

THE GROWING IMPACT OF “SMALL” DONORS IN THE U.S. ELECTORAL
SYSTEM: AN EXAMINATION OF INDIVIDUAL LOBBYIST AND INDIVIDUAL
DONOR TRENDS

By

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Abstract

Individual donors, specifically those that donate less than \$200 per election cycle, commonly considered “small donors”, have become more commonplace in federal election fundraising. As this type of political donor becomes more involved in election fundraising and exerts more influence over the political makeup of our federal government, change continues to be felt. This thesis takes a deeper look into the types of politicians which attract individual, small donors and what characteristics, if any, these elected officials have. Additionally, this paper will provide a look into the donation habits of registered lobbyists to allow for the comparison in techniques utilized among these two types of individual donors.

The findings of this research indicate that lobbyists tend to donate in a more bipartisan fashion while considering a Representative’s legislative effectiveness score while the small donor donates to Representatives which are more ideologically extreme and are mentioned frequently in media. These findings may raise some concern regarding political trends toward ideological extremity and “head-line grabbing” tactics rather than legislative effectiveness or public policy knowledge.

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Introduction

Individuals have always been at the center of the American political system; this is the emphasis of a democratic republic system. Individuals always have an opportunity to vote for their preferred political candidate at the polls on election day. A new way for individuals to become involved in the political system has emerged and new technologies have made it easier than ever to partake. This new way of involvement is the ability of individuals to contribute financially to a candidate's campaign. In the past, financial donations to political candidates have been a game dominated by more wealthy individuals but with the emergence of new technologies and the internet, individuals from across the country can donate to politicians with the click of a button. This has changed and is continuing to change the role the individual has on our political system.

This thesis will examine the motivations of two types of individual donors: the small donor and the individual lobbyist. This thesis will examine the motivations of these two types of individuals first by exploring donation habits of registered lobbyists in Washington, D. C. for the year 2019. This initial research will focus on the motivation trends regarding individual lobbyists and whether their donations go to members of Congress of both political parties and whether their party preferences are displayed when making donations. The next chapter will focus on small, individual donors, which are not lobbyists, from around the country. Fundraising from these types of individuals has taken off since the 2008 elections and are playing a larger role in Congressional elections. The second chapter will look at the top recipients of small donor fundraising in the House of Representatives during the 116th Congress and will investigate similarities and differences among these Representatives while specifically investigating the notion of whether individual donors donate to Representatives who are ideologically extreme. The

final chapter continues to investigate the small, individual donors but expands the scope to include the most popular recipients of small donors in the House of Representatives from the 113th Congress through the 116th Congress. This chapter looks at these Representatives and analyzes variables which lead to why certain Representatives are popular with small donors while others are not. This chapter specifically looks into a Representative's legislative effectiveness score, their leadership score (or ability to attract cosponsors to their legislation), and their mentions in several national news outlets. As small, individual donors continue to play a role in fundraising for Representatives, information regarding what types of Representatives attract different types of individual donors will be necessary to assess the impact of these donors and what types of Representatives are elected or reelected due to small donor preferences. The research on small donors will also take into account small, individual donor preferences across Congressional district. This will be important as individuals from across the country can donate to any politician of their choice whereas an individual is only able to directly vote for the Representative which represents their Congressional district. As more individuals in America become involved in the political process in ways outside of voting, such as by making political donations to political candidates impacting the makeup of Congress outside of their home State or district, this will create new impacts in our political fabric.

Individual Donors

In Congressional elections, individuals have the ability to only vote for Senators and Representatives who would directly represent them: the Senator for their State or the Representative for their district. With the emergence and wide-spread availability of

online financial donations, individuals can donate to politicians who would not directly represent them much easier than in the past. This is allowing individuals from across the country additional ways to influence the political makeup of Congress through avenues other than voting. With this new route of influence available, a question remains of which types of politicians are able to cross district and state lines to attract donations from individuals across the country.

Rules

The term “small donor” refers to an individual who donates less than \$200 cumulatively per election cycle to a single candidate or numerous candidates. Small donors are differentiated from large donors, those who would donate over \$200, since small donors’ personal information is not required to be disclosed to the Federal Election Commission (FEC) whereas large donors are.¹ Although there are numerous other routes individuals can take to donate money to a political candidate or cause such as a political action committee (PAC), a super PAC, or the different types of 529 © organizations, this research focuses on donations and donations trends specifically from small and individual donors.

The Internet and Small Donors

Prior to the emergence of the internet, individuals who wished to donate to their political candidate of choice would need to find the candidates campaign headquarters and mail a check to said candidate. Since the emergence of the internet, politicians are

¹ “Campaign Guideline,” Federal Election Commission United States of America, <https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/candgui.pdf>

able to send out emails requesting donations and accept donations through websites and other online platforms. The first politicians to truly harness the power of the internet and incorporate small donors into their election was former President Barack Obama.² In both 2008 and 2012, Obama gained over 20% of his donations from small donors which at the time as an unprecedented level. Since these elections, and after Obama revolutionized the small donor fundraising game, small donors have begun to play a larger and larger role in both presidential and congressional elections since. The political party organizations took note of how small donors influenced President Obama's election and implemented platforms which allow individuals to donate to a wide array of congressional and presidential candidates all through one site. These sites are ActBlue for the Democratic party and WinRed for Republicans. During the 2018 midterm elections, over 6 million individuals used the ActBlue platform and contributed over \$1.6 billion with an average contribution of \$39.50 per person³. WinRed recorded over \$1 billion in fundraising in their first 15 months online with an average donation of \$47 per person⁴. With numbers like these, small donors have showcased their influence on national politics and voiced their opinions through these donations.

As the influence of small donors has risen, candidates have taken notice and take these small donors into account when campaigning, speaking, and legislating. Since small donors can donate to all politicians and not just those who would represent their state or district, these donors can make a large impact on elections outside of their home area.

Research has shown that out-of-district donors reward politicians they view as similar to

² Lipsitz, K., & Panagopoulos, C. (2011). "Filled coffers: Campaign Contributions and Contributors in the 2008 Elections." *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10.

³ Actblue "2018 Election Cycle in Review", <https://report.actblue.com> [<https://perma.cc/GZ5H-HV86>].

⁴ WinRed, "Zero to \$1,000,000,000 in 15 Months", <https://winred.com/blog/1b/>.

themselves ideologically. This demonstrates the ability of small donors to influence the makeup of Congress outside of just voting.

Existing research has found several variables which have had an impact of individual donors: ideological extremity, discussion in media, legislative effectiveness, or status within party. Research has indicated that these variables carry different weight with various groups of individual donors. Much of the existing research focuses on lobbyists individual donations or on small donors across the country. Existing research has found that lobbyists value access and influence and reward Representatives which are legislatively effective while small donors prefer candidates which share their ideological viewpoints or are often discussed in the media. The chapters of this paper focus on these variables and conduct further research on individual donors including lobbyists and small donors while testing the variables found to influence these groups.

Chapter One: Lobbyist Donations

This thesis examines the connection between small donors and the members of the House of Representatives which attract the most small donors. The first chapter focuses specifically on individual lobbyists and the donation habits of these donors. Lobbyists are individuals who are employed on behalf of organizations, corporations, or associations to play a role in an organized attempt to influence legislators. The first chapter focuses on these individuals as a starting point to discover the donation habits of individuals whose occupation revolves around influencing legislation. While all lobbyists may not be considered small donors, the donation habits utilized by these individuals will provide insight into how individuals who want to influence legislation donate. This

chapter will also allow for comparing trends between lobbyists and other types of individuals donors. The first chapter of this thesis specifically examines the financial donation habits of randomly selected lobbyists from the five largest lobbying firms in Washington, D.C. for the year 2019. When looking at these individual lobbyists, an emphasis of the research will look at whether these donors donate to both political parties or not. Much of the existing literature on the topic finds that lobbyists have greater access to legislators than the average American⁵, indicating that it would be beneficial for lobbyists to donate to legislators of both political parties. However, other research on individual donors finds that most individuals are driven to make donations due to their ideological position for or against a politician⁶. This first chapter will provide insight onto one specific type of individual donor and will put existing literature to the test.

Chapter Two: Ideological Extremity

The following chapter looks more directly at “small donors” across the country; “small donors” are defined as those individuals who donate less than \$200 in total to a politician in an election cycle. In this chapter, the focus is on the House of Representative members who earned the highest amount of small donations and what characteristics these politicians have in common. Aside from their popularity with small donors, other commonalities can be difficult to see. Existing literature regarding small donors finds that small donors tend to donate due to their personal ideological extreme views and that these donors are often more ideologically extreme in their political views than the average

⁵ Amy McKay. 2018. “What do campaign contributions buy? Lobbyists’ strategic giving.” *Int Groups Adv* 7, 1–18.

⁶Barber, Michael. 2016. “Donation Motivations: Testing Theories of Access and Ideology.” *Political Research Quarterly*: Volume 69 Issue 1. 148-159.

member of the American public⁷. This chapter then makes comparisons between the Representative's with the highest amount of small donations and an adjust version of their DW-Nominate scores which will measure partisanship among the two political parties and ideological extremity. The chapter investigates the relationship between ideological partisan Representatives and those Representatives that are the most popular with small donors across the country.

As individuals influence over the make-up of Congress continues to grow, research regarding the connection between Representatives, their ideology, and small donors will provide insights into the future makeup of the House of Representatives. If the research is accurate and individuals do elect candidates which have ideologically extreme political views, political conversations may be shifted to a more extreme end compared to a more moderate one.

This chapter also looks at new factions in the 117th Congress of both the Democratic and Republican parties. On the Democratic side, "the Squad" consisting of progressive Democrats and on the Republican side, "Trump-like" conservatives. These new factions have displayed their ideologically extreme views and have demonstrated their popularity among small donors across the country. As the number of small donors increases across the country, the question of whether one should anticipate a continued influx of ideologically extreme politicians is addressed.

⁷ Barber, Michael. 2016. "Donation Motivations: Testing Theories of Access and Ideology." *Political Research Quarterly*: Volume 69 Issue 1. 148-159.

Chapter Three: Legislative Effectiveness, Agenda Setting, and Media Mentions

The final chapter continues to look at members of the House of Representatives who are most popular with small donors but shifts the focus from ideological viewpoints to other variables such legislative effectiveness, ability to attract cosponsors to their legislation, and mentions in mainstream news (including the New York Times, the Associated Press, CNN.com, Fox News, and Politico). This chapter compares data for these variables for those Representatives most popular with small donors for the 113th through 116th Congresses.

This final chapter investigates additional variables which research has indicated may affect a Representative's ability to attract small donors. Research has shown that individual lobbyists donate more heavily to representatives who are more effective legislators⁸ compared to those that are less effective. The ability to introduce legislation, gain support for it, and get it passed is a skill that not all members of Congress have; the question of whether small donors are also attracted to legislatively effective members is tackled. The legislative effectiveness scores utilized come from researchers who implement several factors to curate a legislative effectiveness score including bills introduced, bills passed through committee, and bills signed into law while accounting for the substance of each bill as to whether it is commemorative (such as renaming a post office), substantive (such as rewriting an aspect of our tax code), or a combination of both.

⁸ Volden, Craig, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2012. "Measuring Legislative Effectiveness," in Dodd, Lawrence C., and Bruce I. Oppenheimer. *Congress Reconsidered*, 10th Ed. Washington DC: CQ Press.

The second variable this chapter touches on is the ability of a representative to attract cosponsors to their legislation; this variable intends to measure a representative's internal legislative popularity and their agenda setting power. This variable is measured utilizing GovTrack's "leadership" scores which measure a congressperson's ability to attract cosponsors to their introduced legislation. This metric allows for a more robust measurement of legislative popularity among Representative's popular with small donors.

The third and final variable viewed in this chapter is the number times a representative is mentioned in a handful of popular news outlets across the country over the term of a given Congress. Research has shown that "headline-grabbers" are growing in popularity with individual and small donors⁹ in the year 2021 but research into previous Congressional sessions has not been conducted. The news outlets utilized for this analysis span television news, online news, and print news along with including Fox News, CNN.com, the Associated Press, the New York Times, and Politico.

This chapter builds upon the previous chapter, utilizing a series of case studies incorporating relevant data to distinguish whether legislative effectiveness, internal popularity, or external discussions plays a role in House Member's small donor fundraising.

The discussion and findings of these chapters will further existing research on the topic of the motivations and intentions of small donors along with an analysis of the characteristics of congressional representatives which attract small and individual donors. As the number of small donors increases and as the internet allows for easier donations,

⁹ Alyce McFadden "Small-dollar donors get behind headline-grabbing lawmakers," *Center for Responsive Politics*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2021/04/small-dollar-donors-q121-headline-congress/>.

small donors will only increase their influence over the makeup of our political landscape. As political parties and campaigns continue to implement ways for small donors to become involved in the political process as WinRed and VoteBlue have done, these donors influence will only continue to grow. With information presented in this thesis, questions are answered as to how small donors make their donations, which candidates attract these donations, and what politicians do to attract these donors.

Chapter 1: Campaign Contributions made by Registered Lobbyists

It is commonplace for those who work in the political world to interact with lobbyists. It can even be part of the job. Many lobbyists formerly worked for the U.S. government often in an executive agency, in Congress, or in the White House. Utilizing the revolving door,¹⁰ former government employees will choose to take the knowledge they gained working in government over to the lobbying world. Lobbyists use their political knowledge to aid groups and to attempt to sway lawmakers to implement legislation on behalf of their clients. Oftentimes, lobbyists' clients are corporations or businesses who do not possess the internal knowledge to navigate or decipher what takes place in Washington, D.C. As lobbyists role is to be a part of the legislative process in Washington, D.C., it is not uncommon for lobbyists in Washington, D.C. to make donations to Members of Congress; many researchers have attempted to establish a connection between lobbyists financial donations and access or influence over a politician. However, differing conclusions have been made regarding financial donations to politicians from lobbyists and what this may or may not gain for the lobbyist. The research done in this paper explores the potential motivations behind the political donations made by registered lobbyists.

Legal Literature

In political campaigns and elections, there are two types of money which are utilized: hard money and soft money. What is commonly referred to as "hard money" is money contributed directly to a political candidate, whether it be a current incumbent or a challenger, given by an individual or a political action committee (PAC); PACs can be

¹⁰ For more information on the revolving door, see 18 U.S.C. 207 and Jacob Straus, "Executive Branch Service and the 'Revolving Door' in Cabinet Departments: Background and Issues for Congress," *CRS Report*, R45946, October 7, 2019, at <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R45946>.

run by individuals, congressional leaders, businesses, or other political active groups. Hard money gets its name because it is subject to legal limits set and regulated by the Federal Election Commission (FEC). Individuals can donate up to \$2,800 to an individual candidate per election, including the primary and the general, totaling up to \$5,600 for a typical election season. Annually, an individual may also donate up to \$5,000 to a PAC of their choice, up to \$35,500 to their preferred national political party committee, typically either the Republican Party or Democratic Party, and up to \$10,000 to their Local/State political party operation.¹¹

Conversely, “soft money,” commonly referred to as dark money,¹² is money not subject to the same federal laws that hard money is. Individuals, PACs, or corporations donate soft money to SuperPACs or to political party organizations. Soft money cannot be donated directly to a political candidate and cannot be used to promote any specific candidate. Further, many organizations that receive soft money often do not legally have to disclose their donors or the amount donated. These organizations have the ability to raise and spend an unlimited amount of funds on independent expenditures that are not directly in support of any specific political candidate.¹³

Although both hard and soft money exist in the campaign finance world, researchers can only study hard money as this is the only type of money that is regulated and disclosed to the public. Political candidates and their campaigns have direct control over how their hard money contributions are spent during their campaign but are not

¹¹ “Campaign Guideline,” Federal Election Commission United States of America, <https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/candgui.pdf>.

¹² Scott, Michelle, 2021. “Dark Money”, *Investopedia*, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/d/dark-money.asp>

¹³ Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (FEC), United States Supreme Court No. 08-205 558 U.S. 310 (20 October 2021). 08-205 Citizens United v. Federal Election Comm'n (01/21/10) (supremecourt.gov).

legally allowed to have any say or ties to any SuperPAC or dark money used.¹⁴ This makes research into some aspects of campaign finance more difficult as there are large sums of money continuously being raised for which no information can be gathered regarding its contributors. For this research, as well as other research conducted on the topic, we must rely on federally regulated hard money in which we have public information on.

Who Makes Political Donations

The literature surrounding political campaign donations has a wide breadth, with a focus on who donates to politicians, what motivates donations, and what contributors may gain by making these donations. The two main groups with the motivation and ability to contribute to political campaigns are individuals and Political Action Committees (PACs). The literature surrounding the motivations for why individuals donate to politicians' points to the notion that the donor is highly motivated by ideological preferences.¹⁵ The individual donor will have either strong ideological preferences for a candidate, causing them to donate, or strong ideological preferences against a candidate, making them likely to donate to their opponent. Generally, the ideologically based donation habits of individuals apply to those candidates directly affecting the individual, politicians representing the individual's District or State, as well

¹⁴ Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission (FEC), United States Supreme Court No. 08-205 558 U.S. 310 (20 October 2021). 08-205 Citizens United v. Federal Election Comm'n (01/21/10) (supremecourt.gov).

¹⁵ Barber, Michael. 2016. "Donation Motivations: Testing Theories of Access and Ideology." *Political Research Quarterly*: Volume 69 Issue 10. & Barber, Michael J., Brandice Canes-Wrone, and Sharece Thrower. 2017. "Ideologically Sophisticated Donors: Which Candidates Do Individual Contributors Finance?" *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2: 278.

as when those candidates who are outside of their State or District.¹⁶ Many individual donors are those who donate in small amounts, such as \$20 or \$50, and are unlikely to be highly affected by congressional activity.

Studies conducted of individuals in positions of power such as CEOs and Board Members of Fortune 500 companies, have found conflicting information as to whether these individuals donate more like the PACs, for potential transactional purposes, or if they are motivated by their own political ideology. One study has found that CEOs and lobbyists are highly motivated by their own personal ideology when making political contributions¹⁷ aligning them with other individual donor's contribution habits. While another study viewed CEOs as much more transactional, signaling that CEOs and Board Members donate more like PACs, hoping to gain something from their donation.¹⁸

Connection Between Donations and Legislation

Individuals are regularly motivated by their own ideological leanings. PACs, however, are less motivated by ideology and more motivated by the potential for gaining access or information sharing between the PAC and the politician.¹⁹ When examining PAC donations, some researchers attempt to find information that may tie campaign

¹⁶ Barber, Michael J., Brandice Canes-Wrone, and Sharece Thrower. 2017. "Ideologically Sophisticated Donors: Which Candidates Do Individual Contributors Finance?" *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2: 278.

¹⁷ Bonica, Adam. 2016. "Avenues of Influence: on the Political Expenditures of Corporations and Their Directors and Executives." *Business and Politics* 18, no. 4: 367–94.

Koger, Gregory, and Jennifer Nicoll Victor. 2009. "Polarized Agents: Campaign Contributions by Lobbyists." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42, no. 3: 485–88.

¹⁸ Sanford C. Gordon, Catherine Hafer, Dimitri Landa. 2007. "Consumption or Investment? On Motivations for Political Giving." *The Journal of Politics* 69:4, 1057-1072.

¹⁹ Austen-Smith, David. "Campaign Contributions and Access." *The American Political Science Review* 89, no. 3 (1995): 566-81. & Barber, Michael. 2016. "Donation Motivations: Testing Theories of Access and Ideology." *Political Research Quarterly*: Volume 69 Issue 10. & Keith Schnaknberg and Ian Turner. 2020. "Helping Friends or Influencing Foes: Electoral and Policy Effects of Campaign Finance Contributions." *American Journal of Political Science Journal* 65 Issue 1: 88-100.

contributions to legislative favors. However, there has not been much of a connection made by researchers thus far when tying these donations directly to Congressional roll call votes. Researchers have now shifted their perspective from roll call votes, to attempting to show that a member of Congress may do work behind the scenes in ways that are less public to aid their PAC donors. Some of these actions are difficult to measure. These may include getting various legislative actions on or off the agenda, working to aid or halt various bills at the committee level, or offering amendments to bills.²⁰

Some researchers attempt to uncover ties between campaign donations and legislative favors by members of Congress whether it be directly through roll call votes or by more behind the scenes actions.²¹ These researchers have searched for connections to tie donations to legislative favors. These studies have shown that Members of Congress' committee assignments cause PACs to increase their donations when a member is on a committee that has jurisdiction over the PAC's policy issues. When a member leaves that committee, PACs will generally stop donating to that Member.²² One study examined campaign contributions made by healthcare related PACs to Senators on the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee during the consideration of the Affordable Care Act (ACA; Obamacare). The study found that political donations to

²⁰ Lowery, David. 2013. "Lobbying Influence: Meaning, Measurement, and Missing". *Interest Groups and Advocacy*: 2: 1-26.

²¹ Stephen Ansolabehere, John M. De figueriredo and James M. Snyder Jr. 2003. "Why is there so little money in US Politics?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* Volume 17, number 1 105-130. & Stratmann, Thomas. 2005. "Some Talk: Money in Politics. A (Partial) Review of the Literature." *Public Choice* 124: 135-156. & Wawro, Gregory. 2001. "A Panel Probit Analysis of Campaign Contributions and Roll-Call Votes." *American Journal of Political Science* 45: 563-79. &

Grenzke, Janet M. 1989. "Shopping in the Congressional Supermarket: The Currency Is Complex." *American Journal of Political Science*. 33 (February): 1-24.

²² Grimmer, Justin and Powell, Eleanor Neff. 2016. "Money in Exile: Campaign Contributions and Committee Access." *The Journal of Politics*: Volume 74, Number 4.

committee members increased while the legislation was being considered but lessened after the legislation was signed into law. Researchers suggest that this decline may indicate these donations were used as a tool for the PAC to gain access to the Senator's office.²³

Research has also been done showing that when Congress focuses on specific legislation, like Healthcare, PAC donations to members on those committees increase when these policies are being discussed.²⁴ Research like this begs the question of what the PACs are gaining or hope to gain when making these donations during the time that Congress is discussing that policy.

Other studies attempt to assess whether members of Congress and their staff favor groups that make campaign contributors when scheduling meetings within the Congressional office. These studies generally have mixed results. One experiment attempted to investigate the prioritization of meeting requests for Congressional Offices. When emailing a Representative's office in an attempt to set up a meeting within the Representative's district office, the researchers disclosed either that a member within the group was a campaign donor or made no mention of campaign donations. Accordingly, if congressional staff know that a group member has made a campaign donation, the group is three to four times more likely to get a meeting with the Representative's Chief of Staff or the Representative themselves.²⁵ This research calls into question whether these groups were prioritized for meeting requests because of their disclosure that a member of their

²³ McKay, Amy. 2018. "What do campaign contributions buy? Lobbyists' strategic giving." *International Groups Advocacy* 7, 1–18.

²⁴ McKay, Amy. 2018. "What do campaign contributions buy? Lobbyists' strategic giving." *International Groups Advocacy* 7, 1–18.

²⁵ Kalla, J., & Brockman, D. 2016. "Campaign Contributions Facilitate Access to Congressional Officials: A Randomized Field Experiment." *American Journal of Political Science*, 60(3), 545- 558.

group is a campaign contributor, or whether these meetings were granted because it was known that this group of individuals were likely supporters of the Representative and shared similar ideological viewpoints.

Another study examined how congressional schedulers create a member's weekly schedule. The schedulers within this study indicated that meeting request from constituents regardless of whether the constituent(s) were affiliated with a group that financially contributed to the Representative, were prioritized and more likely to be granted a meeting. This research shows that constituents of a Member of Congress are always prioritized and their potential financial contributions to the Member are not considered.²⁶ These studies indicate differing levels of prioritization of campaign contributors when a Congressional office is setting up meetings. The research has shown, however, that generally the constituents of a Member of Congress are prioritized compared to non-constituents.

Donation Impact

Federal law limits campaign contributions from individuals and PACs. Therefore, any individual or PAC contribution would only make up a small fraction of the entire cost of a political campaign. According to OpenSecrets,²⁷ in 2018, the average Representative in the House spent over \$2 million (hard money) and the average Senator spent over \$15 million (hard money) to win reelection. Even the maximum potential contribution would not play a significant role in any campaign and that any return by the

²⁶ Chin, Michelle L., Jon R. Bond, and Nehemia Geva. 2000. "A Foot in the Door: An Experimental Study of PAC and Constituency Effects on Access." *The Journal of Politics* 62, no. 2: 534-49.

²⁷ "Fundraising Totals: Politicians and Elections: Who Raised the Most?", OpenSecrets, <https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress>.

Member of Congress in the form of a legislative favor on this donation would be much more beneficial for the donor than the Member of Congress.²⁸

Subsequently, if a campaign donation was viewed by both the donor and the Member of Congress as transactional, we would likely see more companies participating in the political sphere and making campaign contributions. This is not the case however, as only a small fraction of businesses make political donations. Instead, corporations tend to lobby in an effort to influence public policy.²⁹ Consequently, the evidence shows that lobbying and information sharing with a Member of Congress is a more successful route for a corporation to get a desired policy outcome than a campaign contribution. Additionally, a study conducted on the internal emails of a large, energy-related company showed that this company did not consider whether a potential Member of Congress voted in the companies' preferred way before considering a campaign contribution.³⁰ This scenario distances itself from the mindset that campaign contributions are used for transactional reasons, however, this instance cannot be applied broadly to all lobbying activities between corporations and members of Congress.

Throughout these studies, those who view campaign contributions as transactional fail to discuss that politicians must answer to their constituents. This is especially true

²⁸ Milyo, Jeffrey, David Primo, and Timothy Groseclose. 2000. "Corporate PAC Campaign Contributions in Perspective." *Business and Politics* 2, no. 1 (2000): 75–88. & Stephen Ansolabehere, John M. De figueriredo and James M. Snyder Jr. 2003. "Why is there so little money in US Politics?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* Volume 17, number 1 105-130.

²⁹ Matthew D. Hill, G. Wayne Kelly, G. Brandon Lockhart, Robert A. Van Ness. 2013. "Determinants and Effects of Corporate Lobbying". *Social Security Research Network Online Journal*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1420224. & Brian Kelleher Richter, Krislert Samphantharak, Jeffrey F. Timmons. 2009. "Lobbying and Taxes." *American Journal of Political Science* Volume 53, Issue 4. & McKay, Amy. 2012. "Buying Policy? The Effects of Lobbyists' Resources on Their Policy Success." *Political Research Quarterly* 65 (4), 908-923.

³⁰ Fouirnaies, Alexander and Hall, Andrew, August 27, 2015. "The Exposure Theory of Access: Why Some Firms Seek More Access to Incumbents than Others". *Social Science Research Network Online Journal*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2652361>.

when a Member of Congress seeks reelection and campaign contribution limits are relatively small compared to the cost of the election campaign.³¹ If the transactional viewpoint of political donations was consistent, voting records of retiring Members of Congress would shift away from donor loyalty to the Members' personal viewpoints or that of their constituents. This is not the case, as retiring Members of Congress' voting records during their last term in office are found to be substantially similar to the rest of the member's career.³²

As pointed out, although there has been substantial research into the purposes of campaign contributions, inroads have been made indicating that these contributions do not guarantee any legislative transaction or favor, and that many PACs donate in a bipartisan way motivated by access seeking or information providing rather than for ideological reasons or transactional purposes.

Research on Lobbyists

Through my research, I dive deeper into the potential motivations of registered lobbyists' political contributions. Like CEOs, lobbyists have more at stake in terms of producing beneficial results for their clients which may cause them to make political donations with different motivations than your typical individual who is motivated by their own ideology.³³ Under existing law, registered lobbyists must disclose their political

³¹ Bailey, Michael. 2004. "The Two Sides of Money in Politics: A Synthesis and Framework." *Election Law Journal* 3:4, 653-669.

³² Stephen Bronars and John Lott. 1997. "Do Campaign donations alter how a politician votes? Or, do donors support candidates who value the same things that they do?" *Journal of Law and Economics* Volume 40, Number 2 317-350.

³³ Barber, Michael J., Brandice Canes-Wrone, and Sharece Thrower. 2017. "Ideologically Sophisticated Donors: Which Candidates Do Individual Contributors Finance?" *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2: 278.

campaign contributions along with the legislative issues and clients they are lobbying on behalf of. Like PACs, lobbyists may be likely to donate heavily to Members of Congress who sit on the committees of jurisdiction for their clients. Similarly, like PACs, lobbyists may donate in a bipartisan manner to gain access and create an information sharing relationships with specific Members of Congress. Another possibility is that lobbyists donate more like individuals, with their ideological preferences in mind. Many lobbyists have previous experience working on Capitol Hill for a Member of Congress or Committee, which should indicate which political party the lobbyist belongs to.

If the existing literature is correct, we would expect to see a combination of contributions going to Members of Congress with similar ideological leanings as the lobbyist in addition to contributions made in a bipartisan effort to those Members of Congress that are on the committees of jurisdiction for the lobbyist's clients.

Method

The Lobbying Disclosure Act (LDA) of 1995, as amended by the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act (HLOGA) of 2007, attempts to make the lobbying more transparent. One provision requires that lobbyists disclose, on a semi-annual basis, campaign contributions to the Clerk of the House of Representatives and the Secretary of the Senate. Disclosure of campaign donations are in addition to registration and quarterly-disclosure of lobbying contacts and activities that lobbyists must file.

To comply with the semi-annual reporting requirements, lobbyists fill out form LD-203. In their lobbying guidance, the Clerk of the House and the Secretary of the Senate note that

The LDA (2 U.S.C. § 1604(d)) requires specific information regarding certain contributions and payments made by the filer (i.e., each active registrant and active lobbyist), as well as any political committee established or controlled by the filer. In determining contributions and/or payments to report, it is important to note that, in some cases, a leadership PAC (as defined by the Federal Election Campaign Act, FECA) or a former leadership PAC (for example, in the case of a lobbyist who was previously a covered official) may be a political committee established, financed, maintained, or controlled by a lobbyist. Also, a political committee that has changed from a principal campaign committee into a multicandidate committee (defined in the FECA) could be considered to have been established by a covered official or federal candidate. Finally, the FECA defines those organizations that may establish separate segregated funds (SSFs).³⁴

Along with LD-203 forms, lobbyists must file quarterly disclosure forms (LD-2), which show which lobbyists are working on behalf of which clients and on what public policy issues. To comply with federal law, lobbyists must

(a) Quarterly report³⁵

No later than 20 days after the end of the quarterly period beginning on the first day of January, April, July, and October of each year in which a registrant is registered under section 1603 of this title, or on the first business day after such 20th day if the 20th day is not a business day, each registrant shall file a report with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives on its lobbying activities during such quarterly period. A separate report shall be filed for each client of the registrant.

(b) Contents of report

Each quarterly report filed under subsection (a) shall contain-

(1) the name of the registrant, the name of the client, and any changes or updates to the information provided in the initial registration, including information under section 1603(b)(3) of this title. (2 U.S.C. 1604)

The LD-203 forms are unique because they give insight into which firms, and more specifically which lobbyists, are making covered contributions to candidate campaigns. If, as the literature suggests, there is a link between campaign donations and public policy activities, then there could be a link between lobbyists and particular members of Congress. Matched with the LD-2 forms, which provide insight into the

³⁴ HLOGA, sec. 203; 2 U.S.C. §1604(d).

³⁵ U.S.C. §1604(a).

clients of the lobbyists researched, this information shows a lobbyist's clients, connections can be made between clients' industry, and Congressional committees with jurisdiction over these industries.

Background information on a lobbyist's previous work experience is also useful. Much of this information is made public through biographies on lobbying organization's websites. With this information, we can find the political leanings of the lobbyists and see if political donations may be made based on the lobbyist's ideology rather than their clients.

For this research, the information provided by the LD-203 and LD-2 forms are supplemented with information from the Federal Election Commission (FEC). The FEC data includes campaign donation reporting by candidates for federal office. The FEC data, along with specific information regarding the individual lobbyist, their employer, their donation amount and who they donated to, are used to make connections and correlations regarding the donation habits of lobbyists, whether it be more similar to those of PACs, of individuals, a combination, or if a new trend may emerge.

To examine the connection between lobbyist donations, candidates, and policy, this study looked at five of the most profitable lobbying firms in Washington, DC, based on 2019 data according to the Center for Responsive Politics ([OpenSecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org)). These firms are:

- Akin Gump Strauss, Hauer & Feld LLP;
- BGR Group;
- Holland and Knight LLP;
- Brownstein Hyatt Farber Schreck; and
- Squire Patton Boggs.

These firms were chosen because of their notoriety in Washington, DC, suggesting that they might have the most influence.

Within each of these firms, I randomly chose five of their registered lobbyists in 2019. The lobbyists were chosen randomly to give insight into lobbyists contributions within these five powerful firms, not necessarily based on the success of an individual lobbyist, but rather the power of the firm. While many studies suggest that individual lobbyists are most effective when they have a personal connection to an office,³⁶ using individual success as a baseline would potentially obscure the success of firms in pushing for policy in Washington. With the information collected from the lobbyists' LD-203 and LD-2 forms, and contribution disclosure information from the Federal Election Commission, the donation habit trends of registered lobbyists should be revealed.

I chose to look specifically at the calendar year of 2019 as this is the year with the most recent data as well as a year that was not affected by COVID-19 and this would be the year that an emphasis would be put on fundraising for upcoming the 2020 elections of some Representatives and Senators.

For this study, 25 lobbyists, 5 from each firm, were randomly selected from the 5 most profitable lobbying firms in Washington, D.C. To find the lobbyists for this study, I looked through LD-2 forms on the FEC database submitted by the lobbying firms which disclosed clients of the firm and which lobbyist(s) worked on behalf of each client. I made sure to select various lobbyists representing a variety of clients. Of the 25 lobbyists researched, 19 were men and 6 were women. 18 of the lobbyists had experience working in either Congress or the Executive Branch and 7 did not. Each lobbyist averaged

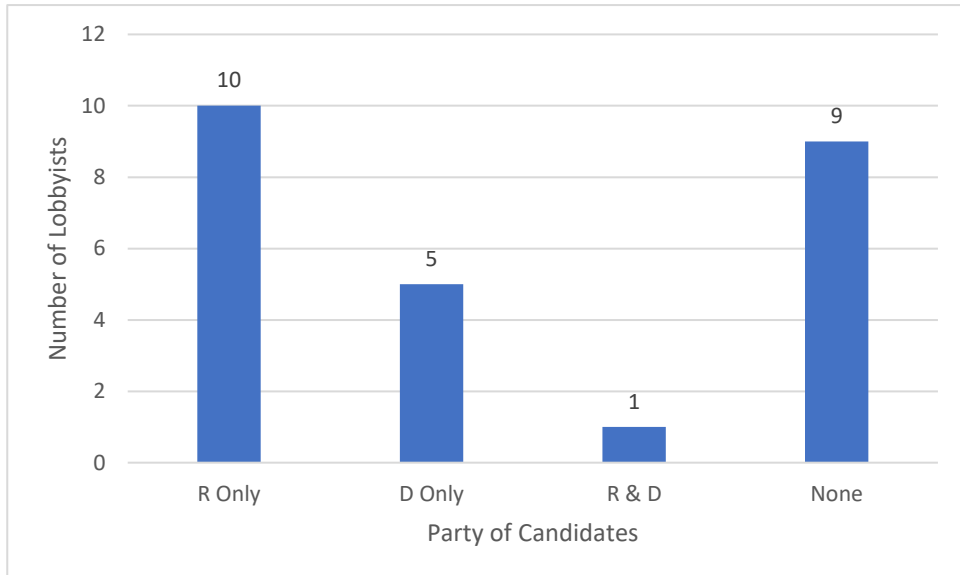
³⁶ Blanes I Vidal, Jordi, Mirko Draca, and Christian Fons-Rosen. 2012. "Revolving Door Lobbyists." *The American Economic Review* 102, no. 7: 3731-748.

between 10 and 11 clients and all the lobbyists in this study are registered lobbyists for the Washington, D.C. area and work for firms that focus on lobbying at the national level of government.

Of the 25 lobbyists observed in this research, Figure 1.1 displays the number of lobbyists which donated to each political party, to both political parties, and to neither.

Findings

Figure 1.1 – Party of Political Candidates



Source: OpenSecrets.org

When looking at Figure 1.1, at first glance, it demonstrates that lobbyists donations to political candidates were typically to one political party or the other, rather than to both. Of the 25 lobbyists examined, 10 donated exclusively to Republicans, five donated exclusively to Democrats, only one donated to candidates of both parties, and nine did not make campaign donations. This shows that when donating to political

candidates, these lobbyists choose to donate to elected officials of one political party rather than officials from both parties.

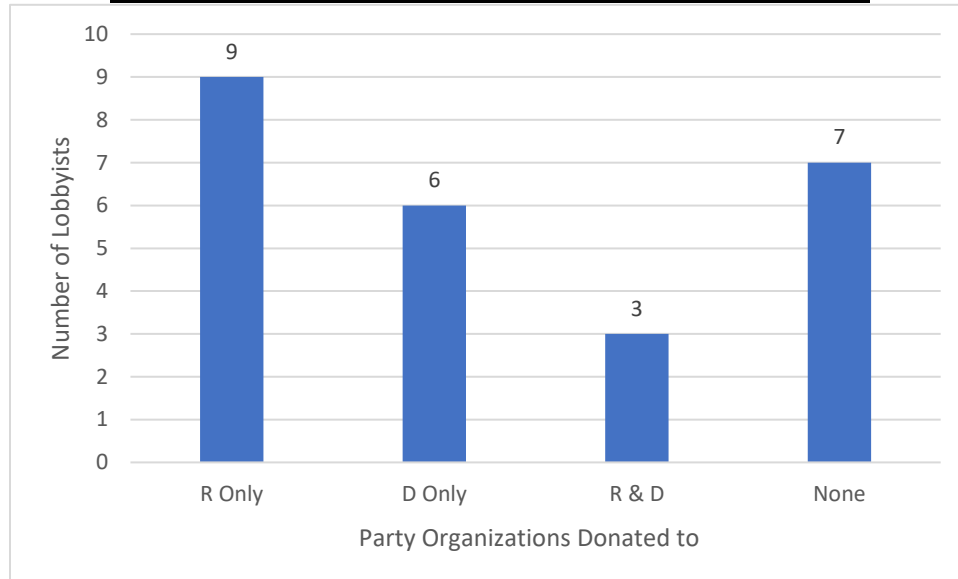
When looking at the lobbyists that donated exclusively to candidates of the Republican Party, these lobbyists donated to on average to 11 candidates. Of those lobbyists who donated exclusively to candidates of the Democratic Party (**Figure 1.3 – Small Dollar Donations and the Democratic Leaders, 116th Congress**) these lobbyists averaged donating to only five candidates. It should be noted that one lobbyist donated to 14 Democratic candidates, which makes the average seem higher; three of these lobbyists donated to less than four political candidates. These initial findings indicate that lobbyists follow the individual pattern of political donations, which highly emphasize partisan motivations.

When looking at the background of the lobbyists who donated exclusively to one political party, we see a relationship between the lobbyist having worked for either that political party or a Members of Congress who are members of that political party. Of the 10 lobbyists who donated exclusively to members of the Republican Party, eight have previous work experience working for Member(s) of Congress belonging to the Republican Party or working for the Republican Party as an entity. Of the five lobbyists who donated exclusively to candidates of the Democratic Party, four had past experience working for a Member of Congress belonging to the Democratic Party or for the Democratic Party as an entity. In this dataset, there is a high correlation between past work experience associated with one of the political parties and later political donations to members of that political party. This furthers the idea that lobbyists, who may benefit

from donating to both political parties for potential preferential access, still choose to make political contributions based on political ideology rather than access seeking.

Figure 1.2 will continue to focus on whether lobbyists donated more heavily to one political party or both, but will display lobbyist donations to organizations affiliated with one political party (such as WinRed for Republicans or ActBlue for Democrats), rather than to members of Congress belonging to one political party.

Figure 1.2 – Lobbyist Donations to Party Organizations



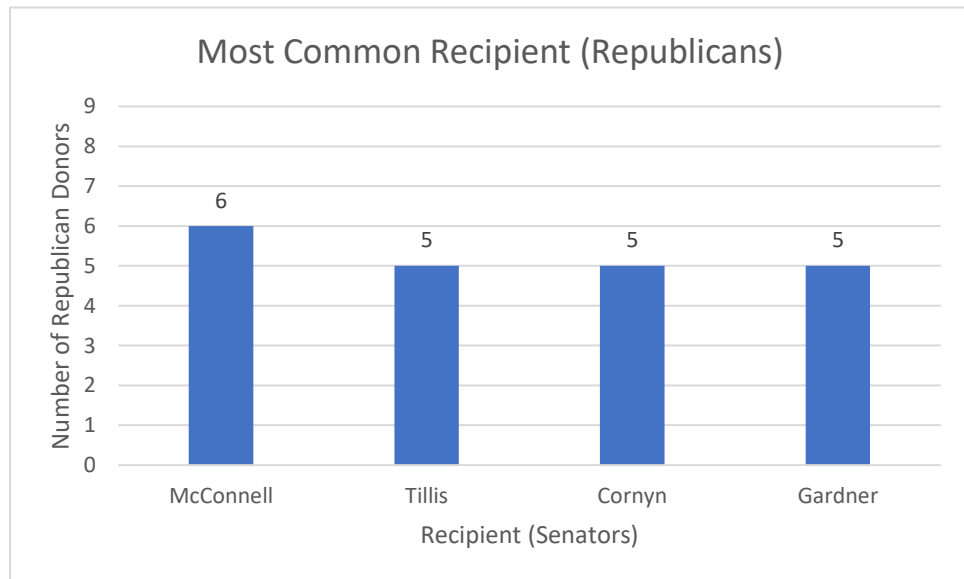
Source: OpenSecrets.org

The donation habits to political party organizations such as WinRed, ActBlue, DCCC, NRSC RNC, DSCC, Biden for President, or Trump for President show slightly more diverse donating habits. As shown in Figure 1.2, of the 25 lobbyists viewed, three donated to party organizations associated with both political parties, six donated exclusively to organizations affiliated with the Democratic Party, nine donated exclusively to organizations affiliated with the Republican party, while seven did not

make donations to these organizations. Donating to one of these partisan organizations should not gain any lobbyist access to a specific Member of Congress but could show willingness to work with that political party. Although still relatively partisan, donations to political parties and their associated party organizations show some slightly more diverse donation habits than those going specifically to political candidates.

Figure 1.3 will focus on those lobbyists which donated exclusively to Republicans and will display which Republican members of Congress were the most common recipients of donations from lobbyists.

Figure 1.3 – Lobbyist Donations Congressional Republicans



Source: OpenSecrets.org

Figure 1.3 demonstrates which members of Congress were most popular with lobbyists, this group of Senate Republicans consist of party leadership as well as donating to those candidates who had difficult elections coming up in 2020. Candidates with

reelection coming would need to prioritize fundraising to adequately fund their reelection campaigns. Referring to data presented in Figure 1.3, of the nine lobbyists who donated exclusively to Republicans, the most common person to be donated to was Mitch McConnell; six of the nine lobbyists donated to him. It should also be noted that 2019 was a big fundraising year for Senator McConnell, as well as the other Senators in Figure 1.3, as these all of these Senators had an election coming up the following year. In 2020, McConnell had an election covered by the national media and was facing a nationally known candidate, Amy McGrath. McGrath gained roughly \$46 million for her campaign and although the race ended up going to McConnell with a double-digit win margin, this shows that the race in 2020 for McConnell was not an easy one. In this case, we see lobbyists donating to the former Senate Majority Leader potentially for access, in addition to aiding in his tougher than usual reelection campaign.

Figure 1.3 also shows that the next three most common recipients of donations from the lobbyists view were Senator Thom Tillis (R-NC), Senator John Cornyn (R-TX), and former Senator Cory Gardner (R-CO) with five of the nine lobbyists donating to these Senators. None of these Senators were Chairs of any Senate committee and did not hold leadership roles within the party. However, all three of these Senators had tough reelection campaigns in 2020. Since these Senators had elections looming in 2020, fundraising would have been a top priority in 2019. Additionally, during 2019 Senator McConnell was the majority leader in the Senate and was highly influential over legislation and the schedule of votes.

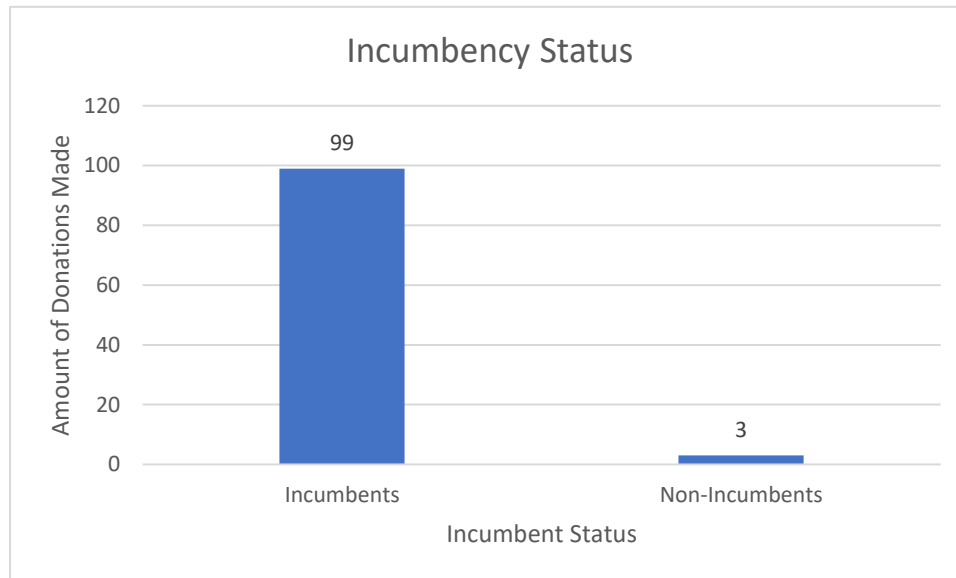
North Carolina was one of the most highly contested Senate races of the 2020 election season which may have caused lobbyists to donate more heavily to Senator Tillis

in 2019. These donations indicate that the lobbyists intentions may have been to aid the Senator of their preferred party in their run for reelection rather than to gain any access to their office. Additionally, Senator Cornyn had a tough reelection as well, many referred to Texas as a purple State indicating that this Senate race could be a toss-up. Senator Cornyn was not a Chair of any Senate Committee indicating that access to his office would not specifically get any policy items on or off the legislative agenda. Finally, following this trend, former Senator Gardner, another Senator who was not the Chair of any committee and was not in a leadership role, but faced a very tough reelection which he ultimately lost. All three of these Senators, regardless of the election outcome in 2020, needed to gain financial support for their reelection campaigns.

Although Senator McConnell, the former Senate Majority Leader, was the most common recipient of lobbyist donations within this sample, these donations may indicate the lobbyists hope of gaining access but additionally, may have been donations to aid him in his tough reelection in 2020. This conclusion can be reached as the other three most common recipients were Senator Tillis, Senator Cornyn and former Senator Gardner, none in leadership or with Chair positions, but all three with tough reelections looming in 2020. These trends highlight the partisan nature of lobbyist donations more so than vying for seeking access.

Figure 1.4 will continue to look at lobbyists who donated exclusively to Republican members of congress but will demonstrate donations based on a politician's incumbency or non-incumbency status.

Figure 1.4 – Incumbency Status



The trends found among Republican donors also shows that lobbyists donated heavily toward incumbents compared to non-incumbents. Figure 1.4 shows the overwhelming number of donations given to Republican incumbents compared to non-incumbents. Of the 10 lobbyists viewed who donated exclusively to Republicans, there were 102 separate donations made to unique candidates. Of those donations, only three were made to non-incumbents. The three donations to challengers were still made to Republican candidates, but in each case, they were made to a challenger to the incumbent member of Congress. The overwhelming donations to incumbents align with the donation habits traditionally used by PACs. As mentioned, PACs generally donate on a more bipartisan basis to incumbents differing from the lobbyists in this study which donated almost exclusively to Republican incumbents. These trends further cement the highly partisan donation habits of registered lobbyists.

Case Studies of Lobbyists

So far, the findings indicate that lobbyists donations trend along ideological lines. In addition to ideology, this research aims to investigate whether lobbyists' clients influenced who the lobbyists donated to. Typically, PACs donate on a bipartisan basis to members of Congress, most specifically on the committee of jurisdiction for their clients.³⁷ Broadly speaking, through the research conducted on the 25 lobbyists for this study, there is no clear indication that lobbyists donate more to Members of Congress on the committee of jurisdiction for their clients. Since lobbyists who donated exclusively to Democrats donated to fewer Members of Congress, it should be easier to find a connection between donations made to specific Members of Congress with jurisdiction over a lobbyist's clients issue area, should one exist.

Small Number of Donations Made

Lobbyist A

One lobbyist in this study, Lobbyist A, had municipalities, counties, and States as clients. Lobbyist A only donated to two representatives: the two representatives who received the donations were from the same State. One representatives' district included both a municipality and county that lobbyist A had as a client. The donation to that representative might indicate that this donation was designed to gain access to the representative to aid their client. However, Lobbyist A had a total of 10 other clients spanning seven other states, but Lobbyist A did not make donation to other

³⁷ Grimmer, Justin and Powell, Eleanor Neff. 2016. "Money in Exile: Campaign Contributions and Committee Access." *The Journal of Politics*: Volume 74, Number 4.

representatives or senators. If Lobbyist A was donating to gain access, lobbyist A likely would have donated to other Members for their other clients.

Lobbyist B

Lobbyist B had 11 healthcare clients. Lobbyist B only donated to one political candidate, a Democratic member from California, who was a Member on the Ways and Means Committee, and a member of the committee's Health Subcommittee. This donation suggests a potential connection between Lobbyist B's clients, since it went to a member on a subcommittee with jurisdiction over revenue related to health policy. Lobbyist B, however, only donated to one representative. If lobbyist B was seeking access on behalf of their healthcare clients, additional donations would have been given to other Members of Congress as there are numerous other committees and subcommittees with jurisdiction over healthcare³⁸. Although Lobbyist B's donation might demonstrate a connection between their client and the recipient, if the true motivation was access to Members of Congress who have jurisdiction over healthcare, additional donations likely would be required.

Lobbyist C

When looking at lobbyists who donated to a small number of Republican candidates, a similar trend emerges. Within this sample, Lobbyist C donated only to Senator Inhofe (R-OK) and former Senator Gardner (R-CO). Lobbyist C had numerous

³⁸ Some of these may include the Senate Health, Education, Labor & Pensions (HELP) committee, the House Oversight committees' subcommittee on Health, or the House Appropriations committees; subcommittee overseeing healthcare.

clients within the chemical industry and the auto industry. In 2019, Senator Inhofe was the Chair of the Armed Services Committee, which does not have jurisdiction over the chemical or automobile industry (**Senate Rule XXV, Standing Committees, Committee on Armed Services**). However, Senator Inhofe was on the Environment and Public Works Committee, which has jurisdiction over the chemical industry when it comes to “Environmental aspects of toxic substances” (**Senate Rule XXV, Standing Committees, Committee on Environment and Public Works**). Former Senator Gardner was a member of the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee, which would have jurisdiction over the automobile industry affecting some of this lobbyist’s clients. If Lobbyist C, or lobbyists broadly speaking, hoped to gain access to the lawmakers who have jurisdiction over their client’s industry, additional donations to relevant committee members would be logical.

Large Number of Donations Made

Lobbyist D

Lobbyist D made donations to 15 separate Republican politicians. Most of the Members sat on the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs. The majority of this lobbyist’s clients fall within the construction industry, the biotechnology field, and the entertainment business. According to Senate Committee jurisdiction laid out in Senate Rule XXV, few connections can be established between Lobbyist D’s clients and the Senator’s committee assignments.

Lobbyist E

Lobbyist E donated to 12 politicians, all of which are members of the Republican Party. Lobbyist E's donations were also to Members of Congress on committees of jurisdiction that coincided with their clients' interests. Lobbyist E's clients were overwhelmingly in the healthcare, insurance, and energy fields. Lobbyist E only donated to one Representative on the House Energy and Commerce Committee and one Senator on the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. If Lobbyist E's goal was to gain access to influence energy policy, additional donations should be made to members of these committees. Lobbyist E, who had numerous additional clients within the healthcare and insurance fields, donated only to two members of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP). It should be noted that one of these recipients who was on the HELP committee was in one of the most highly contested Senate races of the 2020 cycle, creating uncertainty as to the motivation of the donation: whether it was intended for receiving access or assisting in a tough reelection bid.

Donation Trends

These specific cases regarding lobbyists who made less than five donations along with analysis lobbyists who made 12 or more donations show that these donations did not go overwhelmingly to those Members of Congress on the committees of jurisdiction for their clients. Although some specific examples were shown, the additional data regarding the remaining lobbyists in this study show similar trends. There were no instances of lobbyists donating heavily to Members of Congress on one or more specific

congressional committees, which would be the case with PAC donations. Strong trends emerge which indicate that lobbyists donate to politicians on a heavily partisan basis as well as donations made to those politicians of their preferred political party who may be in tough reelections.

The Bipartisan Donor

One lobbyist in this study donated to both Democratic and Republican candidates, although they donated more heavily to the Republican Party. This lobbyist donated to eight different politicians in 2019, six of which were Republicans while the remaining two were Democrats. One of the two Democrats donated to was Representative Richard Neal, the Chair of the Ways and Means Committee. In this case, it is likely that the lobbyist donated heavily to their preferred political party but also made a donation to a very important member of the opposing party, potentially in hopes of gaining access to Richard Neal's office or the Ways and Means committee.

No Donations to Candidates

As mentioned earlier, some lobbyists chose to not donate to any political candidates. Of the 25 lobbyists studied, six donated only to their lobbying firms' PAC while three made no political donations at all to any candidate or PAC.

Conclusion

The research done for this study suggests that registered lobbyists make political donations based heavily on political party preference similar to the trends of other

individuals, rather than in hopes of gaining access like PACs. Within this study, 25 lobbyists at the five most profitable lobbying firms in Washington, D.C. were researched through a combination information provided from LD-203 and LD-2 forms, Federal Election Commission (FEC) donation disclosure information, and background information on the lobbyists provided on the lobbying firms' websites. This research indicates that lobbyists have strong political party preferences, additionally shown by their previous work experience for one political party, which heavily indicated the recipients of their political donations.

Of the 25 lobbyists reviewed, only one donated in a bipartisan fashion; this lobbyist donated more heavily to members of the Republican Party while also donating to the Chair of the Ways and Means committee, a Democrat, and an additional Democratic Representative with no Chair or leadership position. When looking at donation trends compared to the lobbyists' clients, no overwhelming direct connection could be made. Few direct connections were made between lobbyist's clients and political donations to Members of Congress with jurisdiction over their clients' industry. When looking at PAC donations, the connections between the industry in charge of the PAC and the donations to both Members of Congress of both political parties on the committees of jurisdiction are much clearer. Although this study did not find overwhelming evidence that lobbyists donate in hopes of gaining access, this is not to say that this does not occur in some circumstances. This research only considered 25 registered lobbyists in Washington, D.C. and did not find a clear connection; however, for more a more concrete argument, a higher number of lobbyists spanning several years would be necessary.

This research indicates that lobbyists align more with the individual method of political contributions meaning that lobbyists are heavily influenced by their ideological leanings. Few connections were made between donations made in attempt to gain access to a lawmaker. Unlike PACs, lobbyists donate in an overwhelmingly partisan way and do not donate broadly to Members of certain Congressional committees. Lobbyists, like individuals, donated heavily toward politicians who align with them ideologically and were not deterred from making donations to politicians who would not represent the area that they live.

This research conflicts with the theory that political donations are made in hopes of gaining political access or legislative favors from lawmakers. This trend of political donating aligns with the typical individual donor across the country and is unlike the donation trends found among PACs. This leads one to perceive that political donation do not garner access to lawmakers' offices and puts into question why PACs choose to utilize political donation strategy while lobbyists do not. Both PACs and lobbyists hope to influence lawmakers to create or stop laws that would affect their businesses or clients. When beginning this research, I had assumed that lobbyists would employ a donation strategy like that of PACs, but this was not found. Going forward, more research is needed to understand why PACs choose to donate in this way and what benefits they gain from this type of donation. Additionally, to further the findings presented in this chapter, more lobbyists would need to be viewed and would need to be viewed during different years.

Chapter 2: The Impact of Small Donors

American political campaign fundraising utilizes diverse fundraising tactics and now includes more people in the process than in the past. With the emergence of the internet, political candidates are now able to attract a larger number of small dollar individual donors in addition to large, wealthier donors than ever before. Historically, small dollar donors have made a small impact in American election.³⁹ In recent years, they have begun to be more impactful, especially in presidential elections⁴⁰. Today, evidence is beginning to suggest that small dollar donors are starting to have more influence on Congressional races.⁴¹ The emerging dynamic between the small donor and the political candidate appears to be playing a larger role in influencing the makeup of our political system.

Campaign Finance Laws and Regulations

A “small donor” is an individual who donates \$200 or less directly to a political candidate. When a campaign receives a donation from a small donor, the campaign does not need to disclose the personal information to the Federal Elections Commission (FEC), this is unlike large donors whose personal information must be disclosed.⁴² Individuals who donate more than \$200 are generally considered “large donors.” Large donors are typically wealthier individuals who may regularly donate to a variety of political candidates or Political Action Committees (PAC)⁴³. All donors may contribute

³⁹ Panagopoulos, Costas and Daniel Bergan. “Contributions and Contributors in the 2004 Presidential Election Cycle.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 36(2).

⁴⁰ Lipsitz, K., & Panagopoulos, C. (2011). “Filled coffers: Campaign Contributions and Contributors in the 2008 Elections.” *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10.

⁴¹ Pildes, Richard. “Small-Donor-Based Campaign-Finance Reform and Political Polarization” *The Yale Law Journal Forum*, (2019).

⁴² Federal Election Campaign Act, 52 U.S.C. § 30102(c).

⁴³ Culberson, Tyler, Michael P. McDonald, and Suzanne M. Robbins. “Small Donors in Congressional Elections.” *American Politics Research* 47, no. 5 (September 2019): 970–99.

up to \$5,600 per election cycle (e.g., a primary or general elections). Campaigns must disclose donors to the FEC if an individual's donations to a single candidate or PAC exceed a total of \$200 in total for an election cycle.⁴⁴

Not all money in elections is reported to the FEC. Studies have found that “dark money”—money that is not donated specifically to any politician or their campaign but rather donated to a PAC, a Super PAC, or a 501 © organization—also exists. Dark money is donated to organizations that legally do not have to disclosure donor information to the FEC.⁴⁵

This research focuses on small donors who donate directly to candidate campaigns rather than large donors who donate directly to candidates or those who utilize SuperPACs and “dark money”; it is important however to understand the varying aspects of campaign finance which exist in the United States political system.

Emergence of Small Donors and the Internet

Individuals who donate small amounts to political candidates have always existed. The internet, however, has changed the ability of campaigns to target small donors and to increase the number of individuals willing to give less than \$200 in an election cycle.⁴⁶ Prior to the utilization of the internet, a small political donor had to mail in a check to their preferred candidate. With the internet, donations can be sent with the click of a button to your preferred political candidate⁴⁷. In his 2008 campaign, President Barack

⁴⁴ “Campaign Guideline,” Federal Election Commission United States of America, <https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/candgui.pdf>.

⁴⁵ (Citizens United v. FEC).

⁴⁶ Lipsitz, K., & Panagopoulos, C. (2011). “Filled coffers: Campaign Contributions and Contributors in the 2008 Elections.” *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10.

⁴⁷ Davis, Steve, Larry Elin, and Grant Reeher. *Click on Democracy: The Internet's Power to Change Political Apathy into Civic Action*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2002.

Obama was one of the first political candidates to harness the internet's power to collect small dollar donors. How the Obama campaign targeted small donors is now considered the handbook for small donor fundraising.⁴⁸

In 2008, the Obama campaign raised 24% of its total funds from small donors and in 2012, this increased to 28%.⁴⁹ Although Obama revolutionized the small donor fundraising game and was able to bring in a large number of individuals and small donations, studies have found that the donor pool for 2008 presidential election consisted of individuals who were considered "ideologically extreme".⁵⁰ Similar results were also found in the 2004 election cycle.⁵¹ The 2004 and 2008 presidential elections were among the first elections where small donors played a relevant part in political fundraising. They were also some of the first instances of where studies examined individual motivations and characteristics of presidential donors.

Prior to the Obama campaigns use of the internet, small donors did not play a large role in fundraising for federal campaigns. Since 2008 with the Obama campaign, and demonstrated in the election cycle of 2016, where former President Trump became the highest small donor earner ever,⁵² small donors have begun to play a larger role in the financing of political candidates. The emergence of small donor fundraising has begun to

⁴⁸ Lipsitz, K., & Panagopoulos, C. (2011). "Filled coffers: Campaign Contributions and Contributors in the 2008 Elections." *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10, 57.

⁴⁹ Campaign Finance Institute, "*Money vs. Money-Plus: Post-Election Reports Reveal Two Different Campaign Strategies*", tbl.4 (Jan.11, 2013), http://cfinst.org/press/Preleases/13-01-11/Money_vs_Money-Plus_Post-Election_Reports_Reveal_Two_Different_Campaign_Strategies.aspx

⁵⁰ Lipsitz, K., & Panagopoulos, C. (2011). "Filled coffers: Campaign Contributions and Contributors in the 2008 Elections." *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10.

⁵¹ Panagopoulos, Costas and Daniel Bergan. "Contributions and Contributors in the 2004 Presidential Election Cycle." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 36(2).

⁵² Campaign Finance Institute, "*President Trump, with RNC Help, Raised More Small Donor Money than President Obama; As Much as Clinton and Sanders Combined*" (Feb. 21, 2017), http://www.cfinst.org/press/preleases/17-02-21/President_Trump_with_RNC_Help_Raised_More_Small_Donor_Money_than_President_Obama_As_Much_As_Clinton_and_Sanders_Combined.aspx

change the makeup of our executive branch and have more recently begun to affect our legislative branch as well.⁵³

Small Donor Spillover: Congress

Following the burst of small donors to President Obama’s campaign and the continuation of small dollar donor participation in President Trump and his opponent’s campaigns, small donors began to become more involved in elections at other levels of government. Since 2016, small donors have begun to play a more significant factor in congressional elections.⁵⁴

After borrowing online donations tactics utilized by presidential candidates, congressional candidates from both parties began to implement techniques to harness small dollar donors, Republicans implemented WinRed and Democrats implemented ActBlue. These platforms were created to make harnessing political donations easier and more accessible. WinRed and ActBlue are a type of “one-stop-shop” where individuals have the ability to donate to any political candidate(s) of their choosing.⁵⁵ Democrats were the first to utilize this type of platform when ActBlue was created in 2004 but did not become mainstream until, current Senator, Bernie Sanders began to use it in 2016.⁵⁶ Republicans followed suit after ActBlue cemented itself as a new way of political fundraising and implemented their version of the platform in 2019 with WinRed.

⁵³ Culberson, Tyler, Michael P. McDonald, and Suzanne M. Robbins. “Small Donors in Congressional Elections.” *American Politics Research* 47, no. 5 (September 2019): 970–99.

⁵⁴ Culberson, Tyler, Michael P. McDonald, and Suzanne M. Robbins. “Small Donors in Congressional Elections.” *American Politics Research* 47, no. 5 (September 2019): 970–99.

⁵⁵ Pildes, Richard. “Small-Donor-Based Campaign-Finance Reform and Political Polarization” *The Yale Law Journal Forum*, (2019).

⁵⁶ Elena Schneider, “How ActBlue has transformed Democratic Politics,” *Politico*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/10/30/democrats-actblue-fundrasing-elections-433698>.

During the 2018 congressional election cycle, through the ActBlue platform, over \$1.6 billion was collected for Democratic candidates, donated by over 6 million people⁵⁷ with an average donation of \$39.50, which accounted for over half of the individual donations given to Democratic Congressional candidates.⁵⁸ On the other side of the aisle, WinRed recorded over \$1 billion in fundraising in their first 15 months with an average donation of \$47 per person.⁵⁹ With the implementation of these platforms, both political parties and the politicians who belong to these parties had a one-stop political donation site to garner small donor fundraising dollars from individuals across the country. With numbers like these, small donors have showcased their influence on national politics and voiced their opinions through these donations.

Small Donors

Researchers found that individuals who donated in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections were more ideologically extreme than the average citizen.⁶⁰ Other studies have echoed these findings and note that individuals who donate to politicians are highly motivated by their ideological leanings.⁶¹ More specifically, most individuals whom are

⁵⁷ Ben Kamisar, "Meet the Press Blog: Latest news, analysis and data driving the political discussion," <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/blog/meet-press-blog-latest-news-analysis-data-driving-political-discussion-n988541/ncrd1112901#blogHeader>.

⁵⁸ Actblue "2018 Election Cycle in Review", <https://report.actblue.com> [<https://perma.cc/GZ5H-HV86>].

⁵⁹ WinRed, "Zero to \$1,000,000,000 in 15 Months", <https://winred.com/blog/1b/>.

⁶⁰ Panagopoulos, Costas and Daniel Bergan. "Contributions and Contributors in the 2004 Presidential Election Cycle." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 36. ; Lipsitz, K., & Panagopoulos, C. (2011). "Filled coffers: Campaign Contributions and Contributors in the 2008 Elections." *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10, 57.

⁶¹ Michael Barber. 2016. "Donation Motivations: Testing Theories of Access and Ideology." *Political Research Quarterly*: Volume 69 Issue 10.; Barber, Michael J., Brandice Canes-Wrone, and Sharece Thrower. "Ideologically Sophisticated Donors: Which Candidates Do Individual Contributors Finance?" *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2 (2017): 271; Hill, Seth J. and Gregory A. Huber. "Representativeness and Motivations of the Contemporary Donorate: Results from Merged Survey and Administrative Records." *Political Behavior* 39 (2017): 5; Culbertson, Tyler, Michael P. McDonald, and Suzanne M. Robbins. "Small Donors in Congressional Elections." *American Politics Research* 47, no. 5 (September 2019):970.

active participants in party politics, such as those who engage in donating, canvassing, or volunteering, also tend to be the more ideologically extreme than the average member of the political party.⁶² It has also been found that ideologically extreme candidates have a fundraising advantage over centrist candidates.⁶³ Additional studies have shown that individuals do not favor incumbent candidates but rather are motivated more purely by their ideological preferences.⁶⁴ Ideological preferences encourage individuals to donate to politicians whom do not represent their home district or even state; individuals whom donate to politicians outside of their home district or state are similarly highly motivated by their ideological preferences influencing them to donate to a politician they strongly agree with ideologically or donate to the challenger of an individual whom they strongly disagree with ideologically.⁶⁵

Trending toward the Ideologically Extreme

Political fundraisers have leveraged the internet to allow campaigns to collect information more easily about individual's political preferences through information online to target ideologically extreme individuals with political ads or donation requests.⁶⁶

⁶² Abramowitz, Alan. "The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy", (2010).

⁶³ Ensley, Michael J. "Individual Campaign Contributions and Candidate Ideology." *Public Choice* 138, no. 1/2 (2009): 221.

⁶⁴ Bonica, Adam. "Avenues of Influence: on the Political Expenditures of Corporations and Their Directors and Executives." *Business and Politics* 18, no. 4 (2016): 367. ; Michael Barber. 2016. "Donation Motivations: Testing Theories of Access and Ideology." *Political Research Quarterly*: Volume 69 Issue 10.

⁶⁵ Barber, Michael J., Brandice Canes-Wrone, and Sharece Thrower. "Ideologically Sophisticated Donors: Which Candidates Do Individual Contributors Finance?" *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2 (2017): 278.

⁶⁶ Herrera, Helios, David K. Levine, and Cesar Martinelli. 2009. "Policy Platforms, Campaign Spending and Voter Participation" *Journal of Public Economics* (3-4): 503.

As politicians can gain more money from individuals through targeted platforms like WinRed, ActBlue, and targeted ads from small donors, politicians are becoming less reliant on the political party to which they belong for fundraising.⁶⁷ This has caused the political parties to have less control over political candidates of their party.⁶⁸ This relationship between politician and party causes the political parties to wield less power and influence over politicians or political candidates creating more ideologically extreme candidates who receive their fundraising from small donors. It has also been found that the average representative is more ideologically extreme than their average constituent leading one to conclude that representatives may align themselves with their ideologically extreme donors to gain election or reelection compared to their average constituent.⁶⁹ Researchers have indicated that ideologically extreme donors have been successful in pulling their representative, the party, and the political discussion to a more ideologically extreme perspective.⁷⁰

With the emergence of online campaign donations, small donor crowd sourcing through email blasts or text message reminders by candidates or entities like WinRed or ActBlue can be highly beneficial to candidates. With this technology, some candidates are encouraged to be more extreme and to go “viral” online in hopes of gaining attention by individuals across the country or for their viral moment to be picked up by media

⁶⁷ Pildes, Richard. “Small-Donor-Based Campaign-Finance Reform and Political Polarization” *The Yale Law Journal Forum*, (2019).

⁶⁸ Anne Baker, “The More Outside Money Politicians Take, the Less Well They Represent Their Constituents,” *Washington Post*, August 17, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/08/17/members-of-congress-follow-the-money-not-the-voters-heres-the-evidence/>.

⁶⁹ Bafumi, Joseph, and Michael C. Herron. “Leapfrog Representation and Extremism: A Study of American Voters and Their Members in Congress.” *The American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 522.

⁷⁰ La Raja, Raymond J., and Brian F. Schaffner. “The Ideological Wellsprings of Campaign Money.” *In Campaign Finance and Political Polarization: When Purists Prevail* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015): 36-59.

outlets. This tactic is utilized since more ideologically extreme candidates do better at raising money from small donors, especially from outside their district or state,⁷¹ it should not be a surprise that some candidates are choosing to make more extreme statements to gain attention from out of district, ideologically extreme donors.⁷²

In the first quarter of 2021, the top two small donor fundraisers in the House of Representatives were ideologically extreme candidates with national profiles: Representative Marjorie Taylor-Greene (R-Ga.) who raised \$2.5 million, and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) who raised \$2.3 million.⁷³ Both of these representatives are political newcomers. Rep. Greene was first elected to Congress in 2020, and Rep. Ocasio-Cortez in 2018. Additionally, in the Senate, Bernie Sanders (I-VT), a similar ideologically extreme candidate with a national profile and history of fundraising through small donors, had the most small-dollar donations in the Senate for the first quarter of 2021. He raised \$6.2 million in just three months.⁷⁴

Political Polarization

In the 1970s, scholars began to observe increased polarization among the American electorate and in Congress.⁷⁵ Since the 1970s, individuals and politicians have begun to sort themselves based purely on their political ideology. Prior to this time, both

⁷¹ La Raja, Raymond J., and Brian F. Schaffner. "The Ideological Wellsprings of Campaign Money." *In Campaign Finance and Political Polarization: When Purists Prevail* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015): 39.

⁷² Alyce McFadden "Small-dollar donors get behind headline-grabbing lawmakers," *Center for Responsive Politics*, April 20, 2021.

⁷³ Alyce McFadden "Small-dollar donors get behind headline-grabbing lawmakers," *Center for Responsive Politics*, April 20, 2021.

⁷⁴ Alyce McFadden "Small-dollar donors get behind headline-grabbing lawmakers," *Center for Responsive Politics*, April 20, 2021.

⁷⁵ Hare, Christopher, and Keith Poole. 2014. "The Polarization of Contemporary American Politics." *Polity* 46(3): 419.

political parties had strong liberal and conservative factions.⁷⁶ In Congress, polarization has continued since the 1970s and Congress is increasingly more sorted by political affiliation rather than by other metrics such as age or home-state.⁷⁷

Polarization among the American people and our elected leaders has continued to persist regardless of which political party holds the majority in Congress.⁷⁸ The idea of a conservative Democrat or liberal Republican has almost ceased to exist in today's political landscape, this type of political ideology was formerly commonplace.⁷⁹ In both Congress and the electorate, political alignment is trending toward absolutism; one is all in and generally in agreement with all aspects of a political party.⁸⁰ Today, those belonging to each political party has become much more extreme in their political views.⁸¹ Although some Americans are moderate or observers of the political system, evidence that the politically involved have become more polarized in recent years.⁸²

Evolving Trends

As small donors have become a large factor in campaign finance in the United States, it remains unclear how strong of a connection between small donors and political polarization exists in today's political environment. In this research, I explore the impact

⁷⁶ Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁷⁷ Zachary Neal, *A Sign of the Times? Weak and Strong Polarization in the U.S. Congress, 1773-2016* (Science Direct, 2020).

⁷⁸ Zachary Neal, *A Sign of the Times? Weak and Strong Polarization in the U.S. Congress, 1773-2016* (Science Direct, 2020).

⁷⁹ Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁸⁰ Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁸¹ Hare, Christopher, and Keith Poole. 2014. "The Polarization of Contemporary American Politics." *Polity* 46(3): 419.

⁸² Markus Prior, "Media and Polarization", *Annual Review of Political Science* 2013: Vol. 16: 101-127.

of small donors in Congressional elections and their potential connection to facilitating more extreme, polarizing candidates to be elected.

In this paper, I explore three different groupings of Members of Congress and Congressional candidates along with their adjusted DW-Nominate scores and small donor fundraising numbers to investigate what trends that may exist. To learn more about these trends, data was collected on small donor fundraising for the 2020 election cycle (January 2019 through November 2020), along ideology scores (DW-Nominate) for the top 10 recipients of small donors during this period. Additionally, data was collected on congressional leaders from both political parties, and two smaller groups of ideologically extreme members: the group commonly referred to as “the Squad”⁸³ on the political left, and conservative Representatives tied to the January 6th insurrection on the U.S. Capitol on the political right.⁸⁴

It is possible to measure ideology in several ways, for the Members of Congress explored here, the most common measure is Poole and Rosenthal’s DW-Nominate scores.⁸⁵ Poole and Rosenthal use roll call votes in Congress to evaluate party line votes and assign each Representative and Senator a two dimension ideology score that ranges from -1 (most liberal) to +1 (most conservative).⁸⁶ The first dimension focuses

⁸³ Jason Silverstein, “Who is ‘the Squad’? What you need to know about Ocasio-Cortez, Omar, Pressley and Tlaib,” CBS News, July 16, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/who-is-the-squad-what-you-need-to-know-about-aoc-ocasio-cortez-omar-tlaib-pressley/>.

⁸⁴ Hunter Walker, “Exclusive: Jan. 6 Protest Organizers Say They Participated in ‘Dozens’ of Planning Meetings with Members of Congress and White House Staff,” *Rolling Stone*, October 24, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/exclusive-jan-6-organizers-met-congress-white-house-1245289/>.

⁸⁵ Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal (2000). *Congress: A Political History of Roll Call Voting*, New York: Oxford University Press; Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal (2001) “D-NOMINATE after 10 Years: A Comparative Update to Congress: A Political-Economic History of Roll-Call Voting,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 26(1): 5-29, at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/440401>.

⁸⁶ “Fundraising Totals: Politicians and Elections: Who Raised the Most?”, OpenSecrets, <https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress>.

exclusively on the liberal-conservative spectrum and the second dimension introduces social policy, historically the divide over civil rights issues, to differentiate further between political actors.⁸⁷ When looking at existing DW-Nominate scores, an investigation of potential ties between partisanship and small donor fundraising can be explored.

Additionally, although political campaigns do not need to disclose intimate, personal information about their small donors, the total dollar amount and number of small donor donations are commonly reported and exist on sites like OpenSecrets.org and FEC.gov. Referred to as “unitemized” donations,⁸⁸ this number represents the total number of small dollar donations received by the Representative or candidate. Using FEC data provided by OpenSecrets,⁸⁹ we can see which Members of the House of Representatives running for reelection between January 2019 and December 2020 raised the most money from small donors along with the specific amount of money raised.

To note, Democratic and Republican leadership generally has their own Political Action Committee (PAC) which receives political donations in addition to their personal reelection campaign account, their PAC donations were not considered for this data representation, only the Representative’s personal reelection campaign donations were measured.

⁸⁷ [Voteview.com](https://voteview.com/about), “About the Project” at <https://voteview.com/about>

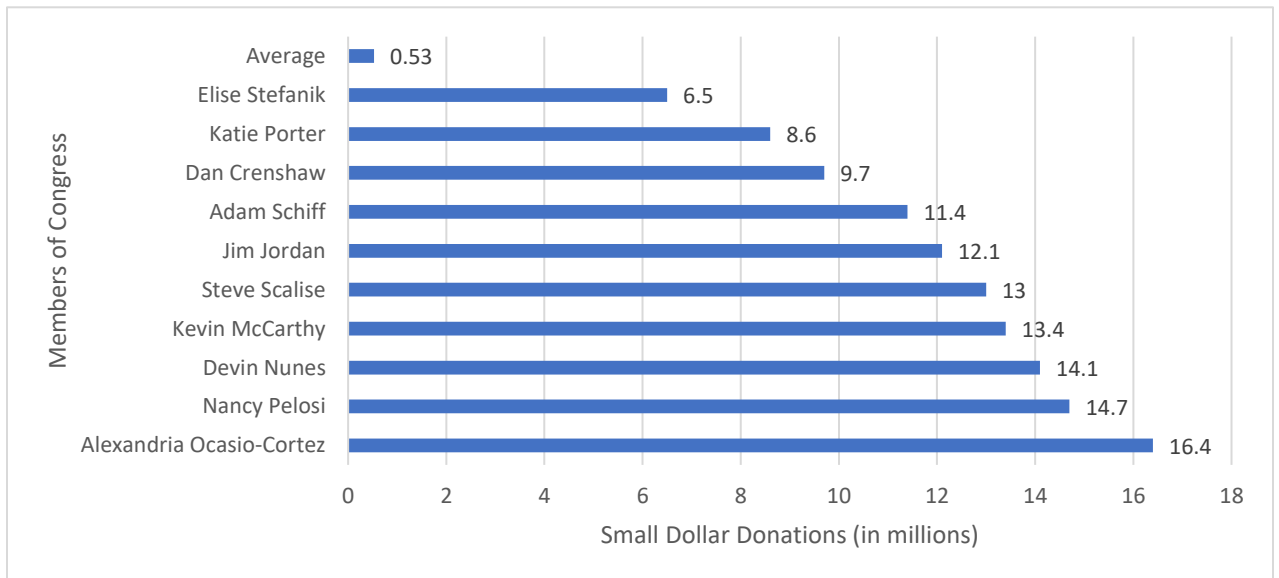
⁸⁸ Dan Hartranft, “OpenSecrets.org Mailbag: Digging into Federal Guidelines, Filing Dealings and more,” OpenSecrets, May 3, 2021, <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2012/05/opensecrets-mailbag-small-vs-large/#:~:text=When%20we%20refer%20to%20%E2%80%9Csmall%E2%80%9D%20donations%20%E2%80%94%20or,less%20to%20federal%20candidates%2C%20PACs%20or%20party%20committees.>

⁸⁹ “Fundraising Totals: Politicians and Elections: Who Raised the Most?”, OpenSecrets, <https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress>.

Current Trends: Highest Small Donor Recipients

The top 10 recipients were all incumbents from the 116th Congress; no freshman in the 117th Congress were among the top 10 small donor fundraisers. Figure 2.1 lists the highest small dollar donation recipients in the 2020 election cycle.

Figure 2.1 – Top 10 Small Dollar Donation Recipients in the 2020 Election Cycle



Source: OpenSecrets.org

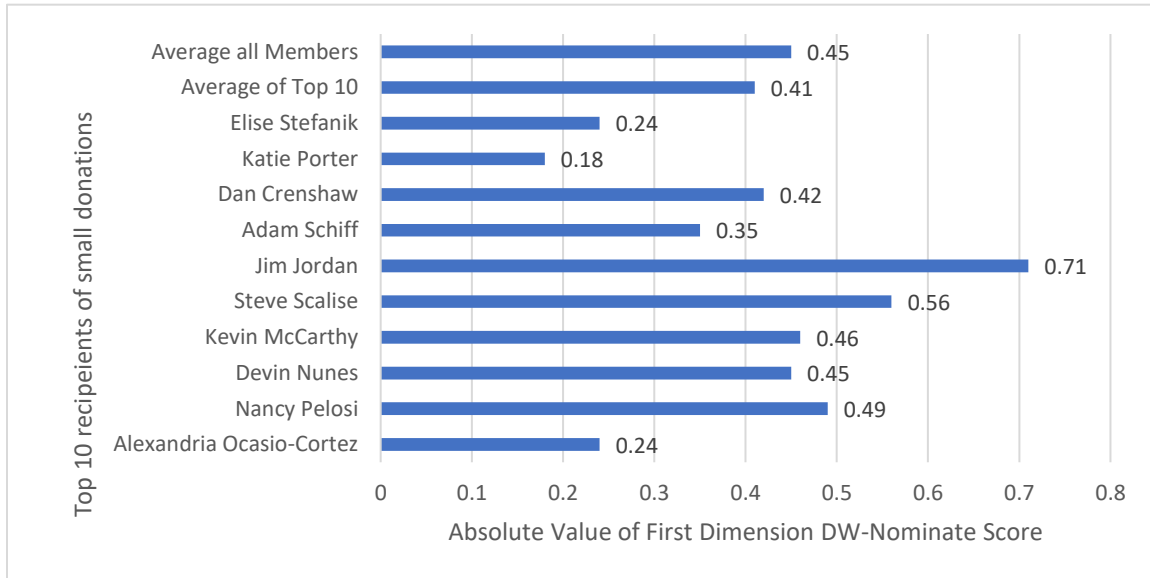
As shown in Figure 2.1, the top 10 recipients of small dollar donations include members of both Congressional parties: 6 Republicans and 4 Democrats, members of party leadership: Steve Scalise (Republican Whip), Kevin McCarthy (Republican Minority Leader), and Nancy Pelosi (Democratic Speaker of the House), and some members who were new to the House of Representatives: Dan Crenshaw (R-TX) and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY), in the 116th Congress. Figure 2.1 suggests that small donations are given regardless of the differences between these representatives regarding their ideological, geographical, and rank in Congress.

The representatives who received the most small dollar donations should provide insight into what attracts small donors to donate to Congressional candidates. As shown, the average amount of money raised through small donors for members of the 116th Congress is \$527,000. All the Representatives shown in Figure 2.1 earned significantly higher than the average, with Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the top recipient, earning over 30 times the average. Although few connections can likely be made between these representatives due to the diversity of this group, these representatives' common trait is their large amount of small donations. The literature ties small donors to the ideological extreme.⁹⁰

If small dollar donations are tied to ideological extremism, then an evaluation of Member ideology might provide insight into the connection between fundraising and partisanship. By itself, DW-Nominate scores do not measure ideological extremity. Rather they measure partisanship on a two-dimension scale where the first dimension is ideology generally and the second considers policy positions (historically dealing with votes on slavery, race, and voting rights), to measure each Member of Congress on a -1 (most liberal) to +1 (most conservative) scale. Ideology extremism can be derived from the first dimension of the DW-Nominate score. To calculate ideological extremism, the absolute value of each Members DW-Nominate score was taken. Figure 2.2 presents data on ideology for the top 10 small donation donors in the 2020 election cycle.

⁹⁰ Barber, Michael J., Brandice Canes-Wrone, and Sharece Thrower. 2017. "Ideologically Sophisticated Donors: Which Candidates Do Individual Contributors Finance?" *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2: 271-88.

Figure 2.2 – Top Ten Small Donation Recipients and Ideological Extremeness Scores in the 2020 Election Cycle.



Source: Author calculation of ideology extremeness using absolute value of DW-Nominate Scores from Voteview.com

As Figure 2.2 shows, the closer that an individual is to 1, the stronger their partisanship and those closer to 0 signals less partisanship. The data is presented in the same order as Figure 2.1 with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez at the bottom as she was the largest recipient of small dollar donations.

According to the literature, one would assess that the Representatives who received the highest amount of small donations would be more partisan members of their political party.⁹¹ As shown by the data above, for the top 10 highest recipients, these members are not overwhelmingly partisan and are not stronger liberals or conservatives compared to the average Representative. It is surprising that the average ideological extremity score of the top 10 largest recipients is lower than the average DW-Nominate score for all Representatives of the 116th Congress. There are several instances of the top

⁹¹ Barber, Michael J., Brandice Canes-Wrone, and Sharece Thrower. 2017. "Ideologically Sophisticated Donors: Which Candidates Do Individual Contributors Finance?" *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2: 271-88.

10 Representatives having a higher DW-Nominate score than the average such as Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), Steve Scalise (R-LA), and Jim Jordan (R-OH) but their scores are not significantly higher than the average aside from Jim Jordan. Representatives Pelosi, McCarthy, and Scalise are all within the top 10 largest small donor recipients, have a DW-Nominate score higher than the top 10 average and the average for all Representatives in the 116th Congress, and are all members of Congressional leadership. Looking into additional members of House Leadership during the 116th Congress may provide additional insights into which Representatives attract small donations.

116th Congress House Leadership

Each party in the House of Representatives has different leadership positions and leadership structure. Since the Democrats had the majority of seats in the 116th Congress, their party leaders are directly in charge of scheduling legislation in the House of Representatives. In order of leadership for the Democratic party:

- Nancy Pelosi (D-CA, Speaker of the House)
- Steny Hoyer (D-MD, Majority Leader)
- Jim Clyburn (D-SC, Majority Whip)
- Ben Ray Lujan (D-NM, Assistant Democratic Leader)
- Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY, Democratic Caucus Chair)

On the Republican side, the minority in the 116th Congress, in order of leadership:

- Kevin McCarthy (R-CA, Minority Leader)
- Steve Scalise (R-LA, Minority Whip)
- Liz Cheney (R-WY, Republican Conference Chair)
- Mark Walker (R-NC, Republican Conference Vice Chair)

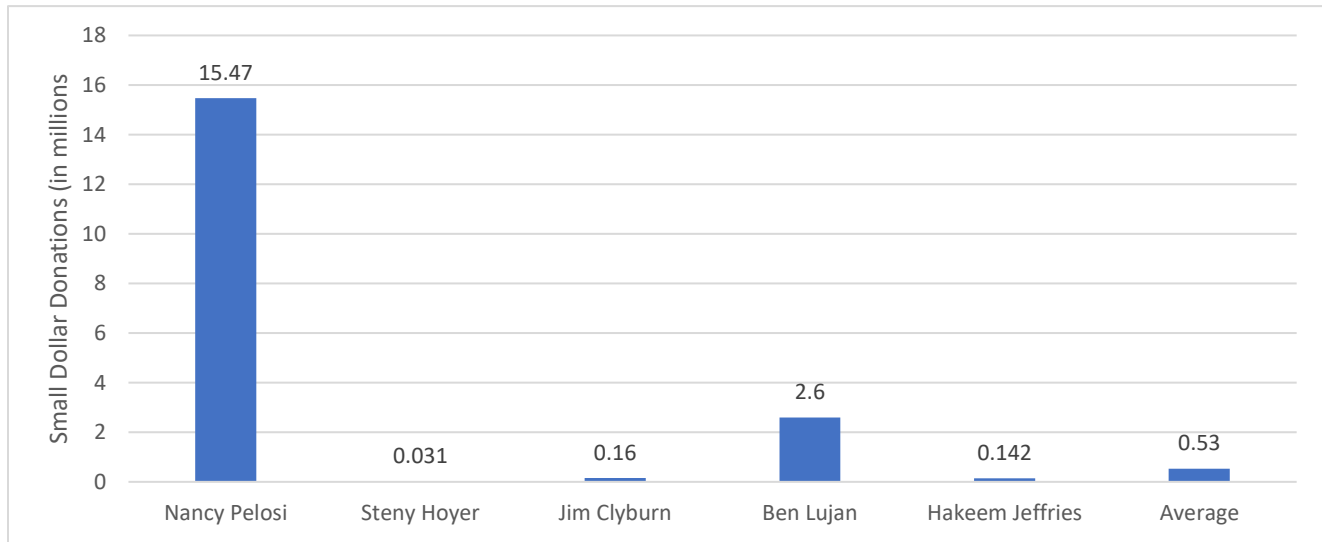
- Gary Palmer (R-AL, Republican Policy Committee Chair)⁹²

As seen in Figures 2.1 and 2.2, Nancy Pelosi, Kevin McCarthy, and Steve Scalise were all within the top 10 of largest small donor recipients, had DW-Nominate scores higher than the top 10 and the entire House of Representatives, and are a part of House leadership for their political parties. An assessment further into other members of House leadership for both parties is necessary to find additional connections between small donors, House leadership, and partisanship.

Democratic Leadership

Within the Democratic Leadership, the amount of money raised from small dollar donors varies widely. Figure 2.3 provides the amount of money raised by Democratic leaders from small dollar donations.

Figure 2.3 – Small Dollar Donations and the Democratic Leaders, 116th Congress



Source: OpenSecrets.org

⁹² “Congressional Leadership in the 116th Congress,” Squire Patton Boggs, <https://www.squirepattonboggs.com/-/media/files/insights/publications/2018/12/congressional-leadership-in-the-116th-congress/congressionalleadershipinthe116thcongress.pdf>.

Figure 2.3 shows the total small dollar donations earned by each member of Democratic leadership, in order of seniority, from January 2019 through December 2020. The data shows clear, stark differences between the total amount of small dollar donations among Democratic leaders. The stark differences in small donor fundraising ability for Democratic leadership highlights the massive popularity Representative Pelosi has with small donors from across the country while the other members of Democratic leadership are unpopular and earn very little money from small donors.

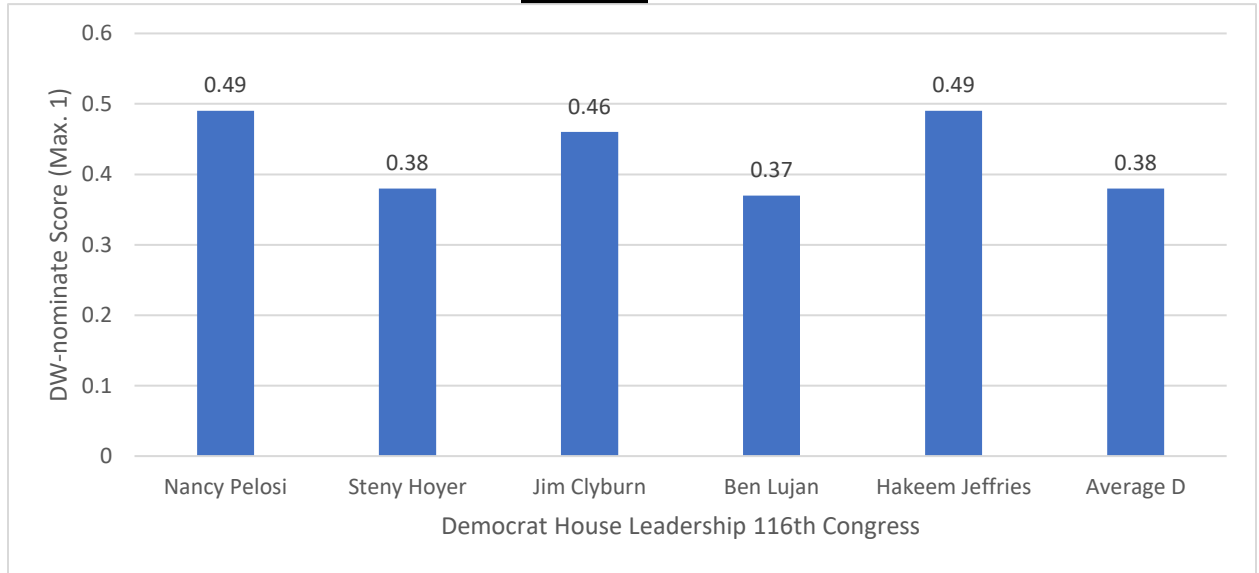
Although Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi earned a large amount of small dollar donations, the rest of Democratic leadership underperformed when compared to the average Representative during the same period. The only exception was Representative Ben Lujan who was running for a seat in the Senate during this time. There may be a few reasons for why leaders generally underperformed the average Representative. First, members may find themselves in “safe” congressional districts and may not need to do much campaigning or fundraising.⁹³ Although, this did not stop small dollar donors from flocking to Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. It is surprising however how underwhelming the small dollar donation numbers are for Democratic leadership.

A connection between small donor fundraising and ideological extremity however was not obvious when looking at the adjusted DW-nominate scores of the top 10 recipients of small dollar donations. When looking at the adjusted DW-nominate scores

⁹³ Herrnson, Paul. 1992. “Campaign Professionalism and Fundraising in Congressional Elections.” *University of Chicago Press Journals* Volume 54, no. 3, 67–94.

of Democratic House leadership provided in Figure 2.4, another look into the connection between partisanship and small dollar donations is explored.

Figure 2.4 – Ideological Extremeness of House Democratic Leadership, 116th Congress



Source: VoteView, DW-Nominate Scores

As Figure 2.4 shows, three of the five Democratic leaders have an ideological extremeness score higher than the average House Democratic. Although the numbers in the graph do not signal a stark contrast between the members of Democratic leadership when compared to the average House Democrat, both Nancy Pelosi and Hakeem Jeffries ideology scores are roughly 30% higher than the average House Democrat. Figure 2.4 provides some insight that members of the House democratic leadership are more strongly partisan than the average House democrat but that this does not correlate over to receiving small dollar donations. The only case in which there is a connection between a higher DW-Nominate score and more small dollar donations is with Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. Both Steny Hoyer and Hakeem Jeffries had higher DW-Nominate scores than the average house Democrat but gained shockingly low small dollar donations. Steny Hoyer received only 6% of what the average Representative earned,

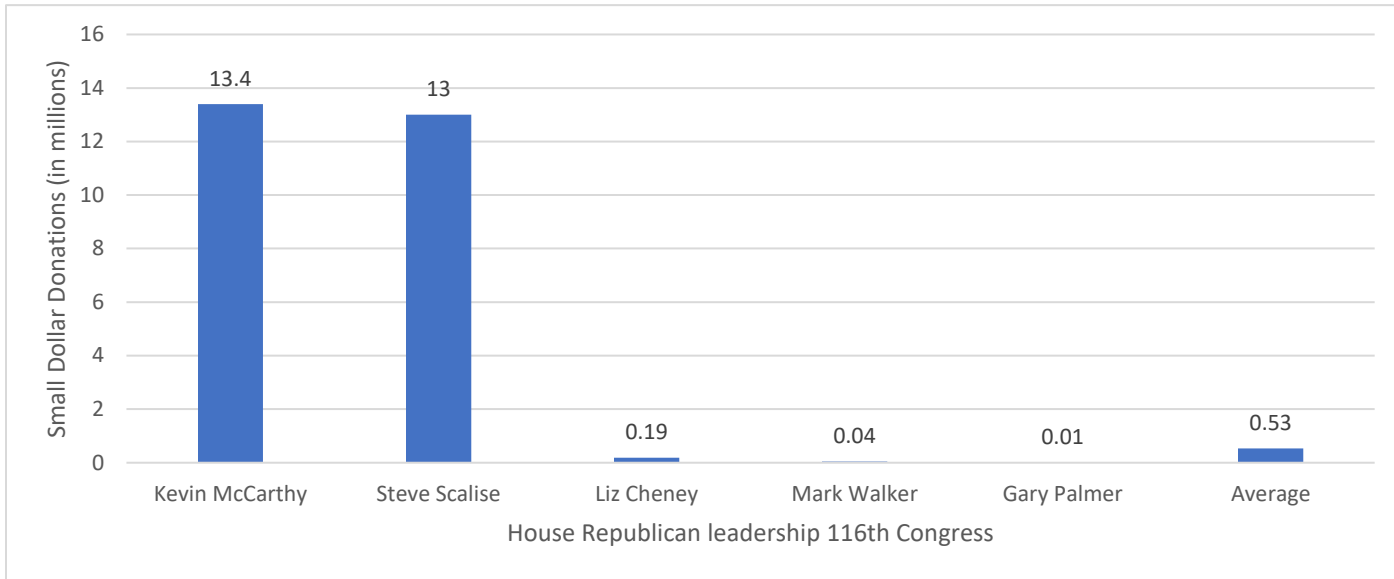
with \$31,000 in small dollar donations, while Hakeem Jeffries earned only 27% of the average Representative with \$142,000.

Republican Leadership

Although when looking at House democratic leadership for the 116th Congress, a strong connection between a high adjusted DW-Nominate score and small dollar donations was not made. In only one instance with Speaker Nancy Pelosi do we see a stronger partisan score correlating with a large amount of small dollar donations. When looking at the top 10 highest small dollar donation recipients, two members of the House republican leadership were among this list; a deeper look into republican leadership DW-Nominate scores and small dollar donations may paint a different picture and showcase a connection different than democratic leadership provided.

A deeper look into House republican leadership may point to connections between strong partisanship through DW-Nominate scores and small dollar donations not seen in democratic leadership. In Figure 2.5 and 2.6, information regarding Republican Party leadership presents the small donor fundraising numbers for republican leadership and the adjusted DW-Nominate scores for these same members.

Figure 2.5- Small Dollar Donations to Republican House Leadership, 116th Congress



Source: OpenSecrets.org

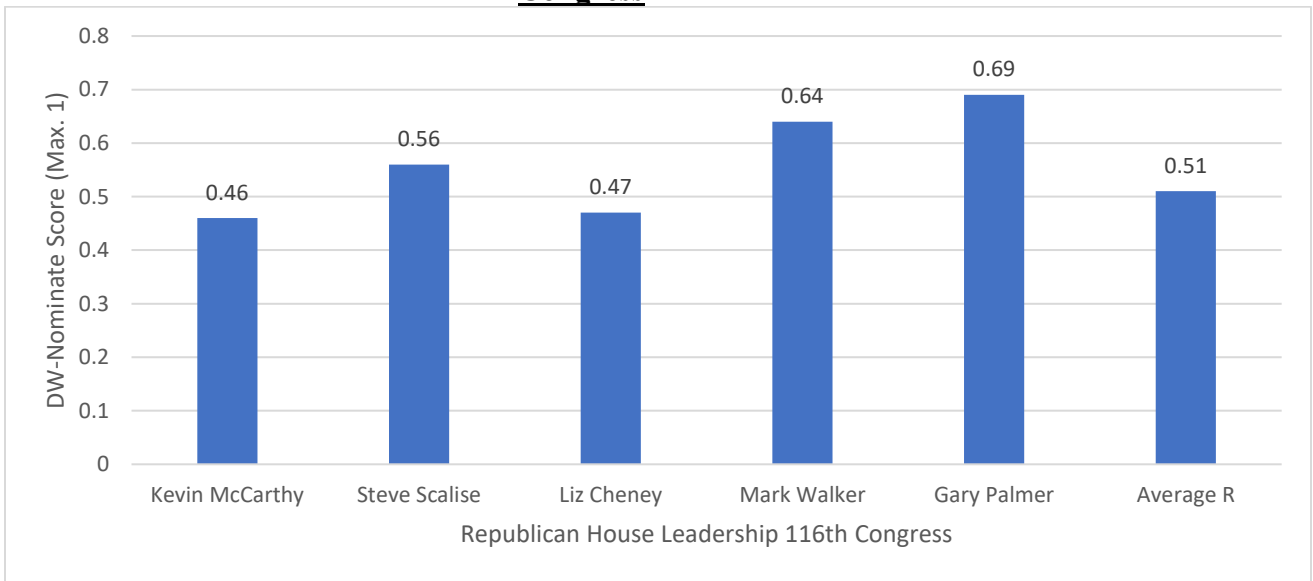
Much like what was seen with the democratic leadership, there are few standouts within leadership who attract significantly large amounts of small dollar donations while other members of leadership generate below average small dollar donations. As shown, both Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy and Minority Whip Steve Scalise significantly outraise the average representative and outraise their fellow members of House republican leadership. A connection between being the leader of each political party in the House, Kevin McCarthy and Nancy Pelosi, can be established as the leaders of both political parties were highly popular with small donors. While the republican side differs slightly with the popularity of Steve Scalise, Republican Whip, and the unpopularity of Jim Clyburn, Democratic Whip, with small donors.

A look into the adjusted DW-Nominate scores of House republican leadership may show connections between strong partisanship and small dollar donations; one would assume from existing literature that Kevin McCarthy and Steve Scalise would

have higher DW-Nominate scores compared to their fellow House leadership members and the average republican Representative due to their high small dollar donations.

Figure 2.6 shows the DW-Nominate scores of House republican leadership.

Figure 2.6- Adjusted DW-Nominate Score of Republican House Leadership, 116th Congress



Source: OpenSecrets.org

Figure 2.6 indicates that a higher adjusted DW-Nominate score does not correlate to a larger share of small dollar donations. Although the average DW-Nominate score for a House republican is 0.51, Kevin McCarthy finds himself slightly below this number while Steve Scalise finds himself slightly above this number. Both McCarthy and Scalise, given their high small dollar donations, would be assumed to have higher DW-Nominate scores than the average member of their party. Mark Walker and Gary Palmer, who do have higher than average DW-Nominate score had starkly low small dollar donations compared to McCarthy, Scalise, and the average representative.

As shown by a deeper analysis into House Republican Party and Democratic Party leadership, a clear connection between strong partisanship through adjusted DW-

Nominate scores and a high number of small dollar donations cannot be shown. There are several factors that may lead to few members of House leadership gaining high amounts of small dollar donations such as name recognition, media coverage, campaign resources, or any number of other variables, but a high adjusted strong DW-Nominate score did not correlate to a high amount of small dollar donations. A connection between being the leader of each party did correlate to high small dollar donations as seen with Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, but this did not extend to other members of House leadership.

A clear connection between strong small dollar donations and strong partisanship could not be established when looking at the top 10 recipients of small dollar donations or at House leadership. However, as noted in the literature, small dollar donations have begun to play a larger role beginning 2016,⁹⁴ both political parties have had new segments of their political parties emerge since this time. On the democratic side, a more progressive leaning group of female Congresswomen all elected in 2018 commonly referred to as “The Squad” and on the republican side, more conservative members potentially tied to the January 6, 2021, insurrection who were elected in 2012, may show an emerging trend between new-age partisans and small dollar donations.

New-Era Partisans

January 6th Affiliated

On the far-right side of conservatism, several members of the Republican Party, elected in 2020, which some claim may be tied to extremist organizations including those

⁹⁴ Culberson, Tyler, Michael P. McDonald, and Suzanne M. Robbins. “Small Donors in Congressional Elections.” *American Politics Research* 47, no. 5 (September 2019): 970–99.

who broke into the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021.⁹⁵ These Representatives, Marjorie Taylor-Greene (R-GA), Lauren Boebert (R-CO), and Madison Cawthorne (R-VA), were all elected in 2020. They are freshman Representatives in the 117th Congress. All three representatives were candidates in the 2020 election cycle (January 2019 through November 2020). Therefore, information about their fundraising, including small dollar donation numbers is available. While the event of January 6, 2021, took place after these Representatives were elected, these Members have been labeled considered ideological extremists,⁹⁶ have voiced their support for conspiracy theories popular amongst conservative extremist groups,⁹⁷ and tied themselves largely to former President Donald Trump.⁹⁸

A look into these Representatives small dollar donation numbers and their adjusted DW-Nominate scores measuring ideological extremity may shed additional light onto the potential connection of small dollar donations and strong partisans. Figure 2.7 will showcase these now-Representatives small dollar donations during their Congressional candidacy.

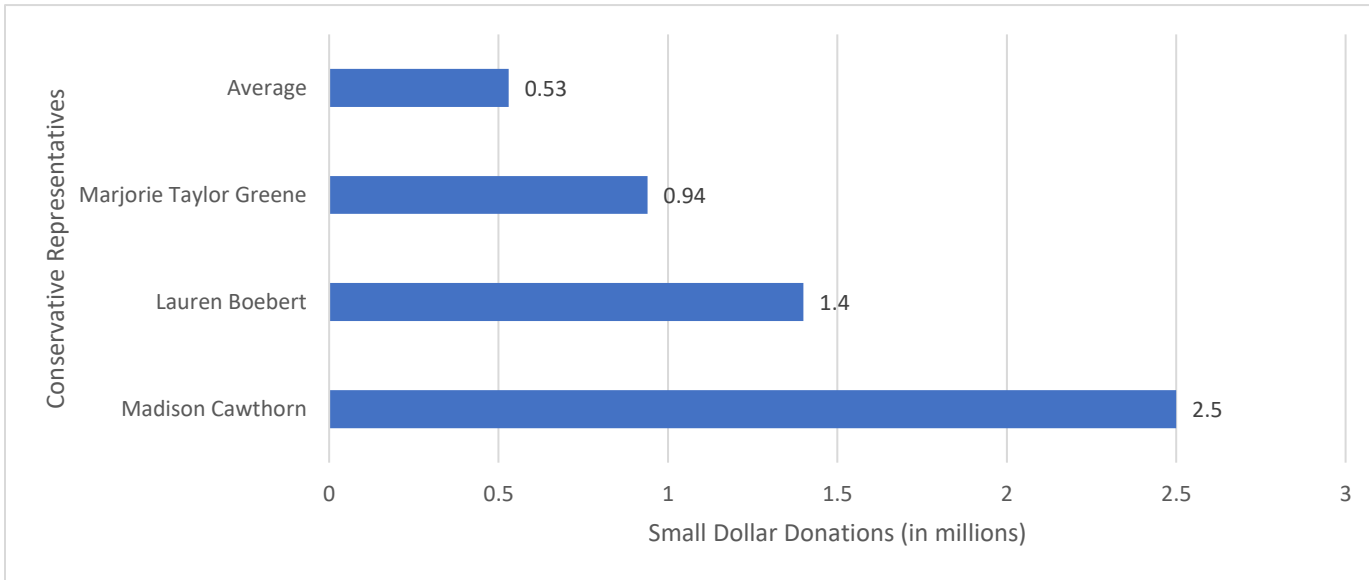
⁹⁵ Hunter Walker, “Exclusive: Jan. 6 Protest Organizers Say They Participated in ‘Dozens’ of Planning Meetings with Members of Congress and White House Staff,” *Rolling Stone*, October 24, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/exclusive-jan-6-organizers-met-congress-white-house-1245289/>.

⁹⁶ “Extremist House Republicans Allegedly Met with Jan. 6 Insurrectionist Organizers ‘Dozens’ of Times,” DCCC, October 25, 2021, <https://dccc.org/icymi-extremist-house-republicans-allegedly-met-with-jan-6-insurrectionist-organizers-dozens-of-times/>.

⁹⁷ Olivia Beavers and Melanie Zanona, “GOP grapples with extremist episodes among its own,” *Politico*, March 4, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/03/04/gop-extremism-473806>.

⁹⁸ Jacqueline Alemany, Marianna Sotomayor, Josh Dawsey, “A MAGA squad of Trump loyalists sees its influence grow amid demands for political purity among Republicans,” *The Washington Post*, November 21, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/greene-boebert-gosar-gaetz/2021/11/20/c77dc78a-47dd-11ec-973c-be864f938c72_story.html.

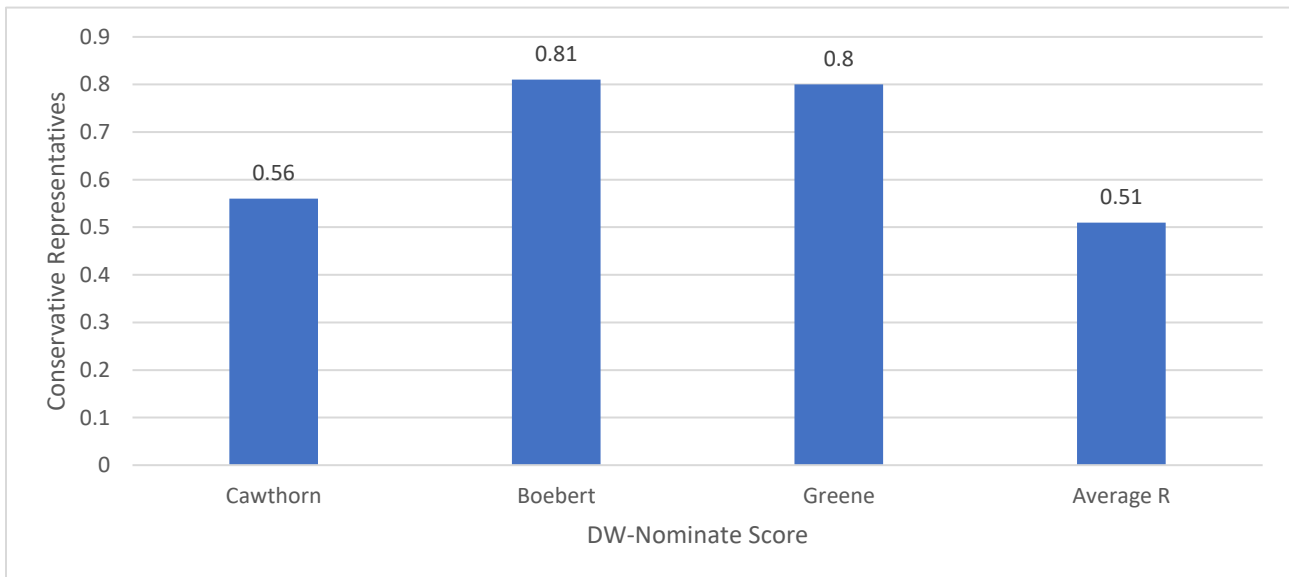
Figure 2.7- Small Dollar Donations to Trump-aligned candidates (2019-2020)



Source: OpenSecrets.org

Each of these conservative candidates outperformed the average small dollar donations. Figure 2.8 will show the DW-Nominate scores for the Representatives shown in Figure 2.7.

Figure 2.8- Adjusted DW-Nominate Scores of Trump-Aligned Candidates



Source: VoteView, DW-Nominate Scores

The DW-Nominate scores for this group of representatives show stronger partisanship than the average republican representative. Although the graph does not signal such a stark contrast, both Representative Green and Boebert's scores are over 55% higher than the average Republican score which signals a much larger divide between these representatives and the average republican representative. Given that these now-representatives were not in office when they earned above average amounts of small dollar donations and when in office earned high DW-Nominate scores, a connection between their strong ideological stances and small dollar donations can be made. Additionally, while both Greene and Boebert were running for political office, these candidates were endorsed by the House Freedom Caucus⁹⁹ which consists of representatives considered more conservative than most republicans.¹⁰⁰

The Squad

In 2018, a group of democratic Congresswomen were elected to Congress; this group consisted of minority women on the more progressive end of the democratic party.¹⁰¹ This group, commonly referred to as "The Squad" has advocated for more progressive policies such as Medicare for All, a \$15 minimum wage, and a "Green New Deal".¹⁰² This group of democratic Congresswomen consists of Alexandria Ocasio-

⁹⁹ "Endorsements," House Freedom Fund, <https://www.housefreedomfund.com/#candidates>.

¹⁰⁰ "The Freedom-From-Reality Caucus," *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-freedom-from-reality-caucus-1490311693?mod=rss_opinion_main.

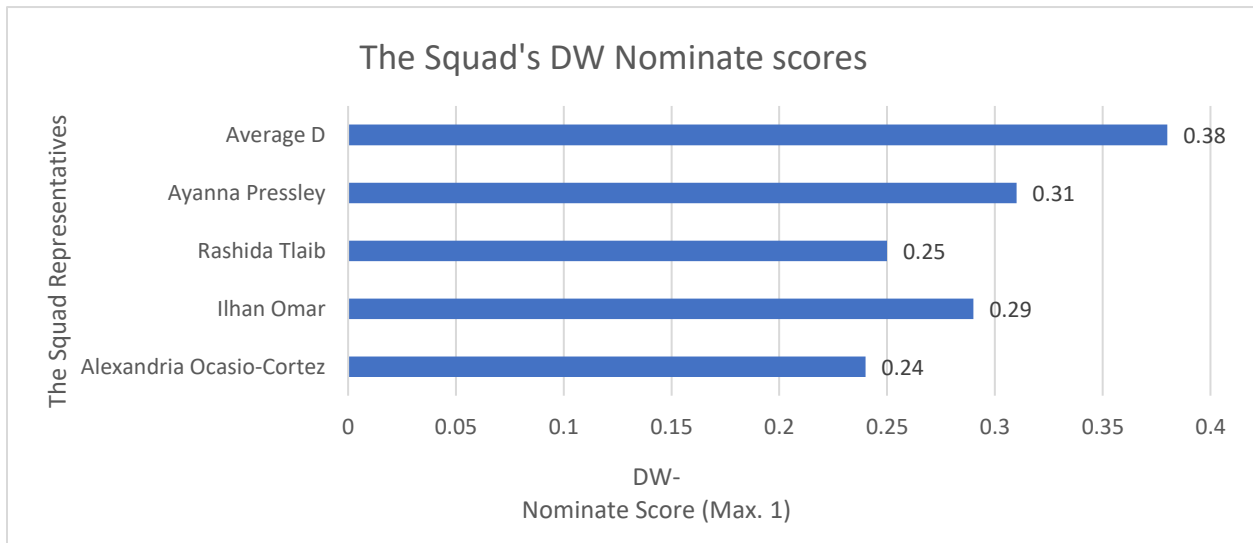
¹⁰¹ Kate Sullivan, "Here are the 4 congresswomen known as 'The Squad' targeted by Trump's racist tweets," *CNN Politics*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/15/politics/who-are-the-squad/index.html>.

¹⁰² Alex Wroblewski, "'The Squad' Keeps the Focus on Bold Policies to Fight Inequality," *Truthout*, July 20, 2019, <https://truthout.org/articles/the-squad-keeps-the-focus-on-bold-policies-to-fight-inequality/>.

Cortez (D-NY), Ilhan Omar (D-MN), Rashida Tlaib (D-WA), and Ayanna Pressley (D-MA). Evaluating them may provide insights into the new emergence of more extreme ends of the political parties and small dollar donations.

As shown earlier in Figure 2.1, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez earned the highest amount of small dollar donations in the 2020 election cycle, earning over \$16 million.¹⁰³ Although she was just finishing her first term in the House, Representative Ocasio-Cortez outraised all other Representatives and Congressional candidates during this time span. Figures 2.9 and 2.10 present the Squad’s small dollar donations and DW-Nominate scores will be presented to see if a connection between these progressive members and small dollar donations can be established.

Figure 2.9- “The Squad” Adjusted DW-Nominate Score



Source: VoteView, DW-Nominate Scores

¹⁰³ “Fundraising Totals: Politicians and Elections: Who Raised the Most?”, OpenSecrets, <https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress>.

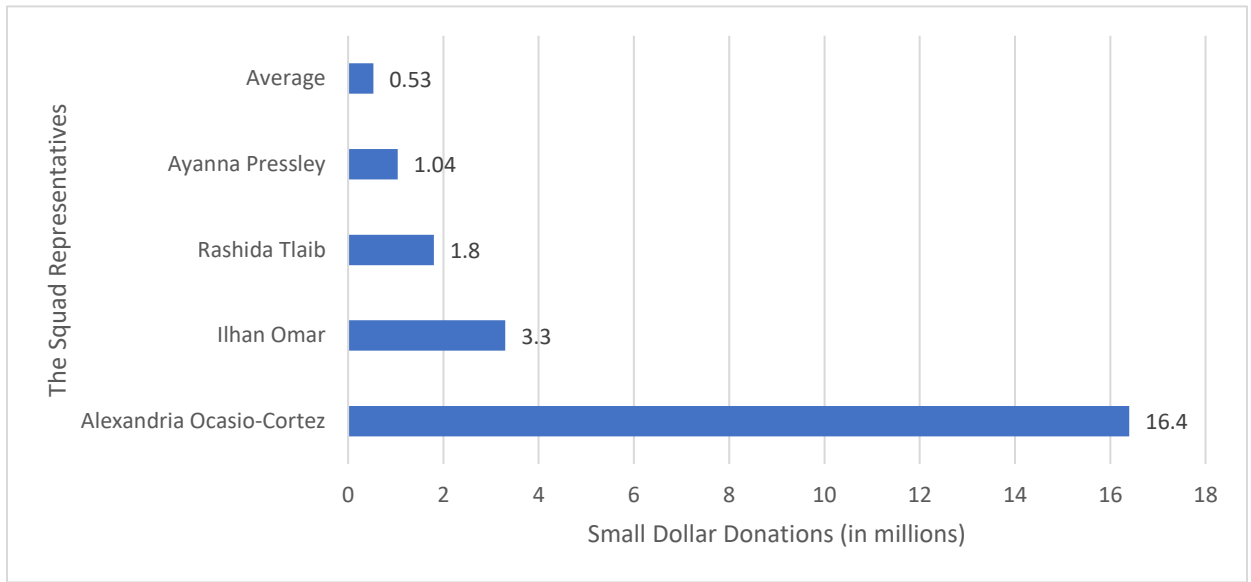
Figure 2.9 indicates that when observing the adjusted DW-Nominate scores for the Representatives in “The Squad”, their scores were lower than the Democratic average signaling that they are less ideologically extreme than the average Democratic Representative. This conflicts with previous information indicating that these Representatives are more ideologically extreme or a part of the more progressive wing of the Democratic party.

In Figure 2.9 it is shown that the DW-Nominate scores are lower than the average House democrat; this may be because DW-Nominate scores only take into account voting record and party line votes rather than other metrics. Some members of The Squad may not align directly with the rest of their party, not because they agree with Republicans but because they disagree with their own party. The DW-Nominate scores may not be the best representation for members of The Squad. All four members of The Squad are members of the House Progressive Caucus¹⁰⁴ which advocates for universal health care and debt-free college.¹⁰⁵ Figure 2.10 displays the small donor fundraising for representatives in the Squad.

¹⁰⁴ “Caucus Members,” Congressional Progressive Caucus, <https://progressives.house.gov/caucus-members>.

¹⁰⁵ “About the CPC,” Congressional Progressive Caucus, <https://progressives.house.gov/about-the-cpc>.

Figure 2.10- “The Squad” Small Dollar Donations (2019-2020)



Source: OpenSecrets.org

Figure 2.10 demonstrates that all representatives in the Squad outperformed the average in terms of small donor fundraising. This echoes what was seen on the republican side as newly elected, more ideologically extreme candidates outperformed the average representative in small donor fundraising ability.

Shortcomings

There are other measures which exist which attempt to measure “ideological extremity” which may be a better measurement for this group. Measures such as GovTrack’s ideology score, which measures Representatives legislative behavior regarding their sponsorships and co-sponsorships on pieces of legislation.¹⁰⁶ This measure indicates how often a Representative drafts legislation which attracts members of the opposite party and how often a Representative co-sponsors legislation drafted by

¹⁰⁶ “2020 Report Cards”, All Representatives / Ideology Score, Govtrack, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/report-cards/2020/house/ideology>.

the opposing party. Given the GovTrack score, during the 116th Congress, all members of The Squad were among the top 15 “most left” members of the Democratic party.¹⁰⁷ This is not to say that one measure of partisanship or ideology is better than another, this measurement is presented to showcase different measurements which can be considered and how these measurements can paint different pictures.

Regardless of the DW-Nominate score which does represent ideological extremity, but rather partisanship and voting record, Figure 2.10 shows that all members of The Squad are above average recipients of small dollar donations. Although Figure 2.10 is somewhat skewed due to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s massive amount of small dollar donations, all other Squad members were more than double the average of a given Representative. This connection is clear, member of the Squad and their progressive policy preferences attract small dollar donations. It is also important to factor in that these Representatives had only been in office for less than two years before earning large amounts of small dollar donations.

Conclusion

A strong connection between large amounts of small donations and strong DW-nominate scores indicating strong partisanship in Congress could not be demonstrated in this paper. There are however some reasons to believe this trend is emerging; with members of The Squad along with members tied to the January 6th event, there is reason to believe high amounts of small donations and the strong ideological viewpoints of these two groups can be shown. All members of these two groups discussed outperformed the

¹⁰⁷ “2020 Report Cards”, All Representatives / Ideology Score, Govtrack, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/report-cards/2020/house/ideology>.

average during the two-year span of 2019-2020. Additionally, all members of The Squad had only been in Congress for a short time before receiving such large amounts of small donations and those members tied to January 6th were not in Congress at all when raising their share of small donations.

When discussing the top 10 recipients of small dollar donations from 2019-2020 these representatives attracted large amounts of small donations, but this list of representatives was very diverse geographically, politically, seniority levels, and leadership status, varied among the top 10. When looking into which representatives attract small dollar donations, looking at those who raised the most is an ideal starting point. However, these Representatives could not be tied to strong adjusted DW-Nominate scores indicating that strong partisanship and a strong party-line voting records correlates to ideologically extreme small donors donating to them.

As mentioned, when discussing members of The Squad, there are other measures in existence which may provide a more distinct measure of ideological extremity such as GovTrack. Additionally, a Representative's ideological viewpoint does not always correlate over to a strong partisan voting record. An example of this would be with Representative Katie Porter (D-CA) who was among the top 10 in small dollar donations from 2019 to 2020, did not have a high DW-Nominate score but is the Deputy Chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus.¹⁰⁸

There are numerous additional factors which may affect an individual's small dollar donations such as campaign style, news coverage, length of time in Congress,

¹⁰⁸ "Caucus Members," Congressional Progressive Caucus, <https://progressives.house.gov/caucus-members>.

amongst others. Considering these other factors, Representative Devin Nunes (R-CA), Representative Jim Jordan (R-OH), and Representative Adam Schiff (D-CA), both of whom were among the top 10 recipients, gained news coverage and airtime given their prominent roles during the Trump impeachment trials which took place during the 116th Congress. Nunes' strong defense of, and Schiff's strong attack of, former President Trump may have attracted small dollar donations, but these actions did not translate into a high adjusted DW-Nominate score. These factors indicate that more variables than just a Representative's ideological extremity plays a role in their ability to attract small dollar donations. These Representative's point to the potential variables of discussion in the media as a potential contributor to small dollar donation trends affecting members of the House of Representatives.

Chapter 3: Exerting Influence: Small Donors

Small donors, the term commonly used to refer to individuals who contribute less than \$200 cumulatively to a political candidate's reelection campaign over the course of an election cycle, have become more influential in recent election cycles. In the past, small donors have had some impact on elections,¹⁰⁹ but more recently, this type of donor has become more influential in the political process. As small donors continue to exert political influence through campaign contributions, a deeper analysis of where small donors choose to donate their money is necessary to understand this groups emerging role in the political election process. This paper conducts a deeper look at small donors by utilizing case studies on the House of Representatives with the most small donor donations over the past 10 years. Using these representatives as our guide, analysis of politicians and small donors can occur. This paper uses data to show whether a connection between small donors can be made with legislatively effective Members, "popular" Members, or Member frequently discussed in the media.

Small Donors and Campaign Finance Law

A "small donor" is an individual who donates \$200 or less directly to a political candidate. When a campaign receives a donation from a small donor, the campaign does not need to disclose the donor's personal information to the Federal Elections Commission (FEC). Small donors are different than large donors. Large donors are individuals who donate more than \$200 in an election cycle. Large donor contributions, including their personal information, must be disclosed by the campaign to the FEC.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Lipsitz, K., & Panagopoulos, C. (2011). "Filled coffers: Campaign Contributions and Contributors in the 2008 Elections." *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10.

¹¹⁰ Federal Election Campaign Act, 52 U.S.C. § 30102(c).

Large donors are typically wealthier individuals who may regularly donate to a variety of political candidates or Political Action Committees (PAC).¹¹¹ All individual donors may contribute up to \$5,600 per election cycle (e.g., a primary or general elections).

Campaigns must disclose donors to the FEC if an individual's donations to a single candidate or PAC exceed a total of \$200 in total for an election cycle.¹¹²

This research focuses on small donors who donate directly to candidate campaigns rather than large donors who donate directly to candidates or those who utilize other types of campaign financing such as PACs or SuperPACs.

Emergence of Small Donors

Individuals who donate small amounts to political candidates have always existed. The internet, however, has changed the ability of campaigns to target small donors and to increase the number of individuals willing to give less than \$200 in an election cycle.¹¹³

Since 2016, small donors have begun to play a more significant factor in Congressional elections.¹¹⁴ Congressional republicans and democrats have implemented techniques to harness small dollar donors—Republicans created WinRed while Democrats use ActBlue. These platforms were created to make harnessing political donations easier and more accessible. WinRed and ActBlue are a type of “one-stop-shop” where individuals have the ability to donate to any political candidate(s) of their

¹¹¹ Culberson, Tyler, Michael P. McDonald, and Suzanne M. Robbins. “Small Donors in Congressional Elections.” *American Politics Research* 47, no. 5 (September 2019): 970–99.

¹¹² “Campaign Guideline,” Federal Election Commission United States of America, <https://www.fec.gov/resources/cms-content/documents/candgui.pdf>.

¹¹³ Lipsitz, K., & Panagopoulos, C. (2011). “Filled coffers: Campaign Contributions and Contributors in the 2008 Elections.” *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10.

¹¹⁴ Culberson, Tyler, Michael P. McDonald, and Suzanne M. Robbins. “Small Donors in Congressional Elections.” *American Politics Research* 47, no. 5 (September 2019): 970–99.

choosing.¹¹⁵ Democrats were the first to utilize this type of platform when ActBlue was created in 2004 and Republicans followed suit after ActBlue cemented itself as a new way of political fundraising and implemented their version of the platform in 2019 with WinRed.

During the 2018 Congressional election cycle, through the ActBlue platform, over \$1.6 billion dollars was collected for Democratic candidates, donated by over 6 million people¹¹⁶ with an average donation of \$39.50, which accounted for over half of the individual donations given to Democratic Congressional candidates.¹¹⁷ On the opposite side for the Republicans, WinRed recorded over \$1 billion in fundraising for Congressional and Presidential candidates in their first 15 months with an average individual donation of \$47.¹¹⁸

This background information highlights how significant small donor fundraising has become and its potential importance in Congressional elections. Platforms such as ActBlue and WinRed demonstrate how easy it is to donate to an individual politician(s) of choice through one platform.

Variables on Small Donors

Past research has found that small donors tend to be more extreme ideologically, but since these findings, few researchers have focused on any other potential variables which play a role on small donor's donation habits to members of Congress aside from

¹¹⁵ Pildes, Richard. "Small-Donor-Based Campaign-Finance Reform and Political Polarization" *The Yale Law Journal Forum*, (2019).

¹¹⁶ Ben Kamisar, "Meet the Press Blog: Latest news, analysis and data driving the political discussion," <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/blog/meet-press-blog-latest-news-analysis-data-driving-political-discussion-n988541/ncrd1112901#blogHeader>.

¹¹⁷ Actblue "2018 Election Cycle in Review", <https://report.actblue.com> [<https://perma.cc/GZ5H-HV86>].

¹¹⁸ WinRed, "Zero to \$1,000,000,000 in 15 Months", <https://winred.com/blog/1b/>.

ideological extremity. Although few researchers have gone in depth into additional variables that might affect small donors, some research regarding the legislative effectiveness of Congresspeople and donations from individuals has been conducted along with research tying small donors to Congressional leadership and discussion in various types of media outlets. This paper focuses additional research on members of the House of Representatives popular with small donors and these Representatives' legislative effectiveness, their popularity in Congress, and their mentions in national news outlets.

Legislative Effectiveness

Defining legislative effectiveness has historically been a difficult task. Past research has found that the most legislatively effective members of Congress are electorally secure,¹¹⁹ senior,¹²⁰ and a member of the majority party.¹²¹ Additional research has shown that although members of the majority party are more legislatively effective, members of the minority party can demonstrate their legislative effectiveness by introducing legislation and working it through the committee process. It has been found that that a representative demonstrating their legislative effectiveness while in the minority will likely translate to being more legislatively effective once their party in the majority.¹²² This paper uses averages of legislative effectiveness scores for both the

¹¹⁹ Fenno, Richard F. 1973. "*Congressmen in committees*". Vol. 6. Brown.

¹²⁰ Frantzich, Stephen. 1979. "Who Makes Our Laws? The Legislative Effectiveness of Members of the U. S. Congress." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3: 409–28.

¹²¹ Frantzich, Stephen. 1979. "Who Makes Our Laws? The Legislative Effectiveness of Members of the U. S. Congress." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 3: 409–28.

¹²² Volden, Craig, and Alan E. Wiseman. 2012. "Measuring Legislative Effectiveness," in Dodd, Lawrence C., and Bruce I. Oppenheimer. *Congress Reconsidered*, 10th Ed. Washington DC: CQ Press.

majority and minority party to compare legislative effectiveness and small donor attractiveness.

Perhaps the most widely used method to measure legislative effectiveness was developed by Craig Volden and Alan Wiseman, the legislative effectiveness scores (LES). The LES uses 9 weighted variables for each member of Congress, with each Representative given a unique score. The nine factors used create LES are: how many bills (excluding all resolutions) each legislator introduces, how many of those bills receive action in committee, how many pass out of committee and receive action on the floor of the House, how many pass the House, and how many become law.¹²³ Additionally, these five indicators are used separately for bills which are considered commemorative, substantive, and bills which are considered both.¹²⁴ The differentiation is necessary as a bill to rename a post office requires less legislative bandwidth compared to a bill which makes overarching changes to our tax code. This differentiation also considers members of Congress who introduced a large number of bills which do not go anywhere in committee or come up for a vote and rewards those who introduced bills which receive further action beyond introduction.

This paper will attempt to find connections between legislatively effective members of the House with small donor fundraising. Although existing literature has not established this connection, research has been done to connect donations from lobbyists

¹²³ Volden, C., & Wiseman, A.(2014. "Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers." *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.*

¹²⁴ Volden, C., & Wiseman, A. 2014. "Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers." *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.*

to members of Congress with high legislative effectiveness scores.¹²⁵ This research has found that both Political Action Committees (PACs) and individual lobbyists take a Congressperson's legislative effectiveness into consideration when making a political donation and that having a higher LES correlates to a substantial increase in contributions from PACs¹²⁶ and individual lobbyists.¹²⁷ Although this research focused solely on PACs and lobbyists, further research regarding small individual donors and legislative effectiveness can provide additional insight as to whether small donors implement similar strategies as individual lobbyists when making donations to members of Congress.

Agenda Setting Power

Individuals do not favor incumbent candidates but rather are motivated more purely by their ideological preferences.¹²⁸ Ideological preferences encourage individuals to donate to politicians who do not represent their home district or even state. Individuals who donate to politicians outside of their home district or state are similarly highly motivated by their ideological preferences influencing them to donate to a politician they strongly agree with ideologically or donate to the challenger of an individual whom they strongly disagree with ideologically.¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Gui, Fred, 2021 "Reward of Legislating: Member's Legislative Performance and Lobbyists' Personal Contributions." *Social Science Research Network Online Journal*, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3605861.

¹²⁶ Box-Steffensmeier, Janet M and J Tobin Grant. 1999. "All in a day's work: The financial rewards of legislative effectiveness." *Legislative Studies Quarterly* pp. 511–523.

¹²⁷ Gui, Fred, 2021. "Reward of Legislating: Member's Legislative Performance and Lobbyists' Personal Contributions." *Social Science Research Network Online Journal*, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3605861.

¹²⁸ Bonica, Adam. 2016. "Avenues of Influence: on the Political Expenditures of Corporations and Their Directors and Executives." *Business and Politics* 18, no. 4: 367. ; Michael Barber. 2016. "Donation Motivations: Testing Theories of Access and Ideology." *Political Research Quarterly*: Volume 69 Issue 10.

¹²⁹ Barber, Michael J., Brandice Canes-Wrone, and Sharece Thrower. 2017. "Ideologically Sophisticated Donors: Which Candidates Do Individual Contributors Finance?" *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2: 278.

Although ideological parallels are important to individual donors, ideological similarities do not always correspond to enactments of legislation regarding these policy stances. Individual donors may not be concerned with the passage of legislation but rather just the introduction of legislation by members of Congress and their dominance in publicity, what researchers have called, “show horses”.¹³⁰ Lack of cosponsors does not however stop Representatives from introducing legislation that represents and signals their ideological stances and preferences to voters.

Small donors choose to donate to politician due to their ideological stances rather than in attempt to influence their policy stances.¹³¹ Additionally, representatives who receive a majority of their fundraising through out-of-district fundraising are more responsive to the preferences of the national party base compared to their district.¹³² Out-of-District donors reward politicians who they view as representative of their ideological and policy viewpoints although this politician does not directly represent them.¹³³ Additionally, this signals that small donors utilize specific methods when choosing which politicians to donate to based on partisanship and policy stances compared to any aspect of randomness.¹³⁴

As Representatives find themselves more beholden to the national party base, ways to showcase these policy stances are necessary. Representatives introduce

¹³⁰ James L. Payne . 1980. “Show Horses v. Work Horses in the United States House of Representatives,” *Polity* 12(3), 428-456.

¹³¹ Baker, Anne E. 2016. “Getting Short-Changed? The Impact of Outside Money on District Representation.” *Social Science Quarterly* 97: 1096–107.

¹³² Canes-Wrone, Brandice, and Miller, Kenneth. “Out-of-District Donors and Representation in the US House.” *Legislative Studies Quarterly, Early View*. April 3, 2021.

¹³³ Baker, Anne E. 2020. “The Partisan and Policy Motivations of Political Donors Seeking Surrogate Representation in House Elections.” *Political Behavior* 42: 1035–54.

¹³⁴ Baker, Anne E. 2020. “The Partisan and Policy Motivations of Political Donors Seeking Surrogate Representation in House Elections.” *Political Behavior* 42: 1035–54.

legislation for a wide variety of reasons such as for messaging purposes.¹³⁵ As representatives choose to introduce legislation purely to signal their ideological and policy preferences, other representatives who agree with the legislation may choose to “co-sponsor” legislation to signal their support for the legislation or policy stance.¹³⁶ A representative who is able to attract a large number of cosponsors to their legislation can signal a certain amount of “soft-power” or “agenda-setting” power to the electorate, political parties, and other representatives.

Discussion in Media

Network television covers more extreme lawmakers than moderate ones.¹³⁷ Such coverage may encourage lawmakers to make more extreme stances or encourage more extreme rhetoric. This extreme rhetoric can be exacerbated by the polarizing of the American electorate and the news media. It has also been found that several of the top small donor fundraisers in the House of Representatives in the most recent Congress (the 116th) have earned large amount of media coverage such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Representatives earn media attention for a wide variety of reasons aside from extreme rhetoric such as: their primary or general election may be followed by national media, their position in Congress may attract news coverage, or variables outside of their control. Examples of each of these can be found in the most recent Congress including

¹³⁵ Volden, C., & Wiseman, A. 2014. “Legislative Effectiveness in the United States Congress: The Lawmakers.” *Cambridge: Cambridge University Press*.

¹³⁶ Harbridge, L. 2013. “Compromise vs. Compromises: Conceptions of Bipartisanship in the American Electorate” Northwestern University.

¹³⁷ Wagner, Michael W., and Mike Gruszczyński. 2018. “Who Gets Covered? Ideological Extremity and News Coverage of Members of the U.S. Congress, 1993 to 2013.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 95, no. 3: 670–90.

with Representative Ocasio-Cortez who received large amounts of media coverage after beating an incumbent Democrat and member of House leadership, Devin Nunes who Chaired the House Intelligence Committee during the impeachment proceedings involving former President Donald Trump, and Steve Scalise who generated a significant amount of coverage following being shot in fall of 2017.¹³⁸ Although these examples provide only anecdotal evidence, these are just a few examples of representatives who earned large amounts of small donor fundraising and had large amounts of media coverage.

Open Secrets, an organization that “follows the money in politics”¹³⁹ noted that in the first quarter of 2021, many of the Congresspeople who did the best with small donors were described as “headline-grabbing lawmakers.”¹⁴⁰ If the identified pattern holds over periods of time, it could encourage lawmakers to create controversy or say more outlandish statements in order to garner additional media coverage and in turn attract more small donors. Former representative and presidential candidate John Delaney was quoted saying that, “If you need to raise a dollar online, you don’t talk about bipartisan solutions... You talk about extreme partisan positions.”¹⁴¹

This literature has been compounded by findings which discusses small donors and the polarizing aspects of the media. It has been found that those who make donations to politicians tend to be more extreme ideologically. It has also been found that more

¹³⁸ Pildes, Richard. 2019. “Small-Donor-Based Campaign-Finance Reform and Political Polarization” *The Yale Law Journal Forum*.

¹³⁹ “Fundraising Totals: Politicians and Elections: Who Raised the Most?”, OpenSecrets, <https://www.opensecrets.org/members-of-congress>.

¹⁴⁰ Alyce McFadden. 2021. “Small-dollar donors get behind headline-grabbing lawmakers,” *Center for Responsive Politics*.

¹⁴¹ Gerald F. Seib, Delaney’s Complaint: Democrats’ Primary System Tilts Left, WALL ST.J. (Oct. 28, 2019).

ideologically extreme candidates are able to fundraise higher amounts from individuals compared to more centrist candidates.¹⁴²

Introduction

This paper focuses on the 113th-116th Congresses (2013-2020); This period was selected as the 113th Congress was the first Congress where legislative effectiveness scores were provided. Additionally, this paper focuses solely on the 10 members of the House of Representatives who received the most small donor donations and will make comparisons between these members with their legislative effectiveness, their agenda-setting power, and their mentions in the media.

The legislative effectiveness scores were created utilizing Volden and Wiseman's methods described above. Their data and methodology are shared on their website.¹⁴³ As noted, the legislative effectiveness scores for members of the majority party are typically higher than the members of those in the minority party. The average LES for both the majority and minority parties were calculated for this assessment and the respective party average is shown next to each member in the data set.

Agenda setting power is difficult to measure. This paper utilizes GovTrack's leadership score.¹⁴⁴ The leadership score tracks a Congressperson's ability to attract cosponsors to their legislation demonstrating other Members support for a given Congressperson's ideas, proposed laws and policy stances. Scholars have found that

¹⁴² Ensley, Michael J. "Individual Campaign Contributions and Candidate Ideology." *Public Choice* 138, no. 1/2 (2009): 221.

¹⁴³ Center for Effective Lawmaking, "Scores for the Members of the House." <https://thelawmakers.org/find-representatives>.

¹⁴⁴ GovTrack, "2020 Report Cards, Leadership Score." <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/members/report-cards/2020/house-sophomores/leadership>.

legislative co-sponsorships reflect a legislator's earnest support for a measure.¹⁴⁵ The official stance of co-sponsorship signals that a member truly endorses or supports a measure more so than a candidate or Member claiming support in a speech or social media post. This paper will focus on GovTrack's leadership score which accounts for a Representative's ability to attract co-sponsorships to their legislation signaling support for their legislation from other members and demonstrating a Representative's soft power or agenda setting power.

Finally, this paper includes a case study focused on the number of times a Representative is mentioned in a variety of news outlets including Fox News, CNN.com, The Associated Press, the New York Times, and Politico. This selection of news outlets was chosen to include a wide array of news platforms and ways to access each outlet including cable television, online and print newspaper articles. Additionally, this selection of media outlets includes all national media outlets as it has been found that those politicians who gain more national media coverage earn more donations from small donors.¹⁴⁶

Legislative Effectiveness

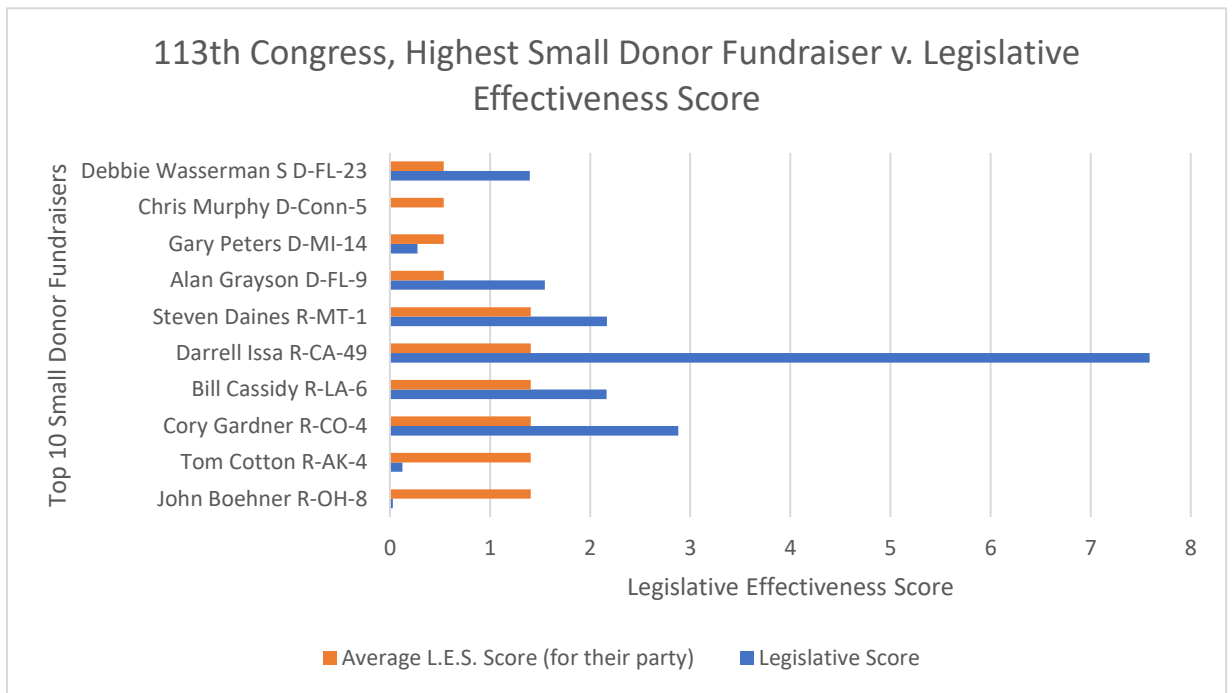
As noted, this paper will focus on three different areas which may contribute to a representative's small donor fundraising ability: legislative effectiveness, ability to attract cosponsors, and mentions in the media. The analysis of the 10 Representatives with the most small dollar donations in the 113th to 116th Congresses utilizes these variables. In

¹⁴⁵ Harbridge, L. 2013. "Compromise vs. Compromises: Conceptions of Bipartisanship in the American Electorate" Northwestern University.

¹⁴⁶ Pildes, Richard. "Small-Donor-Based Campaign-Finance Reform and Political Polarization" *The Yale Law Journal Forum*, (2019).

the Figures below (Figure 3.1-Figure 3.4), the 10 representatives with the most small donor donations will be listed by party affiliation (this will make it easier to compare the average LES) along with their respective LES for that Congress provided by a website created by Volden and Wiseman which creates this score utilizing the metrics discussed . Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the average LES for the party in the majority will be higher than for the minority. The graph does not show the top 10 small donor fundraisers in order but rather sorts them by party affiliation.

Figure 3.1- Highest Small Donor Fundraising v. Legislative Effectiveness Score, 113th Congress

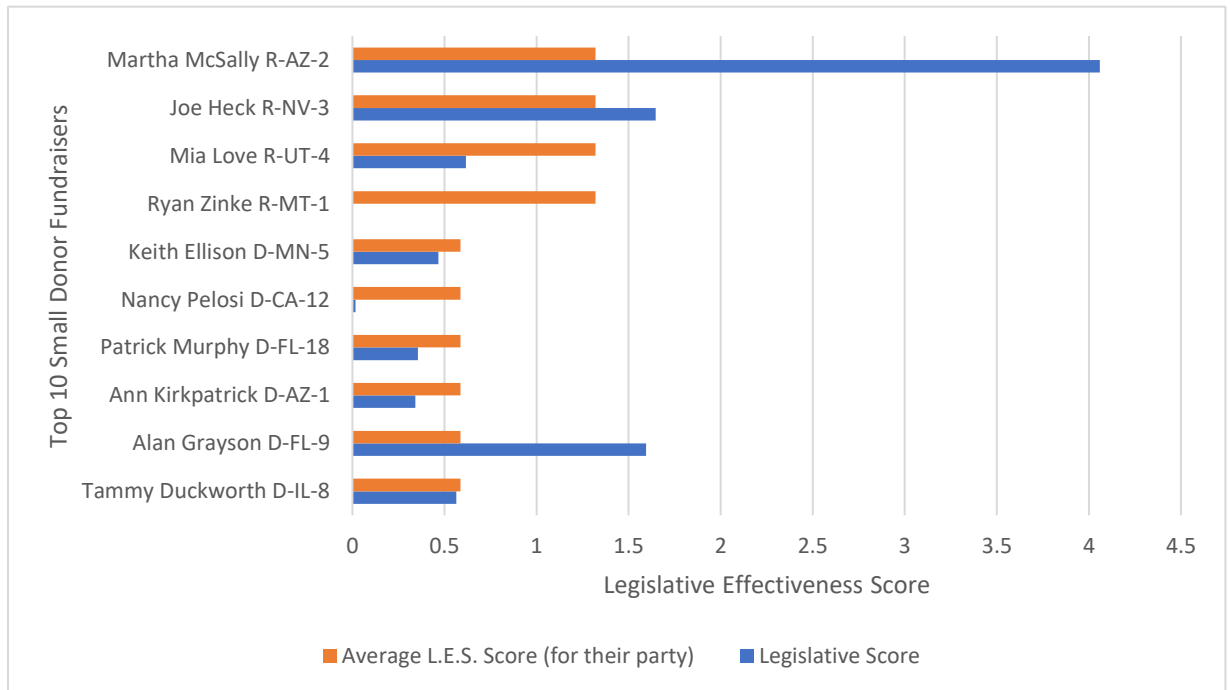


Source: OpenSecrets.org, Center for Effective Lawmaking

As shown in Figure 3.1, 6 of the 10 highest small donor fundraisers from the 113th Congress (2013-2014), had legislative effectiveness scores higher than their party’s average. Given the scale of this graph, it is clear that several of the representatives listed

here significantly outperformed other members of their party in legislative effectiveness. Representatives like Debbie Wasserman-Schultz and Alan Grayson for the Democratic Party were highly effective lawmakers, especially given that their party was in the minority for this Congress. Republican lawmakers like Darrel Issa, Cory Gardner, Bill Cassidy and Steven Daines all were highly effective lawmakers. Other representatives like Tom Cotton and Gary Peters underperformed in LES but still performed well with small donors signaling that legislative effectiveness does not always demonstrate popularity with small donors. This graph does demonstrate insight into House Representative’s demonstrating their legislative effectiveness and eventually being elected to the Senate; 6 of the 10 then-Representatives in Figure 3.1 were eventually elected to the Senate. Figure 3.2 will show parallel data on Representatives in the 114th Congress.

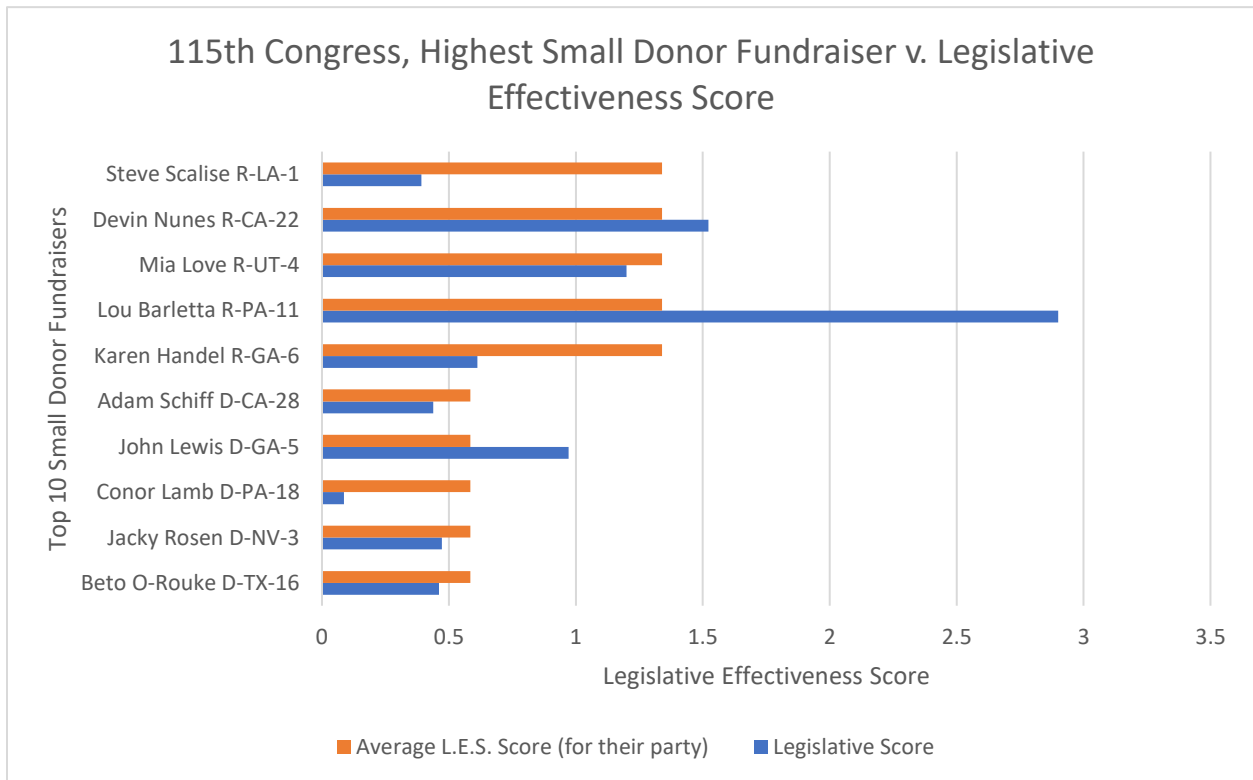
Figure 3.2 -Highest Small Donor Fundraising v. Legislative Effectiveness Score, 114th Congress



Source: OpenSecrets.org, Center for Effective Lawmaking

Contrasting Figure 3.1, the majority of Representatives who received the most small donor fundraising were less legislatively effective than the average member of the political party. This is highlighted by the Democrats on this graph, only 1 of the 6 Representatives had a LES higher than the average for their party highlighting that low legislative effectiveness can still allow lawmakers to be popular with small donors. Representative Grayson again demonstrated his popularity with small donors and his high legislative effectiveness regardless of being in the minority party. Figure 3.3 will show the data for the 115th Congress.

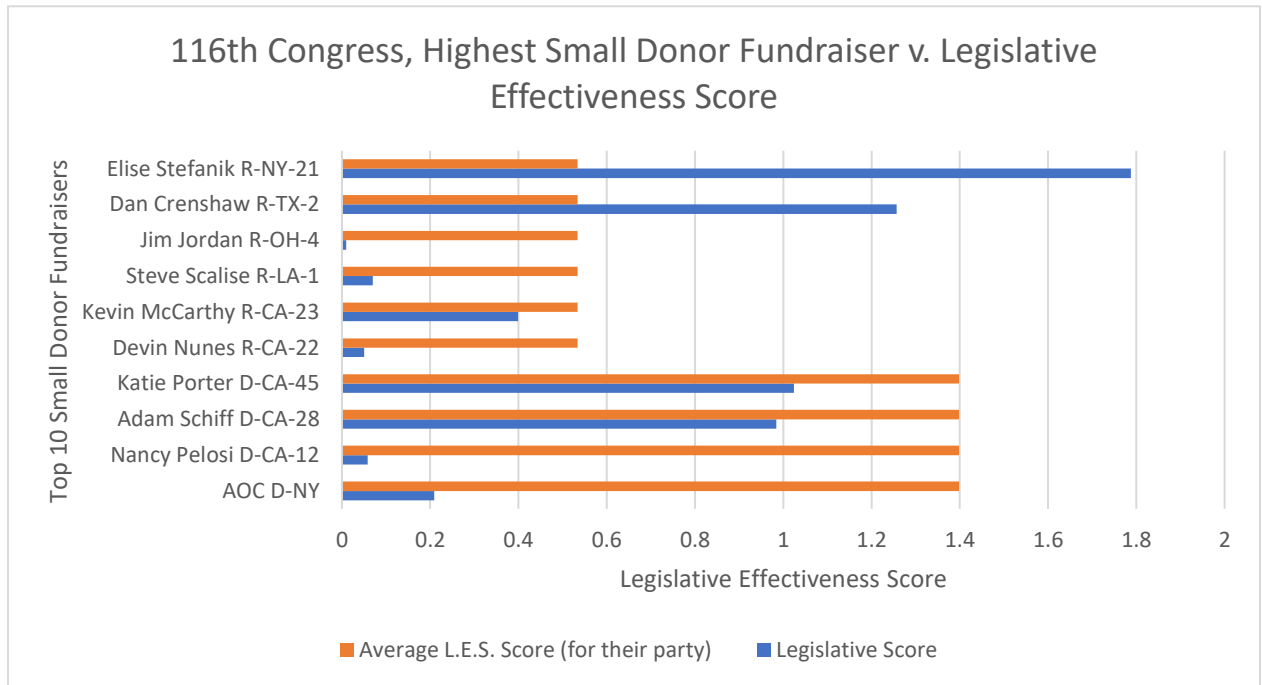
Figure 3.3- Highest Small Donor Fundraising v. Legislative Effectiveness Score, 114th Congress



Source: OpenSecrets.org, Center for Effective Lawmaking

As was the case with Figure 3.2 and the 114th Congress, the majority of lawmakers for both parties who were most popular with small donors were less legislatively effective than the average member of their party. Similar to the 114th, there are 3 outliers who were most legislatively effective than the average, but the majority were not. The trend of being less legislatively effective on average, while still maintaining high popularity with small donors spans both political parties and is in clear contrast to the literature regarding individual lobbyists rewarding legislatively effective members. This indicates that when looking to make donations to members of Congress, small donors and lobbyists have different factors in mind. Figure 3.4 will show data on the 116th Congress, the final Congress being looked at for this case study.

Figure 3.4- Highest Small Donor Fundraising v. Legislative Effectiveness Score, 113th Congress



Source: OpenSecrets.org, Center for Effective Lawmaking

Continuing on the trend seen in the previous two Congresses, the majority of lawmakers of both political parties who were the most popular with small donors were not as legislatively effective than the average member of their political party. In this case, all of the Democrats for this Congress were less legislatively effective than average and only two of the Republicans were more legislatively effective than the average. This clear trend indicates that small donors are not taking legislative effectiveness into account when making small donors the way that individual lobbyists do.

Another trend seen in this analysis is that in the latter Congresses, even those members who were more legislatively effective than the average, their LES is only slightly higher than the average rather than significantly higher as seen in the 113th Congress with Darrell Issa or the 114th Congress with Martha McSally. Individual lobbyists who rely on lawmakers to assist them and their clients put a higher value on a representative's legislative effectiveness than a small donor who is not a registered lobbyist. This follows the existing literature that individuals are highly motivated by the ideology rather than by a representative's legislative effectiveness or ability to get things introduced and passed in the House.

Soft Power in Congress

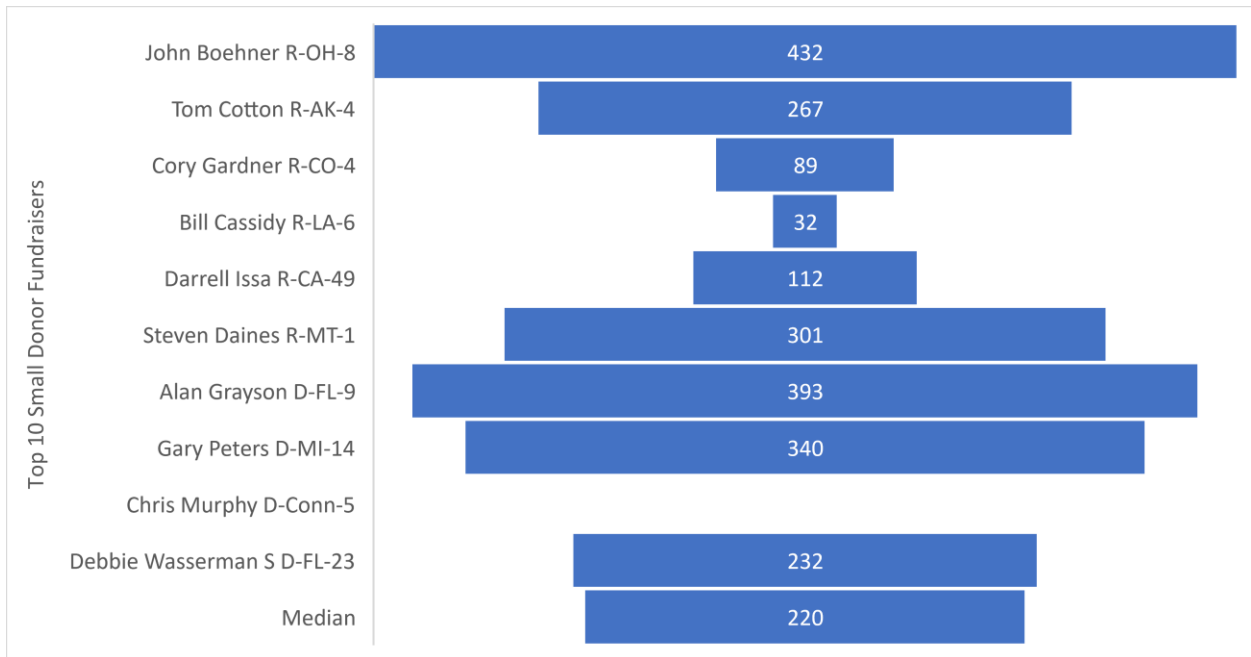
Another potential metric to consider when looking into variables affecting representative's popularity with small donors is a member's "agenda setting" power. In this case, utilization of GovTrack's leadership score will be used to signal a representative's agenda setting ability. This metric measures a representative's ability to

attract cosponsors to their legislation which as the literature has shown, co-sponsorships demonstrate a representative's genuine support for a piece of legislation. Thousands of bills are introduced in Congress each session for a plethora of reasons, some are for messaging purposes to signal to their supporters what their legislative priorities are. As shown in existing literature, small donors are highly motivated by their ideology, meaning small donors may be attracted to representatives who introduce legislation that they support. This study intends to shed light onto whether representatives who introduce legislation which is popular with other representatives also demonstrates a popularity with small donors. While co-sponsorship to a piece of legislation does not indicate that that legislation is more or less likely to become law, the leadership score attempts to measure legislative popularity with other members of Congress. If legislation is popular with other members of Congress, this can indicate an agenda setting ability for representatives. As done in the previous section, the 113th through 116th Congresses will be utilized.

In Figure 3.5 through Figure 3.8, the top 10 representatives popular with small donors and their leadership ranking will be shown. Rather than simply putting a representative's leadership score in numerical value, their leadership score ranking compared to all other representatives in the House will be shown. This will provide additional context to demonstrate where each representative's ranking is compared to the other members of Congress. The median ranking for each Congress will also be shown in the Figures to provide additional context to how these representatives compare to the other top 10 small donor fundraisers as well as to the House of Representatives at large.

When reading Figures 3.5-3.8, please note that a lower ranking signals a higher leadership score, and a higher ranking signals a lower leadership score. For instance, take Representative Bill Cassidy for example, Representative Cassidy has the 32nd highest leadership score in the House meaning his introduced legislation is highly popular with other Representatives. Representative Alan Grayson, however, has a lower leadership score of 393 meaning out of the 440 Representatives who have leadership scores in this Congress, he ranks 393 of 440. The median score in each graph puts into reference what the median rating for each Congress would be.

Figure 3.5- Highest Small Donor Fundraiser v. GovTrack Leadership Score, 113th Congress¹⁴⁷



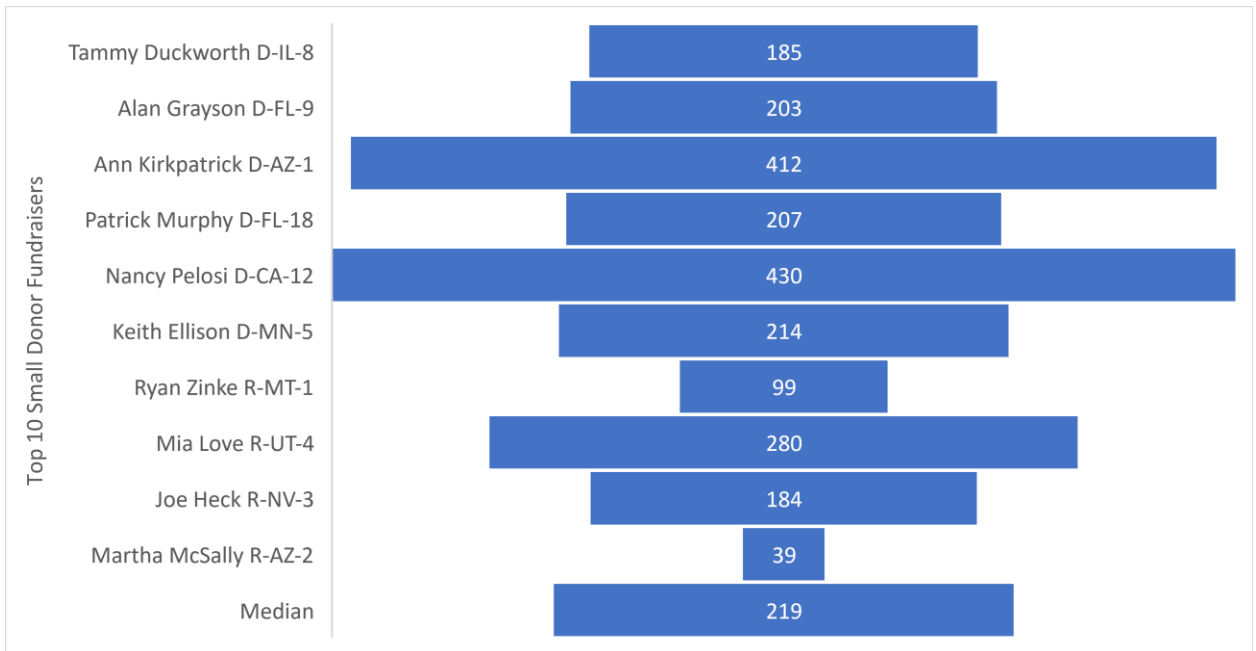
Source: GovTrack.us

Figure 3.5 shows that the majority of Representatives most popular with small donors have a lower leadership score than the media representative. The only

¹⁴⁷ The data for Representative Chris Murphy was unavailable.

representatives with a higher leadership score are Cory Gardner, Bill Cassidy, and Darrell Issa who are all members of the Republican Party. It is surprising that only two representatives are among the top 100 in terms of leadership score ranking, signaling that many of these representatives did not attract a large number of cosponsors for their legislation. The number of cosponsors that a piece of legislation has does not necessarily correlate to a better chance of passage in the House of Representatives; this is why legislative effectiveness was also used in this study. The GovTrack leadership score is being used to purely measure whether a Representative’s introduced legislation attracts cosponsors and signals its popularity within and outside of Congress. Figure 3.6 will show the data for the Representatives from the 114th Congress.

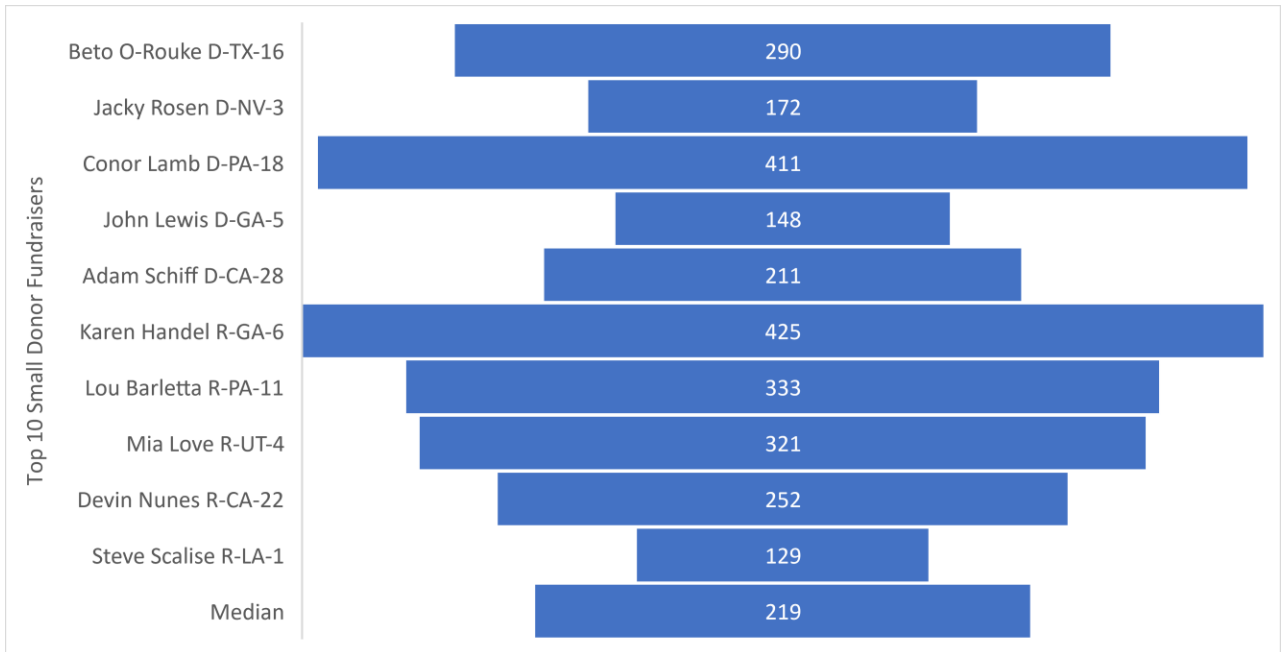
Figure 3.6- Highest Small Donor Fundraiser v. GovTrack Leadership Score, 114th Congress



Source: GovTrack.us

The data presented in Figure 3.6 differs from that of Figure 3.5; in Figure 3.6 it is shown that a majority of the Representatives most popular with small donors had leadership scores higher than the median. A total of seven representatives for this Congress had a ranking above the media member, although some representatives were very near the median. Additionally, similar to Figure 3.5 and the 113th Congress, only two representatives ranked in the top 100 with Martha McSally and Ryan Zinke, signaling their legislative popularity with other representatives in the House. Figure 3.7 will show the data for the 115th Congress.

Figure 3.7- Highest Small Donor Fundraiser v. GovTrack Leadership Score, 115th Congress

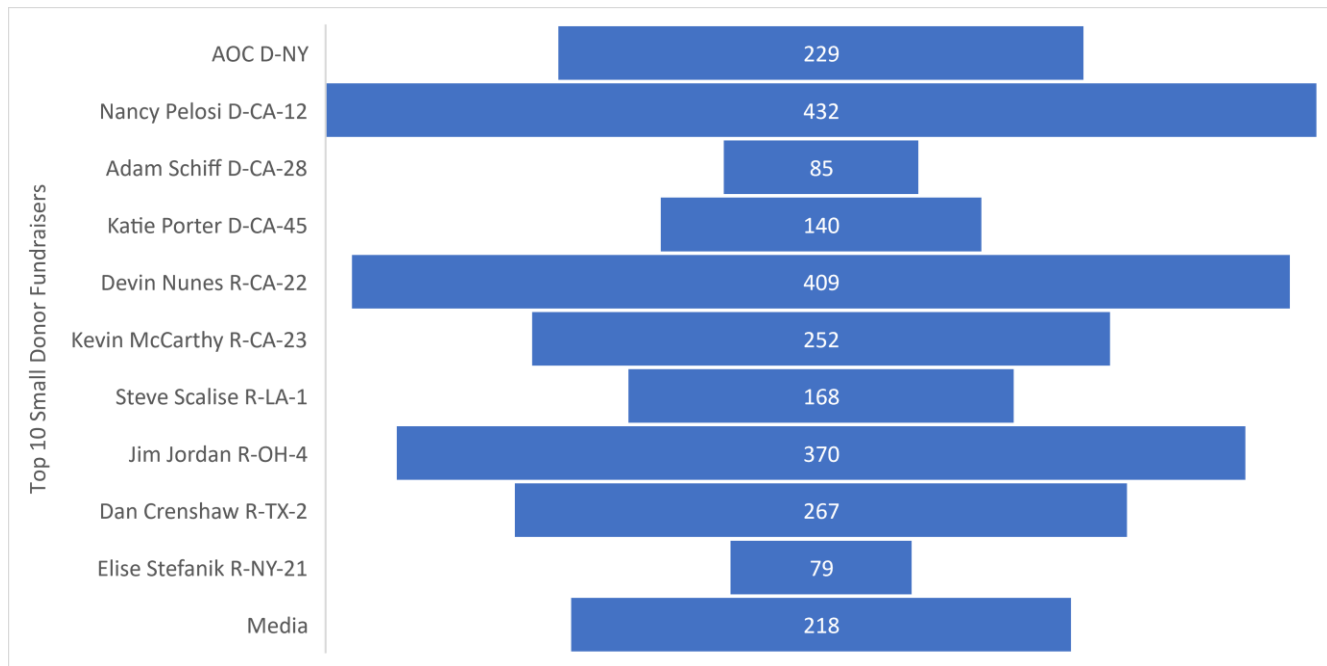


Source: GovTrack.us

Figure 3.7 signals that the trend from the 114th Congress where a majority of Representatives were in the top half of House in their leadership score does not continue

in the 115th Congress. Only 4 representatives from the 115th Congress were in the top half of all representatives in attracting cosponsors to their legislation with none of the representatives coming in the top 100. The data on this topic does not seem to be following any specific trend as few similarities are found between the different Congresses. Figure 3.8 will show the 116th Congress.

Figure 3.8- Highest Small Donor Fundraiser v. GovTrack Leadership Score, 116th Congress



Source: GovTrack.us

Differing slightly from the previous Congress, four representatives were among the top half of leadership scores for the 116th Congress with two representatives in the top 100. The ability of Representatives to attract cosponsors to their legislation does not have an overall effect of their ability to attract small donors. Although small donors are highly

motivated by their ideology, Representatives who attract a large number of cosponsors, or other representatives who support their legislation, this does not translate into attractiveness to small dollar donors.

Figures 3.5 through 3.8 demonstrate that a high leadership score which measures the ability of a representative to attract cosponsorships to their legislation signaling a level of popularity within Congress and soft power did not correlate to that representative being the recipient of a large amount of small donor donations. This trend spanned all four Congresses looked at, although some representatives ranked highly in their leadership score, the majority of representatives did not.

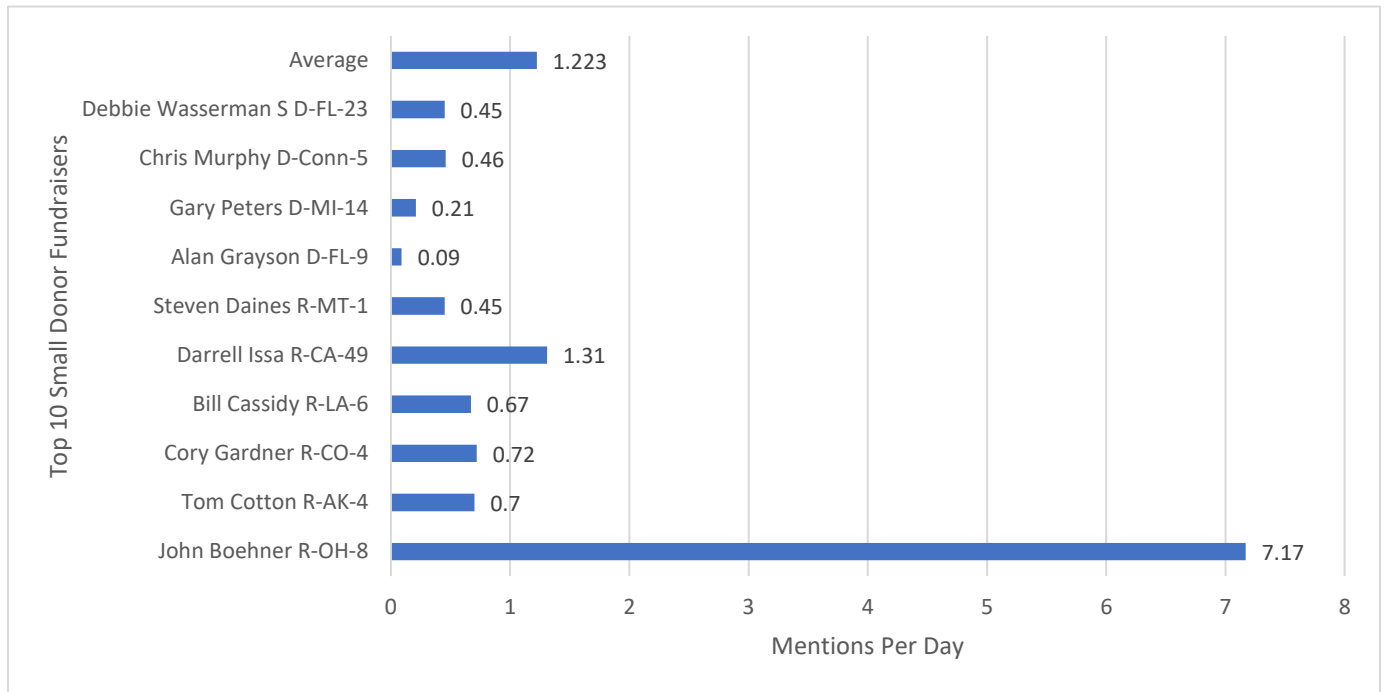
Mentions in the Media

Small donors can be attracted to politicians who are regularly in the news or who may be considered “Head-line grabbers”¹⁴⁸. There are also connections between those representatives who do earn the most media as being some of the more ideologically extreme candidates.¹⁴⁹ Without taking into account a measure of ideological extremity in this chapter, with the utilization of Lexus Nexus, it is possible to track and count the number of times a representative’s name is mentioned in various news outlets over a specific span of time. For this study, five news outlets were chosen: Fox News, CNN.com, Politico, the Association Press, and the New York Times. For each Congress, the information presented shows how many times per day each representative was

¹⁴⁸ Alyce McFadden “Small-dollar donors get behind headline-grabbing lawmakers,” *Center for Responsive Politics*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2021/04/small-dollar-donors-q121-headline-congress/>.

mentioned cumulatively by all the news outlets mentioned during that specific Congress. Figure 3.9 will present the data for the 113th Congress.

Figure 3.9- Highest Small Donor Fundraiser v. Mentions in National News Outlets, 113th Congress

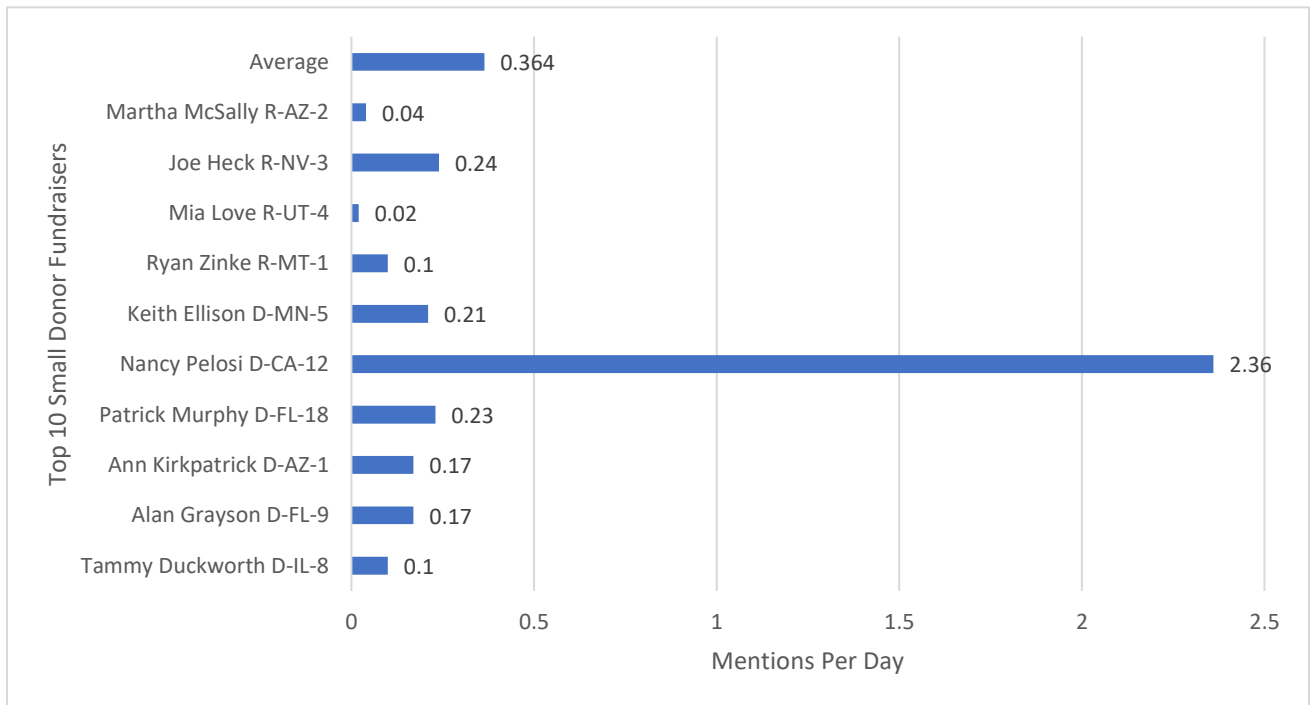


Source: LexusNexus

The data provided here shows how many times each representative was mentioned cumulatively per day in Fox News, CNN.com, Politico, the Associated Press, and the New York Times during the 113th Congress (2013-2015). For example, this data means that Representative Darrel Issa was mentioned 1.31 times per day on average cumulatively across these news outlets, not 1.31 times per day by each outlet. Figure 3.9 demonstrates that there is a very clear outlier in this case, the Speaker of the House for the 113th Congress, John Boehner. He was mentioned numerous times per day across the outlets discussed. Aside from Boehner, only Representative Issa was mentioned more than one time per day across outlets. Although the other representatives were not

mentioned more than one time per day, being mentioned 0.67 times per day equates to being mentioned 489 times over the two-year Congress. Although showing the total number of news mentioned over the two-year period would demonstrate a higher number, mentions per day demonstrates how frequently these representatives were talked about on a day-to-day basis. It is also important to note that although news outlets play a large role in politicians speaking to their constituents and all individuals across the country, this metric does not factor in things such as a representative’s social media posts, press conferences, or in person events unless one of the news outlets mentioned discussed it as well. Figure 3.9 may also demonstrate what was found in the previous chapter, that representatives in Congressional leadership are typically popular with small donor. Figure 3.10 will show the data for the 114th Congress.

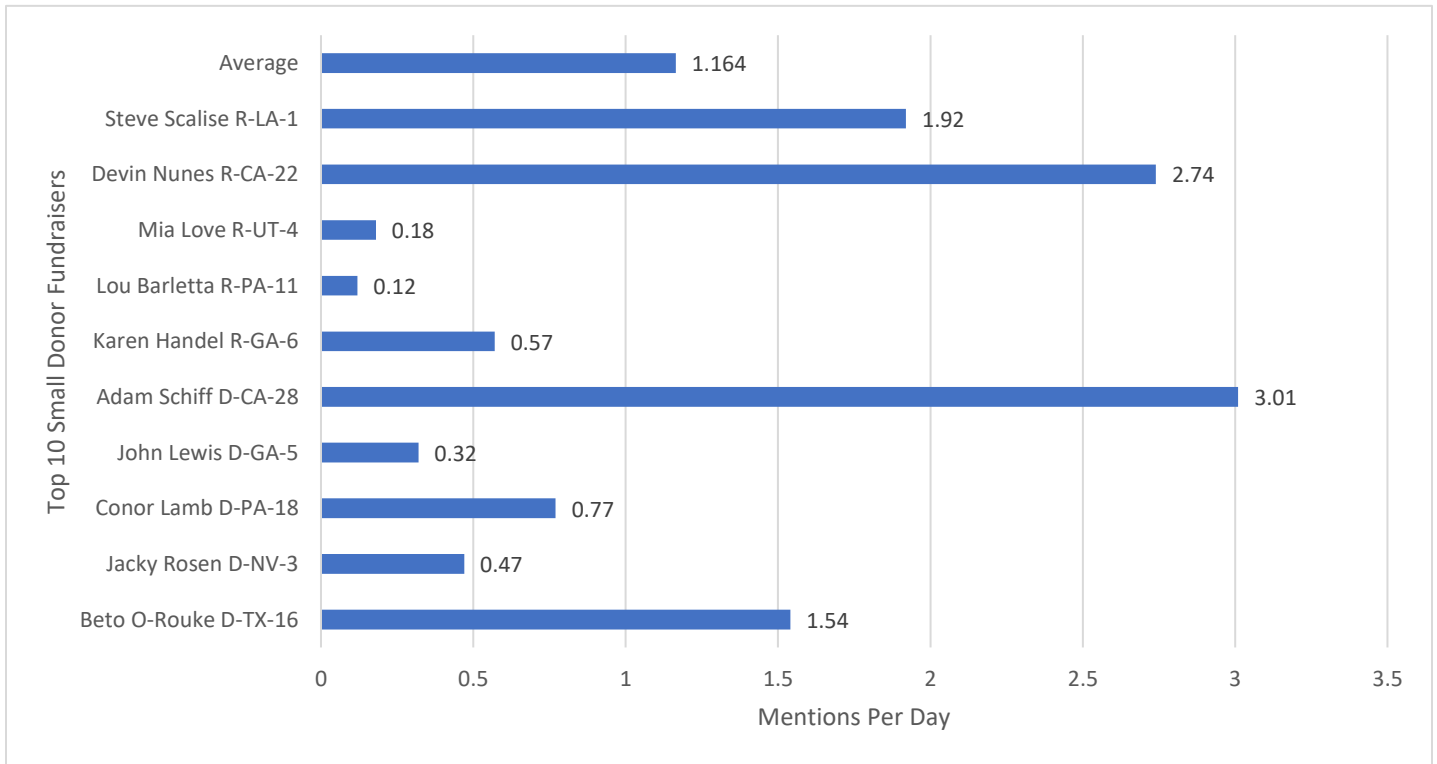
Figure 3.10- Highest Small Donor Fundraiser v. Mentions in National News Outlets, 114th Congress



Source: LexusNexus

Similarly, to the previous Congress, a clear outlier is presented with Representative Nancy Pelosi being discussed the most but at only a fraction of the number of times Speaker Boehner was mentioned in the last Congress. The average number of mentions per day for the 114th Congress is lower than the 113th Congress by over 0.85 mentions. The most popular recipients of small donors in the 114th Congress were discussed less than those of the 113th in popular news outlets. Another peculiar aspect of this graph is that the most popular recipient of small donors in the House, Representative Martha McSally, was mentioned at a rate of 0.04 times per day or only 29 times in total. This surprising number demonstrates that Representative McSally utilized other ways to speak to American citizens than relying on the five outlets discussed here to talk about her. Overall, for the 114th Congress, many of the representatives most popular with small donors were not discussed consistently across news outlets aside from Representative Pelosi. Figure 3.11 will show the data for the 115th Congress.

Figure 3.11 Highest Small Donor Fundraiser v. Mentions in National News Outlets, 115th Congress

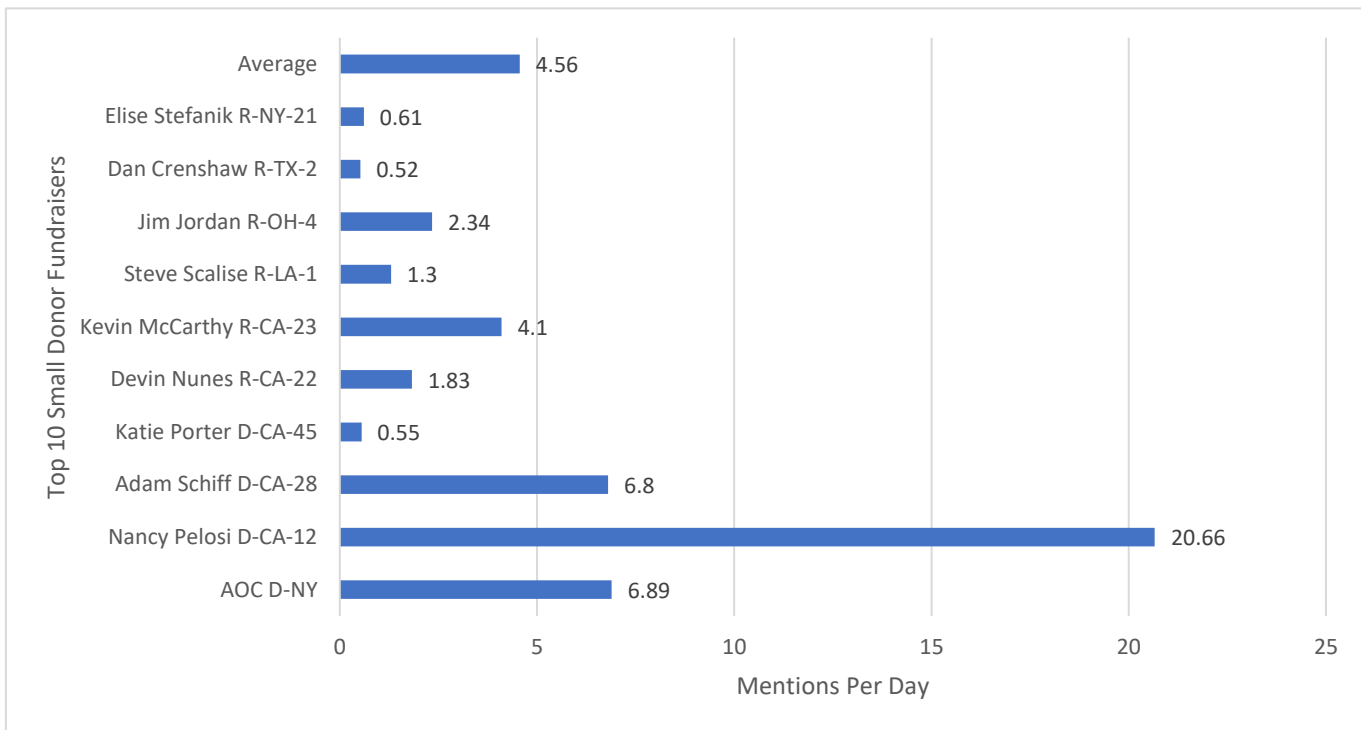


Source: LexusNexus

Figure 3.11 shows that the most popular recipients of small donors for the 115th Congress were discussed more frequently than those of the 114th and that several representatives were mentioned more than 1 time per day across outlets. Anecdotal discussions mentioned early highlight some of the representatives from this Congress such as Representative Scalise who was shot during this Congress and increased his media exposure. Additionally, Representatives Devin Nunes and Adam Schiff became more common names with their roles in Congressional investigations into then-President Trump. The data from the 115th Congress shows that representatives who attract large amounts of small donors were commonly discussed in the news and demonstrates that

there may be a connection between these two variables. However, there are still some representatives who are discussed in the media infrequently who were still popular with small donors in this Congress who were not popular in previous Congresses such as Representative John Lewis. Figure 3.12 will provide the data for the 116th Congress.

Figure 3.12- Highest Small Donor Fundraiser v. Mentions in National News Outlets, 116th Congress



Source: LexusNexus

The average for the 116th Congress shoots up to four times the average for the previous Congress at over 4.5 mentions per day for the top 10 Representatives. Although Speaker of the House for the 116th Congress Nancy Pelosi led the way with over 20 mentions per day, several other members were mentioned numerous times per day across outlets such as Representative Adam Schiff, who had a large role in the President Trump

impeachment trial(s), Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, and freshman member Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez who was a part of a new wave of Democrats in the House of Representatives. Since the 114th Congress, which had an average of less than 0.5 mention per day to the 116th Congress which has over 4.5 mentions per day, demonstrates that the representatives popular with small donors in the 116th Congress were frequently discussed in the media and at a substantially higher rate than just two Congresses previous. However, although the average mentions per day have increased and the spread of representatives which had averages above this has increased over the Congresses observed, there will remain some representatives highly popular with small donors who are not discussed in the media outlets looked at such as Representative Katie Porter or Representative Dan Crenshaw.

The trends found in this section demonstrate that mentions in the news have increased in recent Congresses and that those representatives who earned the most small donor donations find themselves discussed frequently in several popular news outlets.

Discussion

While small donor fundraising continues to increase with the ease of online donations and sites such as WinRed or ActBlue which make donations easier than ever, a deeper analysis of the kinds of representatives that attract these donors is necessary. This research finds that legislatively effective representatives are not rewarded with donations from small donors as they are from lobbyists. This may be the case that lobbyists rely on legislation making its way through the House, Senate, and into law with legislative provisions which their clients want to see enacted. Small donors do not view legislation in the same way that a lobbyist does.

The ability of a representative to attract cosponsorships to their legislation demonstrating other representative's support of their legislation also did not correspond to small donor attraction. This metric attempted to measure a representative's agenda setting power by measuring the number of cosponsors their legislation attracts; although agenda setting ability may have an influence on small dollar fundraising, the GovTrack leadership score did not establish that connection. The GovTrack score may be too rigid a measure to accurately depict a politician's agenda setting power.

Finally, a connection between representative's mentions in national media outlets and their small dollar fundraising could be shown. This research builds upon the previous research done on the "show horse" v. "work horse" theory of members of Congress. At the time when that research was conducted, small donors were not anywhere as active as they are now. An updated analysis of the "show horse" v. "work horse" style of representatives while taking into account their donation data would be beneficial to further information on this topic. If the data showcased here accurately demonstrates the connection between politicians' discussion in the media and their popularity with small donors, an unfortunate circumstance may arise where politics contains more politicians which prefer discussion in the media through any means necessary than by legislating.

Conclusion

While existing literature on small donors has established a connection between their ideology and the ideology of the politicians they donate to, another factor of mentions in news outlets, especially in the most recent Congress, can be shown to have a role in a politician's attractiveness to small donors. Aside from this, legislative effectiveness and agenda setting ability in Congress did not have an effect on a

politician's small donor popularity. This is in contrast to the literature regarding individual lobbyists who do reward legislatively effective lawmakers while small donors' individuals did not. In this chapter, only five news outlets were looked into, but for further analysis, aspects such as social media following or interactions on social media must be analyzed. With the emergence of the internet and the ease at which small donors can donate to politicians through platforms such as WinRed or VoteBlue, additional variables related to the internet should be explored.

Looking ahead, if trends continue, more individuals will become politically involved and will choose to make donations to their preferred political candidates. This change in fundraising ability for various politicians will allow for new types of politicians to emerge and for some to be elected to public office. Further analysis is necessary to demonstrate concrete connections between Representative's and their small donor fundraising; additional measurements of media mentions will be necessary as the internet continues to play a larger role in politics.

Conclusion

The case for this thesis revolved around the rise of the individual and small donors in the United States and the impact they are having on the political landscape. Over the past few election cycles, beginning with Barack Obama in 2008 and the emergence of the internet, up through the most recent election of 2020, small donors have continued to wield significant power and influence on the makeup of the federal government. Former President Obama was the first to showcase this power and influence of the small, individual donors during his presidential runs of 2008 and 2012 where he raised roughly a quarter of his donations from individuals donating a total of less than \$200. This was a significant change from previous candidates who relied on large donors, political actions committees (PACs), superPACs, or various 501© organizations. Following the rise of the small donor in 2008 and 2012 during the presidential elections, small donors began to play a larger role in Congressional elections as well. Both political parties took notice of this shift and created online platforms where small donors could make donations for politicians and candidates of their preferred political party; these sites have harnessed the power of the small donor. ActBlue, the site for the Democratic party, collected donations from over 6 million individuals during the 2018 midterm elections amassing over \$1.6 billion in donations with the average individual donation of only \$39.50¹⁵⁰. On the opposite side for the Republicans, WinRed recorded over \$1 billion in fundraising in their first 15 months with an average individual donation of \$47¹⁵¹.

Past research on individuals and donations has focused primarily on the donation habits of lobbyists or on small donors across the country. This research has indicated that

¹⁵⁰ Actblue “*2018 Election Cycle in Review*”, <https://report.actblue.com> [<https://perma.cc/GZ5H-HV86>].

¹⁵¹ WinRed, “Zero to \$1,000,000,000 in 15 Months”, <https://winred.com/blog/1b/>.

lobbyists make donations to politicians of both political parties in attempts to gain access or influence over legislators and that individual lobbyists reward politicians that are legislatively effective. This differs from the donation habits of small donors which are driven more by their political ideology and that small donors are attracted to politicians which are discussed frequently in media outlets. The chapters of this paper have focused on aspects of existing research and testing existing knowledge while expanding the research to include additional variables which may have an impact on the donation habits of lobbyists and small donors.

The first chapter focused specifically on individual lobbyists in Washington, D.C., and their donations in the year 2019. The lobbyists chosen for this study were selected randomly but were chosen from the five highest earning lobbying firms in Washington, D.C. during 2019. For this research, five lobbyists were randomly selected from the five highest earning lobbying firms in D.C in order to test existing knowledge regarding the donation habits of lobbyists and for comparisons to be made between the habits of lobbyists and the average individual, small donor from across the country who are not lobbyists. The data collected, found that the individual lobbyists observed overwhelmingly did not donate to both political parties as existing research found. The data found that individual lobbyists more closely aligned with the research on individual, small donors' habits regarding making donations based on their ideological preferences. Of the 25 lobbyists observed, only one was found to have made donations to Representatives of both political parties (though this one lobbyist still donated much more heavily to one political party). This finding contradicts existing research on lobbyist

donation habits and raises questions about the impact that lobbyist donations have on politicians regarding influence and access. Overwhelmingly the lobbyists observed donated to one political party over the other and through information found on the past employment of the lobbyists observed, many of these lobbyists had previously worked for Representatives of the political party they donated to.

Although the information found in this chapter contradicts some existing research, there were limitations to the research conducted here. First, only one year of donation habits were done; rather than looking at donation habits over the course of several years, only the year 2019 was observed. Additional research would be necessary on other years to allow for further conclusions to be made on lobbyists donation habits. This research also selected lobbyists at random at five lobbying firms, there are hundreds of lobbying firms in Washington, D.C. and although for this research, the five highest earning firms were selected, additional research would be necessary on other firms to draw definitive conclusions. Building upon this, the randomly selected lobbyists could have been an anomaly and do not represent all lobbyists. This is unlikely but certainly a possibility and additional lobbyists would need to be observed to make drastic conclusions on the donation habits of lobbyists compared to other individuals.

The next chapter focused primarily on the notion that individual small donors who are not lobbyists donate more heavily to politicians who represent their ideological views and that typically, small donors are more ideologically extreme than the average American. If existing research is correct, small donations heavily going to strong ideological Representatives is expected. This chapter focused on small donors from

across the country, not individual lobbyists as the previous chapter did. This chapter relied on existing DW-Nominate scores created by Poole and Rosenthal which measure a Representative's ideology score on a -1 (most liberal) to +1 (more conservative) spectrum. The DW-Nominate score creates these measurements while taking into account social policy, historical differences between parties, and differences on the liberal-conservative spectrum. Utilizing these scores, an exploration of the connection between small donors and ideological scores can be observed.

This chapter specifically observed the top 10 most popular Representatives with small donors for the 2020 election cycle (from January 2019 through November 2020) are observed along with the Representative's DW-Nominate score. This research did not find a strong connection between a Representative's popularity with small donors and a strong DW-nominate score. The Representatives which earned the most small donor donations during this time did not have the highest ideological scores and varied along ideological lines, geographic location of their Congressional district, seniority level, and leadership status.

The research in this chapter is limited to DW-Nominate scores to measure for strong political ideology, however, these scores cannot account for all aspects of a politician's ideological platform. Further research in the latter part of this chapter specifically looks at new factions among both the Republican and Democratic parties consisting of freshman and sophomore Representatives who, by metrics other than DW-Nominate scores, can be attributed to extreme ideological views. These Representatives include the group commonly referred to as "The Squad" which consists of progressive, minority Democratic Representatives and Trump-aligning conservatives such as

Representative Taylor-Greene of Georgia or Representative Boebert of Colorado. The research conducted in this paper found that these representatives were popular with small donors compared to the average Representative but either did not have a DW-Nominate score or their DW-Nominate score did not depict a high ideological score. Although the metric utilized for the bulk of the research did not demonstrate a strong connection between strong DW-Nominate scores and small donations, the research into the new factions of both political parties in Congress demonstrated a popularity with small donors and a more extreme ideological platform.

The final chapter further explored relationships between small donors and members of the House of Representatives; this chapter looked at the past four Congresses (113th-116th) to analyze potential connections between Representatives most popular with small donors and the Representative's legislative effectiveness score, their leadership score, and their discussion in national media outlets. This chapter compares the top 10 Representatives which earned the most small donors for each Congress and compares the data from these metrics to find connections. Researchers have created a database of legislative effectiveness scores utilizing a number of metrics related to bill introduction, bill action in committee, bill passage; additionally included in these scores is a metric related to the substance of the bill, whether it is substantive, commemorative, or a combination of both. It has been found that individual lobbyists make financial contributions to those Representatives which have demonstrated their legislative effectiveness, but this connection has not been tested for all small donors. The leadership scores used are tracked by GovTrack.org and measure a Representative's ability to attract cosponsorships from other Representatives on their introduced

legislation. The usage of this score intends to measure a Representative's legislative popularity and rank this compared to other Representatives. Finally, this chapter utilizes LexusNexus media tracking to account for the number of times a Representative is mentioned in the New York Times, the Associated Press, Fox News, CNN.com, and Politico during a given Congress to draw conclusions regarding the number of discussions in media and a Representative's ability to attract small donors. Previous research on Representative's small donor fundraising found that in 2021 small donors were attracted to "head-line grabbers". However, this research did not include previous Congresses or years.

The findings of this chapter find that other small donors do not take legislative effectiveness into account when making donations the way that lobbyists have been found to do. There was a wide array of legislative effectiveness scores among the Representative's most popular with small donors including some of the most legislatively effective Representatives and some which are statistically very ineffective. The research also found that a Representative's legislative popularity also does not contribute to ability to attract and raise money from small donors. On average, most of the Representatives popular with small donors were did not have high leadership scores indicating that their legislation was not popular, in terms of cosponsorships, with other Representatives. The research did find that those Representative's mentioned frequently in the media (over 1 time per day cumulatively across outlets over a given Congress) were popular with small donors. This research is consistent with the research conducted in 2021 on this same topic.

The research done in the final chapter intended to measure connections between different variables and small donor popularity of Representatives. The metrics used in the final chapter attempted to measure whether small donors were attracted to legislatively effective Representatives the way that individual lobbyists were this research did not find a connection between small donors and legislatively effective Representatives. The GovTrack leadership score intending to measure a Representative's agenda-setting power only look into account an ability of a Representative to attract cosponsors to introduced legislation which fails to account for other aspects of agenda-setting power a Representative can have. To truly test for agenda-setting power of a Representative, one would need to account for discussion of political ideas, whether those political ideas were nationally accepted or accepted by their political party, whether other Representatives adopted discussions of certain policies afterwards, along with a plethora of other variables. The GovTrack score utilized here used could not capture all of the aspects which go into a politician's agenda-setting power. Additionally, to test for small donor trends compared to a Representative's discussion in the news, additional news outlets would need to be taken into account such as local news stations, additional online sources, as well as a way to take into account discussions on social media platform such as Twitter or Facebook to capture all aspects of a Representative's discussion across media platforms.

While lobbyists consider a Representative's legislative effectiveness score when making donations, the small, individual donor does not seem to. Based on the findings of Chapter 1, both lobbyists and small donors tend to favor one political party and make donations corresponding to those political preferences. In Chapter 2, DW-Nominate

scores were utilized to analyze whether small donors tended to favor ideologically strong Representatives; the DW-Nominate score was a useful tool in measuring a Representative's past voting in Congress and how strongly aligned they are with their political party but does not measure ideological extremity or measure individuals who are not in Congress. There are other metrics which require payment that claim to measure ideological extremity more purely but for this research those measures were unavailable. To measure ideological extremity factors outside of just voting record would be necessary, additionally, a way to measure the ideological extremity of a non-incumbent or a newcomer to Congress would be needed.

Individual donors' role in fundraising for Congressional elections is rising and this has caused some Representative's and political parties to take notice. Research into the preferences of individual donors is necessary and will continue to be necessary to adequately account for and to predict which Representatives will attract small donors in future elections. Through this research it has been found that in recent years, small donors tend to be attracted to more ideologically extreme members of Congress such as members of "the Squad" or politicians aligned with Donald Trump. Additionally, politicians who are able to attract media coverage are popular with small donors; some research has found connections between ideologically extreme Representatives and media coverage, the convergence of these two factors sheds light onto the preferences of small donors.

As political polarization runs rampant among the American public as well as among Representatives of opposing parties, new factions of Representatives have begun to be elected representing the ideological extreme ends of the political spectrum. At the same time, small donors have started to play a larger role in the financing of political

elections. Rather than rewarding the legislatively effective Representatives, individual donors tend to prefer ideologically extreme, headline grabbing politicians. Political donations allow individuals to display their preferences through financial donations expanding the reach of an individual's influence in Congress; previously, an individual only had direct influence over the Representative of the Congressional district which they resided in. The ability for individuals to make donations is easier than ever with the emergence of new platforms such as WinRed and ActBlue allowing for more individuals to become involved in political donations. As the number of individual donors and money raised through these individuals rises, changes will be seen within the makeup of our political system.

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Curriculum Vita

Conner Duffy was born in Green Bay, Wisconsin on April 10, 1997. After attending Preble High School in Green Bay, Conner attended college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. As a part of the class of 2019, Conner graduated from UW-Madison with a Bachelor of Science, majoring in Political Science with a certificate in Criminal Justice.

While pursuing his Masters degree, Conner has been working on Capitol Hill for a member of Congress from his home State of Wisconsin. There, Conner has been rising through the ranks of his Congressional office and is currently serving as a Legislative Aide.

In March of 2022, during his last semester pursuing his Masters degree with Johns Hopkins University, Conner was selected to take part in a Graduate Certificate program for those working in public policy through the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. This certificate program focuses on public policy and economics and lasts roughly six months.