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## Campaign Finance and Political Polarization

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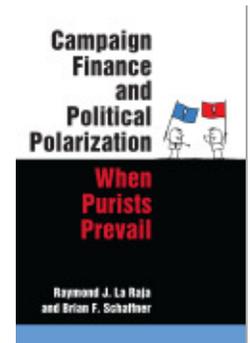
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## Preface

The public intensely dislikes how campaigns are financed in the United States. We can understand why. The system of private financing seems rigged to favor special interests and wealthy donors. Much of the reform community has responded by calling for tighter restrictions on private financing of elections to push the system toward “small donor democracy” and various forms of public financing. These strategies seem to make sense and, in principle, we are not opposed to them.

But our research and professional experience as political scientists have led us to speculate that these populist approaches to curtailing money in politics might not be alleviating, but contributing to, contemporary problems in the political system, including the bitter partisan stand-offs and apparent insensitivity of elected officials to the concerns of ordinary Americans that appear to characterize the current state of U.S. politics. Indeed, we began to sense that the populist approach to campaign finance reform may reflect a larger pattern of populist assumptions about how democracy works that have in fact led to ill-conceived reforms in other areas, as Bruce Cain argues in *Democracy More or Less* (2014). We wondered if anticorruption rules, which purportedly make the wealthy less influential, were in fact doing the opposite: making the system even less responsive to broad constituencies and rendering political discourse even more acerbic than it would otherwise be.

Our hunch was that prevailing approaches to reform may reinforce the influence of a small fraction of citizens and groups that already dominate the financing of politics. How could this be? One plausible reason is that such donors already have the means and motive to contrive ways to get around the most stringent elements of campaign finance laws. But there may be more to the story. We have observed that there is an essential element

missing from most campaign finance reform strategies: the realization that restrictions on money in politics actually enfeeble political parties.

Our growing conviction that most contemporary campaign reform initiatives have undervalued the roles that political parties play in U.S. politics led us to undertake the research project that culminated in this book. In fact, a vast body of research on democratic politics indicates that parties play several vital roles, including aggregating interests, guiding voter choices, and holding politicians accountable with meaningful partisan labels. Yet this research seems to have been ignored in the design of post-Watergate reforms.

The consequence, as we show in this book, is the continuation of a shift begun in the early 20th century from party-centered politics to candidate-centered politics. The counterintuitive result has been a system in which interest groups and intensely ideological—and wealthy—citizens play a disproportionately large role in financing candidates for public office. This dynamic has direct implications for many of the problems facing American government today, including ideological polarization and political gridlock. The campaign finance system is certainly not the only source of polarization and gridlock, but we think it is an important part of the story. In this book, we tell this story by considering the rich variation in campaign finance laws in the 50 American states and comparing their effects on political discourse and elections.

Our motivation to write this book reflects both our scholarly interests and our concerns as citizens. We take seriously the urging of the leadership in our profession, particularly reflected in the American Political Science Association (APSA), to make political science relevant for broader societal concerns. In the past decade APSA presidential addresses have called for greater attention to problems associated with inequality, partisan polarization, and the dysfunction of the American political system. This book addresses some of these issues. We embarked on the project not simply to solve a “puzzle” in the scholarship about financing in the party system, but to understand how campaign finance laws affect elections and governance, with an eye toward making useful policy recommendations.

Our work developed from emergent research about the dynamics of partisan polarization and new conceptions of American political parties, particularly those formulated by a group we call the UCLA school. The ideas for this book advanced from ongoing conversations and blog exchanges (via the Monkey Cage and Election Law Blog) with our colleagues who study and/or practice election law, including Steve Ansolabehere, Bob Bauer, Bob Biersack, Rob Boatright, Adam Bonica, Bruce Cain, Guy-Uriel Charles, Tony Corrado, Diana Dwyre, John Fortier, Michael Franz, Erika Fowler,

Ben Ginsberg, Keith Hamm, Rick Hasen, Paul Herrnson, Eitan Hersh, Ruth Jones, Dave Karpf, Robin Kolodny, Michael Malbin, Tom Mann, Seth Masket, Ken Mayer, Eric McGhee, Sid Milkis, Jeff Milyo, Nate Persily, Rick Pildes, Trevor Potter, Lynda Powell, John Samples, and John Sides.

We also benefited significantly from the leadership of forward-thinking foundations and policy centers that have been trying to address emergent problems of governance in the United States. Together the leaders in these organizations created a forum for robust dialogue on political reform. This group includes Joe Goldman of the Democracy Fund, who initiated a round of discussions that convened academics, practitioners, and reformers. These excellent forums were led by John Fortier of the Bipartisan Policy Center and Nate Persily of Stanford University Law School. Above all, we would like to thank Daniel Stid and Larry Kramer of the Hewlett Foundation for providing the support that made this project feasible, as well as program officers Jean Parvin Bordewich and Kelly Born.

The timing for conducting this research was fortunate. We benefited from an extraordinary amount of new data recently made available at the state level. We greatly appreciate the dedication of the people who gathered these data and their generosity in sharing them with us. The National Institute on Money in State Politics, through Ed Bender and Denise Roth Barber, provided abundant campaign finance data; Keith Hamm and Jeff Milyo both shared their data on campaign finance laws, as did Jennie Drage Bowser at the National Conference of State Legislatures; Boris Shor and Nolan McCarty provided an immensely useful dataset on the ideological scores of state legislators. Carl Klarner offers an invaluable resource to scholars by posting his historical data on election outcomes in state legislatures. We thank Neil Reiff for arranging interviews with leaders of state party committees.

We appreciate the enthusiasm for this project from our editor Melody Herr at the University of Michigan Press. She has built up an impressive library of books on campaign finance and elections, and we are honored to have our work included among this select group of publications. We would also like to thank our colleagues at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst who are part of the American Politics Research Group and who read significant portions of this work, including Maryann Barakso, Bruce Desmarais, Seth Goldman, Rahsaan Maxwell, Tatishe Nteta, Jesse Rhodes, and Libby Sharrow. Bruce Cain at Stanford also read the entire manuscript, provided valuable comments, and gave us a chance to present our work to a wide-ranging group of scholars and practitioners at Stanford’s Program on American Democracy in Comparative Perspective. Finally, we thank

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All of the data and program files necessary to replicate the results from this book are available at [https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/laraja\\_schaffner](https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/laraja_schaffner).

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