison led us toward several independent funding routes. None should become the only practical way a candidate can survive. Pure deregulation and government as the sole financier create different risks; neither gets a free pass.

The goal is not to eliminate power.

It is to keep any one source of power from becoming something candidates cannot realistically do without.

21. THE SUBSTITUTION TEST

Outside spending can coexist with public financing at very high levels.

That does not prove public financing caused it.

A before-and-after increase could reflect:

substitution—constrained activity moved outside

addition—more total political activity occurred

crowding out—public resources replaced some private resources

exposure—outside spending would have existed anyway, but limited candidate resources made candidates more vulnerable

A CHANGE AFTER A REFORM DOES NOT PROVE THE REFORM CAUSED IT. WE STILL HAVE TO ASK WHAT WOULD LIKELY HAVE HAPPENED WITHOUT THE REFORM.

The system does not need candidate resources to match every outside dollar.

It needs candidates to keep enough resources and control to make their own choices under outside pressure.

A robust system remains functional in the presence of outside pressure rather than mechanically expanding whenever outside spending expands.

Chapter references →

22. FOLLOW THE ACCESS, NOT ONLY THE MONEY

Campaign finance can matter after the check clears.

Donor relationships can affect access to senior officials. But access must not be confused with policy purchase.

To claim influence, we would need to trace a chain:

resource relationship

→ opportunity for contact

→ opportunity to supply information or priorities

→ possible agenda or policy influence

Each arrow requires evidence.

Reducing financial barriers can also change which candidates enter or survive. Those candidates are not automatically more representative of the median voter.

Making it easier to pass one barrier can give more power to whoever controls the next one.

That produced:

SELECTION QUALITY

Selection quality does not mean ideological moderation.

It asks whether letting more candidates enter gives a wider group of voters a meaningful choice—or simply lets another small group decide which candidates survive.

REMOVING ONE GATEKEEPER IS NOT DEMOCRATIZATION IF THE SAME DECISION SIMPLY TRANSFERS TO ANOTHER NARROW GATEKEEPER DOWNSTREAM.

Chapter references →

23. CAMPAIGN FINANCE MEETS THE PRIMARY SYSTEM

A candidate has to make it through several gates before voters get the final choice:

personal capacity

→ financial viability

→ party viability

→ primary

→ general election

→ office

Campaign-finance reform touches only part of that chain.

If the financial gate widens but the decisive primary electorate remains narrow, selection power may move downstream.

This matters especially where winning the primary leaves little realistic competition in the general election. Much of the choice has already happened by then.

Public financing, donor mobilization, primary rules, district safety, turnout, and party institutions interact.

A REFORM SHOULD BE EVALUATED ACROSS THE ENTIRE SELECTION CHAIN, NOT ONLY AT THE STAGE WHERE IT INTERVENES.

24. WHERE DOES THE NEXT DOLLAR MATTER MOST?

Campaign resources perform different jobs at different stages:

entry

viability

organization

attention

persuasion

mobilization

defense

fundraising

stored option value—resources held in reserve so a campaign can respond later

The same dollar can be irrelevant in one context and decisive in another.

The Marginal-Dollar Test asks:

What can the campaign do with this dollar that it could not do without it?

If money matters most near early viability, support should target that bottleneck rather than promise equal resources forever.

Early public or matched support remains a plausible design idea—not a proven rule for every election.

Do not turn a plausible design into a fact merely because it fits the theory.

25. THE SMALL-DOLLAR PARADOX

Small-dollar fundraising appears democratizing because no donor controls much money.

But thousands of separate donations can still depend on tools and networks controlled by a few actors:

email lists

fundraising platforms

national ideological networks

algorithmic testing

recurring-payment systems

negative political identity—support driven mainly by opposition to the other side

Small-dollar participation can broaden financing. It may also reward messages designed to provoke anger or national attention—a risk to test, not an established effect of every small-donor programme.

The evidence does not justify claiming that small donors universally cause extremity.

The structural question remains:

Who controls the platforms, lists and recruitment tools through which many people give separately?

The goal therefore shifted from maximizing small dollars to:

BROAD-BASED CONSTITUENT FINANCING — SUPPORT FROM A WIDE RANGE OF THE PEOPLE A CANDIDATE WOULD REPRESENT

Another pillar followed:

DEPENDENCY ALIGNMENT

Candidates should not become too dependent on groups with little connection to the people they are elected to represent.

More participation does not necessarily mean better representation. The way people are recruited can consistently favor some groups over others.

Chapter references →

26. THE PARTY QUESTION

Parties can give voters a recognizable identity, keep organizations working between elections, bring different groups together, support candidates, and maintain local networks. Their continued presence also means their reputation can be judged across elections.

They can also let a small leadership group decide who gets resources, carry donor influence into candidate decisions, or keep challengers from getting a foothold.

The better question is:

Which party functions should be strong, and where should other candidates or organizations still be able to challenge the party's control?

Official parties may be more accountable than disposable outside organizations because they persist across elections and carry reputational consequences.

That does not make them automatically representative or moderate.

The preferred concept became:

ACCOUNTABLE PARTY CAPACITY

meaningful capacity

visible funding

candidate alternatives

local organizational strength

no sole gatekeeper

The Supreme Court’s 2026 decision in NRSC v. FEC invalidated federal limits on coordinated party expenditures. We therefore analyze party power without treating those limits as an available stabilizer.

The systems point survives:

Weakening parties can make the system easier to control if their resources and influence move to actors who are harder to hold accountable.

Chapter references →

27. THE ACCOUNTABILITY MAP

Transparency is not accountability.

A system may reveal who acted without providing any meaningful way to understand the action, challenge it, correct it, or impose consequences.

A useful accountability chain asks:

Who possesses practical power?

Can the responsible actor be identified?

Must the actor explain the decision?

Can the decision be challenged?

Can a remedy arrive in time?

Can consequences follow?

Can the actor disappear before accountability arrives?

Candidates face direct electoral accountability, but elections are intermittent and bundle many decisions into a single vote.

Parties persist and are publicly recognizable, but responsibility can become hard to pin down when candidates, committees, officeholders, and affiliated organizations share decisions.

Outside organizations may possess enormous practical power without being directly accountable to voters. They may still face legal, donor, reputational, or organizational constraints, but those are not equivalent to electoral accountability.

Media organizations and platforms face market, professional, contractual, and reputational accountability. They also allocate political attention without holding public office.

Regulators possess formal authority and legal limits. Because they can investigate, punish, and enforce, we also have to examine their independence, procedures, transparency, and how easily their power could be captured or politicized.

We called the distance between practical power and effective accountability the Accountability Gap.

There is no useful number to subtract here. The question is whether influence has outgrown our ability to identify who used it, challenge the decision, and correct what went wrong.

POWER THAT CANNOT BE ELIMINATED SHOULD BE VISIBLE ENOUGH TO UNDERSTAND, POSSIBLE TO CHALLENGE, AND SUBJECT TO ACCOUNTABILITY.

28. ACCOUNTABILITY ARBITRAGE — WHEN ACTIVITY MOVES TO THE EASIER CHANNEL

People and organizations respond to the rules, scrutiny, and consequences that come with different ways of organizing political activity.

If one channel offers more influence, more privacy, less attribution, greater flexibility, weaker enforcement, or less reputational exposure, political activity may migrate there.

Suppose one channel lets an organization do more while answering for less. Why stay in the harder channel?

Political activity moving toward the most useful power with the least accountability is what we call Accountability Arbitrage.

Effective disclosure must distinguish among:

legal source—the person or organization listed under the reporting rules

immediate funding source—who directly supplied the money

ultimate economic source—where the money originally came from

decision-making source—who decided how the money would be used

communication source—who produced or delivered the message

beneficiary—who benefited from the activity

These are not always the same.

Visibility does not tell us where the money or control ultimately came from.

A disclosed organization may be only the final entity in a longer chain of funding or control.

At the same time, tracing every association to every person can create false attribution, excessive burdens, and serious risks to private political association.

Disclosure therefore has to be matched carefully to the connection being shown.

In Citizens United, the Supreme Court upheld the challenged campaign-disclosure requirements based on the public's interest in information about election-related spending. In Americans for Prosperity Foundation v. Bonta, it struck down California's blanket collection of charities' major-donor information. Where exacting scrutiny applies, disclosure must have a substantial relationship to a sufficiently important governmental interest and be narrowly tailored, though it need not use the least restrictive means.

Those legal boundaries inform the project's proposed disclosure rule:

The more a disclosure rule publicly identifies someone as responsible for political activity, the stronger the evidence should be that they actually funded, authorized, or controlled it.

And:

TRANSPARENCY THAT FALSELY ATTRIBUTES RESPONSIBILITY IS NOT TRANSPARENCY. IT IS DISTORTION.

Disclosure should help identify who financed, authorized, or materially controlled consequential political activity.

It should not convert ordinary membership, incidental association, or remote economic connection into presumed political responsibility.

Before compelling more information, make what is already collected accurate, searchable, comparable, timely, and useful in practice.

Chapter references →

29. THE CORRUPTION PROBLEM

By this point, calling everything “corruption” was getting in the way. We needed to say what actually happened.

In modern campaign-finance law, the Supreme Court has generally treated one kind of corruption as the main constitutional basis for contribution limits: quid pro quo corruption, meaning an exchange of political money or value for official action, or the appearance of such an exchange.

That is a legal category.

It is not a complete vocabulary for institutional analysis.

So we kept the mechanisms separate:

bribery or explicit quid pro quo

circumvention—routing money or activity around the rules

institutional dependency

access inequality

candidate-selection influence

agenda influence

representational distortion

ordinary persuasion

ordinary association

These mechanisms are not interchangeable.

A donor and candidate agreeing is not evidence that the donor purchased the agreement.

A donor receiving access is not proof that policy was sold.

A contribution followed by favorable policy is not, by itself, proof of an exchange.

But the absence of a provable quid pro quo does not establish that a political system is healthy.

A system can generate dependency, unequal access, distorted selection, or narrowed agendas without satisfying the legal definition of corruption.

Legal doctrine determines which restrictions can survive constitutional review.

Systems analysis asks:

WHAT RELATIONSHIPS OF DEPENDENCE, ACCESS, SELECTION, AND ACCOUNTABILITY DOES THE SYSTEM PRODUCE?

That distinction produced a language rule:

NAME THE MECHANISM BEFORE ASSIGNING THE MORAL LABEL.

And a substantive rule:

INFLUENCE IS NOT THE PROBLEM BY ITSELF. IT BECOMES DANGEROUS WHEN IT IS TOO HARD TO CHALLENGE OR TOO IMPORTANT TO ESCAPE.

In this analysis, changing who candidates must rely on and what behavior the system rewards looked more promising than broad bans imposed later. Such bans can require government to make intrusive judgments about people's motives, relationships, or right to participate. That is where this case led us, not where every inquiry has to end.

Chapter references →

30. THE PURPOSE HIERARCHY

What are we asking campaign-finance rules to accomplish? Before choosing a reform, we put those purposes in order. A tool should have to answer to the job we gave it.

TIER ONE — CONSTITUTIONAL AND DEMOCRATIC INTEGRITY

prevent explicit quid pro quo corruption and circumvention

preserve political expression and association

preserve meaningful electoral competition

maintain neutral, competent, and reviewable administration

TIER TWO — STRUCTURAL HEALTH

candidate access

dependency diversification—giving candidates several sources of support

accountability alignment—making responsibility follow actual power

usable transparency

institutional resilience

timely enforcement

TIER THREE — PARTICIPATORY AND REPRESENTATIONAL OUTCOMES

broader participation

lower fundraising burden

better constituency alignment

more representative participation

lower unnecessary campaign cost

greater public confidence

TIER FOUR — ADJACENT OUTCOMES

polarization

civic knowledge

media quality

district competitiveness

governing competence

Lower-tier outcomes still matter. The order tells us which commitments a reform has to protect while pursuing them.

A reform should not casually damage constitutional rights, meaningful competition, or neutral administration in pursuit of a secondary benefit whose relationship to campaign-finance rules is weak or speculative.

The hierarchy also separates ends from tools.

Contribution limits are not a purpose.

Public financing is not a purpose.

Disclosure is not a purpose.

Enforcement is not a purpose.

Each is an instrument whose value depends on what it accomplishes, what it displaces, and what vulnerabilities it creates.

The Constitution may constrain the available means even when the desired end is legitimate.

Evidence should determine whether a tool actually advances that end.

NEVER DEFEND A TOOL AFTER IT STOPS SERVING THE PURPOSE THAT JUSTIFIED IT.

31. WHAT WE KEEP, CHANGE, TEST, AND REJECT

We ended with different answers for different tools. Some were worth keeping. Some needed changing. Some needed a test before anyone made them permanent. Here is where each landed.

RETAIN

defensible direct candidate-contribution limits

independent political advocacy

meaningful party participation

multiple lawful routes to candidate viability

EXPAND OR IMPROVE

source transparency people can actually use

basic compliance infrastructure

rapid disclosure for large election-specific transactions

digital sponsorship attribution

clear coordination rules

election-sensitive review

publicly usable reporting data

timely, constrained, and reviewable enforcement

MODIFY

small-donor matching toward broad constituent dependency rather than raw transaction volume

party rules toward accountable capacity without party indispensability

coordination enforcement toward clarity without easy partisan weaponization

qualification rules toward objective, accessible evidence of support

TEST

early viability grants

constituent-focused matching

voucher systems

small-donor party support

objective public capacity floors

DEPRIORITIZE

aggregate contribution limits as a primary solution

full national public financing as the default

campaign-duration restrictions

total campaign spending reduction as an objective

REJECT AS A PREFERRED DESIGN

mandatory candidate spending caps

independent-expenditure caps

self-financing restrictions as a core strategy

broad government regulation of political truth or tone

monopoly public financing

maximal donor disclosure disconnected from a political transaction

automatic public matching triggered by an opponent’s or outside group’s spending

The legal environment matters.

After the Supreme Court’s 2026 decision in NRSC v. FEC, federal reform cannot rely on coordinated-party-expenditure limits as a stable design component. Party capacity must instead be assessed through contribution rules, attribution, circumvention, internal concentration, and candidate alternatives.

The recommendation got smaller as we found more reasons to limit it. We had asked the analysis to change our answer. It did.

Chapter references →

32. THE HOSTILE TAKEOVER TEST

So we gave the model a less comfortable test: imagine the people we would least want in charge getting every power it creates.

They get the same authority. They do not have to share our reasons for building it.

Could a legislature raise the qualification threshold until challengers could no longer get in? Could an administration hold up payments until the money no longer mattered? Could a regulator make the process itself a punishment, even if it eventually lost the case?

Could the major parties agree on rules that kept outsiders out? Could donor information become a tool for harassment? Could an authoritarian administration combine funding, disclosure, tax, investigative, and enforcement powers against groups it wanted to weaken?

Suppose candidates came to depend on the program. Could the legislature then cut its funding?

Technology gets a turn too. If the hard part shifts from producing a message to getting anyone to see it, would our financing rules still be solving yesterday's problem?

Those questions belong inside the model. We cannot leave them for whoever implements it and hope that person is careful.

If a control is safe only while people we trust are running it, we have not finished designing the control.

That is the Hostile Takeover Test.

It strengthened the case for eligibility rules people can check, required decision deadlines, and fast independent review. Personal disclosure should go only as far as the political activity justifies. Candidates need several ways to obtain resources, and election rules need enough stability that those in charge cannot suddenly change the terms.

Interventions should increase in stages and remain reversible. Concentrated infrastructure needs monitoring. Decisions with serious consequences need public explanations.

The same test weakened the case for making government the only source of campaign finance, disclosing everything regardless of its relevance, or letting officials decide eligibility with too much discretion. It also counted against funding formulas triggered by an opponent's activity, concentrated enforcement power, dependence on annual political funding decisions, and rules that can change immediately before an election.

An eighth pillar emerged:

ADAPTIVE CONSTRAINT

The system has to keep up when behavior changes, technology changes, or people find a way around a rule. But current officeholders should not get to use that need as permission to rewrite the core rules for their own immediate advantage.

Leave no room to adapt, and the system gets stuck with yesterday's problem. Leave no limits on adaptation, and the people in charge get to decide what today's rules mean.

We need both: room to respond and limits on who can change what.

The test is not finished when good people can use the model safely. We need to know how much harm its safeguards can prevent when the next person gets the keys.

33. FREEZE THE MODEL AND WRITE THE DISSENT

Before calling the model successful, we froze it. No more quiet improvements whenever an objection landed.

Then we wrote the strongest case against the version we actually had. A proposal should not get to change clothes halfway through its own test.

The rival was the Decentralized Liberty Model.

Its argument was serious.

The current system is unequal, noisy, and frequently opaque. But many of its failures are dispersed across independent actors.

Public matching, qualification, payment, and enforcement systems can concentrate sensitive political power in government.

Private fundraising also performs useful signaling functions. It can reveal coalition strength, organizational ability, intensity of support, and political demand.

Public programs can subsidize candidates with little genuine support, reward compliance expertise, increase vendor capture, bureaucratize entry, create constituencies invested in the program, become difficult to unwind, and fall behind technological change.

Inequality of participation may also be partly inherent in voluntary politics. Citizens possess unequal time, attention, interest, networks, communication skill, and willingness to participate.

Even an ideal finance system cannot equalize fame, incumbency, media access, social capital, celebrity, organizational skill, or public enthusiasm.

The status quo also permits competitive races, outsider candidacies, grassroots fundraising, party organization, independent advocacy, and rapid adaptation.

The Decentralized Liberty Model therefore supported:

defensible contribution limits

disclosure tied to consequential political transactions

anti-bribery rules and rules against routing around limits

protected independent expenditures

faster and more reliable enforcement

clearer coordination standards

simpler compliance

But it opposed broad public financing of candidates.

Its warning was direct:

DO NOT RESPOND TO UNEQUAL PRIVATE POWER BY CREATING PUBLIC POWER CANDIDATES CANNOT AVOID.

That dissent landed several punches.

It exposed the danger of treating government capacity as neutral merely because its stated purpose was democratic.

It forced the reform model to narrow its claims, reduce its scale, lower its administrative discretion, preserve alternative funding routes, and define exit conditions.

The dissent did not kill the model. It improved it.

The resulting principle was:

Test the proposal before adopting it nationwide.

A proposal that cannot survive its strongest dissent is not ready to govern anyone.

34. WHERE THE MODEL LANDED

We started with “take money out.” Here is the less dramatic answer we could actually defend.

Preserve a decentralized campaign-finance system with multiple independent resource channels.

Improve transparency, compliance, coordination rules, enforcement, and accountability nationally.

Experiment with targeted interventions that reduce early candidate-viability bottlenecks before broad federal expansion.

Keep private contributions.

Keep independent advocacy.

Keep meaningful party participation.

Keep government from becoming the dominant allocator of candidate viability.

Where public support is tested, use objective rules, modest amounts, accessible thresholds, low administrative discretion, independent review, measures chosen in advance, substitution analysis, and clear exit conditions.

Do not make any experimental piece something candidates must rely on before it proves that it works.

The working design principle is:

Several independent ways to obtain campaign resources, with clear limits on government's role.

The working conclusion for campaign finance is:

Government should remove specific barriers to meaningful competition when the evidence shows those barriers exist—and when doing so will not give government the main power to decide who can compete.

35. WHAT WE CAN SAY WITH CONFIDENCE

What is well supported:

Analytical conclusion — Political competition requires resources.

Working explanation — Money gives campaigns the capacity to act; it does not mechanically buy votes.

Analytical conclusion — Funding channels create different relationships and risks.

Evidence-supported associations — Early fundraising is linked to later fundraising and primary performance. Separate research links weak early fundraising to dropping out before the primary, particularly among experienced candidates.

Evidence-supported finding — Revealing donor status can affect access in a studied setting. That does not establish the pattern's wider prevalence or a purchased policy outcome.

Analytical conclusion — Total spending is a weak measure of system health.

Analytical conclusion — Restrictions can push activity into substitute channels.

Legal constraint — Independent speech and privacy in political association impose real constitutional constraints.

Governance principle — Enforcement capacity and practice belong alongside rule design in the analysis.

Important distinction — Transparency and accountability are not the same.

What looks plausible but still deserves caution:

Dependency concentration is often a better reform target than total quantity.

A basic level of support targeted at a specific campaign need could improve competition.

Broad constituent financing can reduce narrow dependency.

Official parties can sometimes align practical power with more visible accountability.

Transparency people can actually use can materially improve accountability.

What still needs testing:

National-scale public viability grants produce net benefit.

Constituent matching improves governing responsiveness.

Campaign-finance reform meaningfully reduces polarization.

The proposed hybrid would outperform the federal baseline.

Uncertainty should match the strength of the evidence.

A conclusion should be no more confident than the evidence supporting its weakest necessary link.

Chapter references →

36. THE CAMPAIGN-FINANCE ANSWER

The original question was:

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WE TOOK MONEY OUT OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS?

The answer is now much clearer.

Political competition would still require communication, organization, attention, labor, information, coordination, access, resilience, and time.

Removing money would not remove those functions.

It would force them toward whatever resources and institutions remained available:

government

parties

outside organizations

personal wealth

volunteer networks

media institutions

platforms

celebrity

existing officeholders

The result would depend less on how many dollars disappeared than on who gained control over the staff, communication, organization, and other resources those dollars had provided.

Some dependencies might weaken. Others would strengthen.

Some political activity might disappear. Some would move. Some would become less visible.

The resources still have to come from somewhere. That leaves us with the question we now need to answer:

HOW DO WE PRESERVE ENOUGH POLITICAL CAPACITY FOR MEANINGFUL COMPETITION WITHOUT LETTING ANY NARROW PRIVATE ACTOR, PUBLIC AUTHORITY, PARTY, OR HIDDEN INTERMEDIARY DECIDE WHO CAN REALISTICALLY COMPETE?

That is the campaign-finance answer.

37. WHAT CAMPAIGN FINANCE TAUGHT US

We did not start with a methodology. We started with a question about money and kept finding reasons the easy answer would not hold. Each difficulty made us ask something we had not known to ask before. Here is what forced those questions into the work.

FUNCTION BEFORE REMOVAL

We wanted to know what would happen if money disappeared. But money was paying for staff, communication, travel, data, and organization. We could not judge removal without asking which jobs still needed doing. That gave us a rule: understand the function before removing the mechanism.

LIMITS REMAIN; THE POWER TO DISTRIBUTE SHIFTS

Campaigns would still compete for limited attention, labor, and resources. If money no longer distributed those things, government, parties, media, platforms, or existing fame would do more of the distributing. Removing one route did not remove the limit. It changed who had the power to decide.

THE RESULT BEGINS BEFORE THE FINAL CHOICE

Looking only at who won missed everyone who never became a realistic option. Early resources could help determine who entered, survived, or became visible. We had to trace the result backward, before the ballot and before the vote.

CHOICE REQUIRES EXAMINING THE MENU

Once we saw that, voter choice was no longer the whole inquiry. We also had to ask how the candidate menu had been produced. A final choice can be free while the path that produced the options remains narrow.

SUBSTITUTION CAN MOVE POWER WITHOUT REDUCING IT

A limit on one financial channel could push activity toward another. That meant a reform could look successful where we measured it while moving power somewhere harder to see. We had to follow what replaced the activity, not stop where the rule applied.

RULES WORK THROUGH ENFORCEMENT SYSTEMS

A written prohibition told us what was supposed to happen. It did not tell us whether anyone could detect a violation, reach a decision, or impose a consequence before the election ended. We had to follow the rule into practice.

ACCOUNTABILITY MUST FOLLOW PRACTICAL POWER

Following resources revealed actors with substantial influence but different obligations to explain or answer for their decisions. A name on a disclosure form was not enough. We had to trace practical control and ask what accountability actually reached it.

HOSTILE ACTORS BELONG INSIDE THE DESIGN ASSUMPTIONS

Public financing could sound reassuring while people we trusted ran it. Changing the imagined administrator exposed a different question: could qualification, payment, or enforcement become a weapon? The safeguards had to survive the person in charge changing.

THE STATUS QUO IS A COMPETING MODEL

The current system had weaknesses, but our proposal introduced risks of its own. We had to compare two imperfect arrangements, not a flawed reality with an ideal version of our idea. Keeping part of the existing system had to remain a possible conclusion.

IRREVERSIBILITY RAISES THE EVIDENCE BURDEN

An experiment we could stop was different from a program candidates might become unable to survive without. The harder a commitment was to undo, the more we needed to know before making it.

BUILD IN A WAY TO BE PROVEN WRONG

We needed to say what would count against our proposal before the results arrived. Otherwise every failure could become an excuse to add another fix and keep believing the same thing.

MORAL LABELS COME AFTER MECHANISMS

“Corruption,” “fairness,” and “democracy” could name real concerns without explaining them. Access, selection, dependency, and an explicit exchange were different claims. We had to name what happened before deciding which label it deserved.

These were not rules handed to the question at the beginning. They were lessons the question forced on us. An attractive answer met a difficulty; following that difficulty exposed a missing question; asking it changed the answer.

But useful lessons are not yet a method. The next step was learning how to use them together, rather than remembering a different warning every time another problem appeared.

38. HOW THE QUESTIONS BECAME A METHOD

We began with one question:

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF WE TOOK MONEY OUT OF POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS?

We were trying to understand campaign finance, not introduce a grand framework.

But the work produced two things: a more cautious answer about campaign finance, and a way of examining answers that we could use again.

The original question assumed money was simply the thing to remove. Following what it did exposed how much the question had left out.

The investigation showed that money was doing work. It supplied organization, communication, visibility, staffing, information, resilience, access, and time.

Removing it would not remove those needs.

It would force the system to answer another question:

WHO WOULD PROVIDE OR ALLOCATE THOSE THINGS INSTEAD?

That was the first turn: from removing a visible thing to understanding the work it was doing.

The next question came from what the first answer left unexplained.

“Money in politics” was not one problem. It was a bundle.

Money can help a candidate enter, survive, organize, become visible, communicate, respond, build a coalition, and signal viability.

Financial relationships can also affect who gets access, who relies on whom, which candidates survive, which issues get attention, and whether anyone can be held responsible.

Those are not the same mechanism.

So the first improvement was:

WHAT EXACTLY IS MONEY DOING?

Once we separated those different ways money works, every proposed solution raised another question about what would happen next.

Limit candidate spending?

What happens to outside spending, incumbency, celebrity, personal wealth, and earned media?

Replace private money with public money?

Who qualifies candidates? Who sets the amount? Who administers payment? What happens under hostile government?

Increase disclosure?

Disclosure of what, by whom, at which point in the transaction, with what privacy cost, and with what risk of false attribution?

Strengthen parties?

Who controls the party? Can candidates survive without leadership approval? Can outsiders still compete?

Whenever a proposal weakened one source of power, we had to investigate what could become more important in its place.

Campaign finance stopped looking like a money problem.

It became an allocation problem.

The deeper question became:

Who controls the resources people need to compete in politics? Who must rely on whom to get them, and who can be held responsible for those decisions?

Getting a more detailed answer was not enough. We also needed a way to check whether we were becoming more accurate—or merely better at defending our starting intuition.

The check was whether the investigation could make us give up an answer we liked.

Campaign finance did.

We started near “take money out.” We ended somewhere more cautious:

keep several routes to political capacity, fix specific failures we can actually show, and test targeted public support without making government the new gatekeeper candidates cannot avoid.

The analysis narrowed itself.

Good.

The decentralized private system had genuine strengths and failures.

Public-finance alternatives had genuine strengths and failures.

Neither won every category.

The question therefore stopped being:

How do we replace the broken system?

It became:

WHICH PARTS OF THE CURRENT SYSTEM ARE WORTH PRESERVING, WHICH FAILURES ARE SUFFICIENTLY ESTABLISHED TO JUSTIFY INTERVENTION, AND HOW MUCH NEW POWER IS NECESSARY TO ADDRESS THEM?

Again, the question got better.

The change was not that we collected enough principles to give them a name. It was that we began connecting the questions into a repeatable inquiry. Each answer had to earn the next step.

The questions now worked together:

What result or claim are we trying to explain?

What are we assuming before we begin?

What functions are being performed, and what resources do they require?

What evidence connects those functions, decisions, and relationships to the result?

What else could explain what we see?

Who controls the resources, who must rely on whom, and who bears the consequences?

If we change a rule, what behavior or resource takes its place?

What could improve, what could be lost, and what is already working that should remain?

Would the proposal still work under ordinary failure or hostile control?

What would prove us wrong, and could we correct course?

That order mattered. We could not responsibly choose a fix before understanding the failure. We could not call the fix better before comparing it with a realistic alternative. And we could not call the explanation strong unless evidence could challenge it.

That is what made the habit a methodology: a repeatable way to move from a question to an explanation, test the explanation, and decide what—if anything—the evidence justified changing. We eventually gave it a name: Outcome Anatomy.

“Outcome” keeps the result in view: what actually happened, what someone claims happened, or what we expect a decision to produce. “Anatomy” means examining the parts and their relationships. Not just listing the institutions, but explaining how their choices, resources, incentives, and constraints worked together.

Take a candidate's failure to become viable. “Not enough money” may describe one part of it. It does not yet tell us whether money was the cause, a signal of weak support, or a resource controlled by someone who could keep the candidate out.

Those explanations could call for different responses. We have to trace the connections and test them against evidence before choosing among them.

That is the work the name describes. Take an answer that sounds complete and ask what still needs explaining.

The name came after the habit. It did not make the habit true, and it did not prove the questions would work everywhere. That would have to be tested in the next subjects.

Looking back, we can see the progression:

What would happen if we took money out of campaigns?

↓

What does campaign money actually do?

↓

What happens when different financial channels are constrained?

↓

Who supplies the functions those channels previously performed?

↓

How is political capacity allocated?

↓

What dependencies and accountability structures does that allocation create?

↓

How can competition keep enough capacity without letting any narrow private or public gatekeeper become the only realistic route in?

The questions did not grow more elaborate for their own sake. Each one exposed something the previous version had left out.

And the method was not a rigid checklist. Some inquiries would need different questions, a different order, or evidence we could not obtain.

What had to remain was the discipline: follow the connections, test the explanation, and let the evidence change the answer.

The goal was still to earn a better question.

A better question may invalidate the original diagnosis, the preferred villain, or the preferred solution.

If the analysis cannot change the answer we brought in, what are we using it for?

A method also needs a way to stop short of pretending it knows more than it does.

Some findings should remain well supported. Some tentative. Some contested. Some unknown.

We do not have to complete the story just because an incomplete answer is uncomfortable.

Leaving a necessary connection unproven is more honest than filling it with confidence.

If someone asks, “So what should we actually do?” the answer is not one sweeping reform. Preserve multiple routes to political capacity, reduce the clearest forms of dependency and hidden control, improve enforcement, and test targeted fixes where the evidence shows a real bottleneck.

The rhetoric became weaker.

The explanation became stronger.

That is a good trade.

Campaign finance belongs first because the reader can see the habit forming inside a real investigation.

The question came first.

The difficulties exposed the missing questions.

Those questions became a repeatable discipline. The name came last.

The first volume leaves us with a more useful result than confidence in our own method:

LOOK HOW MUCH HARDER IT BECAME TO FOOL OURSELVES ONCE WE HAD TO EXPLAIN HOW THE OUTCOME WAS PRODUCED.

VOLUME 1 TO VOLUME 2

Campaign finance showed Outcome Anatomy working backward from the political choices voters received, through the rules, incentives, dependencies, and workarounds that helped shape them.

That raised a different question:

WHAT IF WE COULD EXAMINE A SYSTEM BEFORE TODAY'S DECISIONS BECAME TOMORROW'S INSTITUTIONS?

Volume 1 asked:

HOW WAS THIS OUTCOME PRODUCED, AND WHAT CAN WE STILL CHANGE?

Volume 2 asks:

WHAT OUTCOMES ARE TODAY'S DECISIONS MAKING MORE LIKELY WHILE THE SYSTEM IS STILL FORMING?

The method now has two jobs.

In an established system, trace the outcome back through what happened, identify what remains uncertain, and ask what can still be changed.

In a forming system, trace how today's commitments could shape tomorrow's outcomes. Identify what will become hard to undo, and preserve the ability to correct course before those commitments harden.

Volume 1's central warning was:

WHEN YOU REMOVE A MECHANISM, ASK WHAT TAKES ITS PLACE.

Volume 2 adds:

BEFORE APPROVING A COMMITMENT, ASK WHAT SYSTEM THAT COMMITMENT HELPS CREATE.

Chapter references

4. THE LEGAL RULES SHAPING THE SYSTEM

Congressional Research Service. (n.d.). *Campaign finance contribution limits and source restrictions* (Amdt1.7.13.2). *Constitution Annotated*, reproduced by Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute. https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution-conan/amendment-1/campaign-finance-contribution-limits-and-source-restrictions

Source: https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/amdt1-7-11-2/ALDE_00013491/

Congressional Research Service. (n.d.). *Campaign finance expenditure limits* (Amdt1.7.13.3). *Constitution Annotated*, reproduced by Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute. https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution-conan/amendment-1/campaign-finance-expenditure-limits

Source: https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/amdt1-7-11-3/ALDE_00013492/

Federal Election Commission. (n.d.). *Buckley v. Valeo* [Case summary; 424 U.S. 1 (1976)].

Source: https://www.fec.gov/legal-resources/court-cases/buckley-v-valeo/

Stoetzer, P. (2026, July 1). *Supreme Court finds limits on coordinated party expenditures unconstitutional in NRSC v. FEC (609 U.S. ____ (2026)).* Federal Election Commission.

Source: https://www.fec.gov/updates/supreme-court-finds-limits-on-coordinated-party-expenditures-unconstitutional-in-nrsc-v-fec-609-us-____2026/

National Republican Senatorial Committee v. Federal Election Commission, 609 U.S. ____ (2026), No. 24-621 (June 30, 2026). Supreme Court of the United States.

Source: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/25pdf/24-621_h315.pdf

Return to chapter →

5. FOLLOW THE MONEY—BUT DO NOT STOP THERE

Federal Election Commission. (2025, April 23). *Statistical summary of 24-month campaign activity of the 2023–2024 election cycle.*

Source: https://www.fec.gov/updates/statistical-summary-of-24-month-campaign-activity-of-the-2023-2024-election-cycle/

Return to chapter →

6. DOES MONEY ACTUALLY MATTER?

Levitt, S. D. (1994). Using repeat challengers to estimate the effect of campaign spending on election outcomes in the U.S. House. *Journal of Political Economy, 102*(4), 777–798. https://doi.org/10.1086/261954

Source: https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/261954

Gerber, A. (1998). Estimating the effect of campaign spending on Senate election outcomes using instrumental variables. *American Political Science Review, 92*(2), 401–409.

Source: https://www.sas.rochester.edu/psc/clarke/214/Gerber98.pdf

Return to chapter →

7. WHAT DOES MONEY BUY FROM POLITICIANS?

Kalla, J. L., & Broockman, D. E. (2016). Campaign contributions facilitate access to congressional officials: A randomized field experiment. *American Journal of Political Science, 60*(3), 545–558. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12180

Source: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8wm3k5g4

Return to chapter →

8. THE TIME TAX

U.S. Senate, Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Human Rights. (2015). *The Fair Elections Now Act: A comprehensive response to Citizens United* (S. Hrg. 112–935; hearing held April 12, 2011; Serial No. J–112–15). U.S. Government Publishing Office.

Source: https://www.congress.gov/112/chrg/CHRG-112shrg94623/CHRG-112shrg94623.pdf

Return to chapter →

9. WHO GETS TO RUN?

Case, C. R., & Porter, R. (2026). Conceptualizing and measuring early campaign fundraising in congressional elections. *Political Science Research and Methods, 14*(3), 913–928. https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2025.10014

Source: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/political-science-research-and-methods/article/conceptualizing-and-measuring-early-campaign-fundraising-in-congressional-elections/48B7870A4EC0EC7B3AE060FBC42873C0

Thomsen, D. M. (2025, August 8). *Early money and strategic candidate exit*. *British Journal of Political Science*. Published online. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/early-money-and-strategic-candidate-exit/3EFFBCA74202AE908F9978B12F630683

This observational study examines non-incumbent U.S. House candidates from 1980–2022. Its candidate-exit findings should be distinguished from the fundraising and primary-performance findings of Case and Porter.

Return to chapter →

10. THE ATTENTION MARKET

Kalla, J. L., & Broockman, D. E. (2018). The minimal persuasive effects of campaign contact in general elections: Evidence from 49 field experiments. *American Political Science Review, 112*(1), 148–166. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055417000363

Source: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/103775sx

Return to chapter →

11. THE ENFORCEMENT GAP

Federal Election Commission. (n.d.). *Leadership and structure.*

Source: https://www.fec.gov/about/leadership-and-structure/

U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2020, February 3). *Campaign finance: Federal framework, agency roles and responsibilities, and perspectives* (GAO-20-66R).

Source: https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-66r

Return to chapter →

12. THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINT

Congressional Research Service. (n.d.). *Overview of campaign finance* (Amdt1.7.13.1). *Constitution Annotated*, reproduced by Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute. https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution-conan/amendment-1/overview-of-campaign-finance

Source: https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/amdt1-7-13-1/ALDE_00013490/

Return to chapter →

13. REFORM EXPERIMENTS

New York City Campaign Finance Board. (2026, September 1). *2025 post-election report.*

Source: https://www.nyccfb.info/media/reports/2025-post-election-report/

Return to chapter →

14. DEFINE SUCCESS BEFORE DESIGNING REFORM

Pildes, R. H. (2019, November 18). Small-donor-based campaign-finance reform and political polarization. *The Yale Law Journal Forum.*

Source: https://yalelawjournal.org/essay/small-donor-based-campaign-finance-reform-and-political-polarization

Return to chapter →

16. BREAK THE HYBRID

Arizona Free Enterprise Club's Freedom Club PAC v. Bennett, 564 U.S. 721 (2011). Supreme Court of the United States.

Source: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/boundvolumes/564bv.pdf

Return to chapter →

17. THE SMALLEST DESIGN THAT STILL RESISTS CAPTURE

National Republican Senatorial Committee v. Federal Election Commission, 609 U.S. ____ (2026), No. 24-621 (June 30, 2026). Supreme Court of the United States.

Source: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/25pdf/24-621_h315.pdf

Return to chapter →

21. THE SUBSTITUTION TEST

New York City Campaign Finance Board. (2026, September 1). *2025 post-election report.*

Source: https://www.nyccfb.info/media/reports/2025-post-election-report/

Return to chapter →

22. FOLLOW THE ACCESS, NOT ONLY THE MONEY

Kalla, J. L., & Broockman, D. E. (2016). Campaign contributions facilitate access to congressional officials: A randomized field experiment. *American Journal of Political Science, 60*(3), 545–558. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12180

Source: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8wm3k5g4

Return to chapter →

25. THE SMALL-DOLLAR PARADOX

Kim, S.-y. S., & Li, Z. (2026). Keep winning with WinRed? Online fundraising platform as the party's public good. *The Journal of Politics, 88*(2), 698–715. https://doi.org/10.1086/735435

Source: https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/10.1086/735435

Pildes, R. H. (2019, November 18). Small-donor-based campaign-finance reform and political polarization. *The Yale Law Journal Forum.*

Source: https://yalelawjournal.org/essay/small-donor-based-campaign-finance-reform-and-political-polarization

Keena, A., & Knight-Finley, M. (2019). Are small donors polarizing? A longitudinal study of the Senate. *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy, 18*(2), 132–144. https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2018.0498

Source: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1089/elj.2018.0498

Return to chapter →

26. THE PARTY QUESTION

National Republican Senatorial Committee v. Federal Election Commission, 609 U.S. ____ (2026), No. 24-621 (June 30, 2026). Supreme Court of the United States.

Source: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/25pdf/24-621_h315.pdf

Return to chapter →

28. ACCOUNTABILITY ARBITRAGE — WHEN ACTIVITY MOVES TO THE EASIER CHANNEL

Americans for Prosperity Foundation v. Bonta, 594 U.S. 595 (2021), No. 19-251 (July 1, 2021). Supreme Court of the United States.

Source: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/20pdf/19-251_p86b.pdf

Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, 558 U.S. 310 (2010). https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/boundvolumes/558bv.pdf

Return to chapter →

29. THE CORRUPTION PROBLEM

McCutcheon v. Federal Election Commission, 572 U.S. 185 (2014). Supreme Court of the United States.

Source: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/boundvolumes/572BV.pdf

Return to chapter →

31. WHAT WE KEEP, CHANGE, TEST, AND REJECT

National Republican Senatorial Committee v. Federal Election Commission, 609 U.S. ____ (2026), No. 24-621 (June 30, 2026). Supreme Court of the United States.

Source: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/25pdf/24-621_h315.pdf

Return to chapter →

35. WHAT WE CAN SAY WITH CONFIDENCE

Case, C. R., & Porter, R. (2026). Conceptualizing and measuring early campaign fundraising in congressional elections. *Political Science Research and Methods, 14*(3), 913–928. https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2025.10014

Source: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/political-science-research-and-methods/article/conceptualizing-and-measuring-early-campaign-fundraising-in-congressional-elections/48B7870A4EC0EC7B3AE060FBC42873C0

Kalla, J. L., & Broockman, D. E. (2016). Campaign contributions facilitate access to congressional officials: A randomized field experiment. *American Journal of Political Science, 60*(3), 545–558. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12180

Source: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ajps.12180

Congressional Research Service. (n.d.). *Overview of campaign finance* (Amdt1.7.13.1). *Constitution Annotated*, reproduced by Cornell Law School, Legal Information Institute. https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution-conan/amendment-1/overview-of-campaign-finance

Source: https://constitution.congress.gov/browse/essay/amdt1-7-13-1/ALDE_00013490/

Thomsen, D. M. (2025, August 8). *Early money and strategic candidate exit*. *British Journal of Political Science*. Published online. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/early-money-and-strategic-candidate-exit/3EFFBCA74202AE908F9978B12F630683

This observational study examines non-incumbent U.S. House candidates from 1980–2022. Its candidate-exit findings should be distinguished from the fundraising and primary-performance findings of Case and Porter.

Return to chapter →

About the author

JMAC is the writing name of Brian Phillips, an independent systems researcher and writer building Side Angle Works.

Before this work, he spent years in professional kitchens. That experience still shapes his approach: understand the whole operation, find the bottlenecks, work with the resources available, and account for real human behavior.

Through Outcome Anatomy, he examines how choices, conditions, incentives, rules and resources combine to produce results.

Teaching people to ask better questions.
Team Human.

Corrections and contact

A correction is useful. If you find an error, a missing explanation, or evidence that changes the picture, include the volume, chapter and passage so I can find it.

sideangleworks@gmail.com

Other volumes in the series

People Suck. Build Around the Suck.

- Volume 1: Campaign Finance
- Volume 2: Data Centers
- Volume 3: Foster Care and Child Welfare
- Volume 4: Addiction-Related Homelessness

JMAC · Side Angle Works

If we took money out of political campaigns, who would decide who gets heard?

Campaigns would still need people, organization, attention, and a way to reach voters. Removing money would leave those needs in someone else's hands. Who would gain power? Who would lose a way in? Could a reform move influence somewhere harder to see?

This book follows those questions through donors, candidates, parties, media, platforms, and the rules connecting them. It examines what money makes possible, where dependence forms, and how a promising reform might fail when people learn to work around it.

Outcome Anatomy means following a result back through the choices and conditions that produced it. Here, it turns a familiar argument about money in politics into a more demanding inquiry: what would a better system need to do, and what would prove us wrong?

Teaching people to ask better questions.

SIDE ANGLE WORKS

Team Human.

KLP