

D.C.'S WHITE DONOR CLASS: OUTSIZED INFLUENCE IN A DIVERSE CITY

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Introduction

Policymakers should be responsive to the public, not to big donors. Yet an increasingly large body of evidence shows that the rich and the donor class have a disproportionate influence on policy. This influential donor class is not representative of the United States' vibrant diversity. Donors are wealthier and older than average Americans, and they are more likely to be white and male than the general population. This dynamic plays out in troubling ways at the national as well as the local level.

In Washington D.C.'s 2014 mayoral election, successful candidate Muriel Bowser raised \$2,115,335 in donations, 69 percent from large donors (those who gave more than \$1,000). Her general election competitor, David Catania, pulled in \$845,881, of which 59 percent came from large donors. The incumbent mayor, Vincent Gray, raised \$774,996, and 71 percent of it came from large donors. In total, donors giving more than \$1,000 accounted for 67 percent of all money raised by the three candidates in 2014. Small donors giving \$50 or less accounted for less than 2 percent.

The fact that big donors—overwhelmingly white, male and high-income—hold such outsized influence in a city that is extremely diverse both demographically and economically is deeply problematic. The 2014 election was defined by campaign finance, both in terms of the serious scandals dogging the incumbent mayor, and the immense amounts of fundraising. The *Washington Post* reported that the level of “post-primary mayoral fundraising” was “unusual.” The solution is to for the city to implement The Citizens Fair Elections Program Amendment Act of 2015, which would institute a public financing system to give every D.C. resident a say in their democracy.

Key Findings

- The donor class doesn't represent the diversity of Washington D.C.'s population. While 37 percent of D.C.'s population is white, 62 percent of mayoral donors and 67 percent of City Council donors are white.
- The rich are disproportionately represented in the donor class. Only a quarter of D.C.'s adult population makes more than \$100,000, but 59 percent of council donors and 61 percent of mayoral donors do.
- The pool of donors who make small donations is more representative than the pool of those who make large donations. Women make up about half of those giving less than \$50 to mayoral and council races, but only 31 percent of those giving more than \$1,000. People of color make up 47 percent of mayoral donors giving less than \$25, but 31 percent of those giving more than \$1,000.
- The small donor pool contains more income diversity as well. Those making \$100,000 or more comprise 44 percent of donors giving \$25 or less to mayoral candidates, but 72 percent of those giving \$1,000 or more.
- Mayoral candidates relied heavily on big donors, raising less than 7 percent of their total funds from donors giving less than \$100, and 67 percent from donors giving more than \$1,000.
- A system of public financing would increase the diversity of D.C.'s donor class, leading to more responsive policymaking.

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