

New paper explores race, representation in campaign finance

October 9 2019, by Peter Kelley



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In politics as in life, money talks. And in American politics, the question of "Who donates?" is closely linked to the crucial question of "Who governs?"

By far, most [campaign](#) donations historically have come from white

voters. But new University of Washington-led research indicates that if more candidates of color ran for office, donations from individuals of color would likely increase as well.

The findings are described in a new paper by Jake Grumbach, UW assistant professor of political science, with Alexander Sahn, a doctoral student at the University of California, Berkeley. The paper is forthcoming from the *American Political Science Review*.

Grumbach said he was not surprised by the findings themselves—which largely match what common sense would indicate—but by how clear the results were.

"In terms of voting, it's unclear whether people of color are more likely to turn out to vote when a candidate of color runs—studies disagree," he said. "But it's very clear that candidates of color increase contributions from donors of color."

To investigate campaign giving across populations, Grumbach and Sahn combined federal data on campaign contributions with a statistical technique that tries to predict the individuals' racial background based on their name and location. Using this process they estimated the ethnoracial identity of 27 million campaign contributors making in all about 87 million individual campaign contributions in the years between 1980 and 2012, totaling about \$33 billion in all.

"Across this time period, we find a highly unrepresentative contributor class," they write. "Black and Latino representation in contributions is much smaller than in the general population, electorate, and elected offices, and has remained mostly static since 1980."

They found that the presence of an Asian, black or Latino nominee in a political race significantly increases the proportion of contributions from

"coethnic" contributors, or those of the same ethnic background.

Republican Latino candidates, they also found, received significantly lower contributions from whites than white Republican candidates.

Grumbach said also wondered if candidates of color underwent "backlash," or white voters either giving less to them or actually turning to donate to their opponent.

"We ended up finding a bit of decrease in money from white donors to minority candidates, but it's more than made up for by increased minority contributions. And, opponents don't raise any additional money when running against minority candidates.

"Overall, minority candidates—especially Democrats—are at least as competitive in fundraising as white candidates. This should assuage fears that running more [minority](#) candidates would hurt fundraising."

As to why black and Latino donating to candidates has remained static since 1980—years in which candidates of color have been more plentiful and successful—Grumbach cited the ever-growing racial wealth gap, "so black and Latino people in the United States just don't have enough money to be a larger share of money in politics."

It also may be, he said, that "people of color may feel unrepresented and that donating money is unlikely to change the system, whereas white voters may feel like their [money](#) can have a real effect on politics."

Grumbach and Sahn added that they hope this study "sparks greater interest in the political economy of race."

Provided by University of Washington

Citation: New paper explores race, representation in campaign finance (2019, October 9)
retrieved 23 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2019-10-paper-explores-representation-campaign.html>

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