ADVANCED POLICY ANALYSIS

Enhancing Political Engagement in Oakland: Barriers and Solutions

A Study Conducted for the City of Oakland Public Ethics Commission, Oakland, California

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary

By the time a vote is cast in an election, the dollar has already determined the slate of candidates that a voter can choose amongst. The average voter has little influence over who runs for office and which candidates make it onto the ballot because all candidates share one common need to run for office: money.

Money plays a significant role in determining who runs for office and a voter's choices at the ballot box. All candidates require funds to officially launch their campaign; in Oakland, candidates must pay a $300 filing fee when declaring their candidacy. Candidates need money to hire campaign staff and consultants, and to provide campaign materials to their volunteers. Candidates need funds to build name recognition, often through tools such as signs and mailers. Candidates need money to qualify for public funds; in Oakland, a candidate must raise five percent of the expenditure ceiling for the office sought in order to qualify for the public financing program.

Money also impacts how candidates and communities engage one another. Donors have more access to candidates because of the need for money to run a campaign. Candidates often target their outreach efforts towards communities that are already voting, purchasing voter information from county offices to learn how households voted in previous elections. Oftentimes, low-income and minority communities donate and vote at lower rates relative to wealthier, whiter communities. This means that low income and minority communities remain left out of the political process, limiting their access to elected officials and their engagement in the political process.

This report seeks to identify the key barriers to political engagement in Oakland by learning from the users of the political system. Interviews were conducted with former candidates for city council, current city councilmembers, and representatives from community organizations in Oakland. These conversations led to three key policy recommendations to enhance and improve public engagement in Oakland's political process.

1. Implement a voucher or matching funds program for public financing of local campaigns.

The Public Ethics Commission (PEC) should implement a voucher or matching funds program for public financing of local campaigns. A matching funds program would allow candidates to seek out smaller donors and amplify small donor dollars. A voucher program, however, would both incentivize candidates to seek out funds from all communities and encourage less engaged communities to participate by putting public funds into voters' hands. A voucher program is the stronger choice to increase equity and improve public engagement in the political process.

2. Leverage existing tools to engage underrepresented communities.

The PEC should leverage the tools it has to bring the political process to under-engaged communities where they live, by hosting public candidate forums in those communities. These forums should be recorded and made publicly available online. Participation in forums should be required for candidates receiving public financing for their campaigns. The PEC should also

undertake a voter education and outreach effort to raise awareness of how local government impacts communities and begin the process of building trust in under-engaged communities to encourage their involvement in the political process.

3. Host candidate workshops and develop a candidate handbook to lower barriers for new candidates.

The PEC should consider hosting candidate workshops and developing a candidate handbook explaining the campaign process for new candidates. The PEC currently holds workshops for candidates about its current public financing for campaigns program. This can be expanded and come earlier in the campaign process to include additional campaign information, such as the key filings that a candidate must complete, the campaign timeline, the roles that different staff may play, and an overview of the endorsement process. This would provide important, foundational information to facilitate the entry of new candidates running for local office.

While there may always be a need for money in the political process, we can take steps to encourage and facilitate greater involvement and engagement from all Oakland communities. The City should leverage its existing tools to bring more information to all Oaklanders, and implement and adopt new policies and programs to enhance engagement throughout the City.

Methodology

This analysis is part of a broader PEC project, and seeks to identify the key barriers faced by the users of Oakland's political system: former candidates for local elected office, current elected officials, community organizations, and the public.

This paper discusses the racial and socioeconomic barriers to participation in the political process at the federal, state, and local levels through a literature review. Interviews conducted by the author with former candidates, current elected officials, and community organizations identified key barriers faced by each group to their effective participation in the campaign and political processes in Oakland.

Sampling Technique

The author interviewed nine former candidates for Oakland city council in the 2014 or 2016 elections. Two current Oakland City Council officials agreed to be interviewed. Four city councilmembers responded to my interview request. Two councilmembers offered to answer questions via email, but did not respond to written questions provided.

I identified community organizations to contact for potential interviews based on guidance from the PEC and my own research into community groups in Oakland. I interviewed representatives from seven Oakland community organizations for this project.

Data Collection

I conducted one-on-one interviews in-person with each respondent except for two interviews conducted by phone. My interview methodology consisted of asking the same set of questions for each interviewee within an interview group. Interviews were conducted as discussions, and the order in which questions were asked changed depending on the flow of the interview. The longest interview was three-and-a-half hours, and the shortest was 45 minutes. On average, interviews took one to one-and-a-half hours.

I conducted the interviews at locations based on the preferences and availability of the respondents. Interviews with candidates were conducted at local cafes. Interviews with community organizations took place at the organization's offices. One interview with a city councilmember took place in their office, and another took place at a café. I informed respondents that their responses were anonymous, though I may quote them anonymously. I informed respondents that I would contact them for their consent for any quote that may identify them.

Data Analysis

I recorded interviews with the respondent's consent and took notes during the interview. I then cross-referenced my interview notes with the recordings to identify key themes.

Money and the Political Process

Money influences who can run a campaign and the choices available to voters.

Donors wield great influence over the range of decisions that voters can make at the ballot box. Money plays a key role in determining which candidates make it onto a ballot, defining the field of possibility in an election.[1] A candidate's viability is often determined by the amount of funding they are able to raise early in the campaign process. Candidates that appeal to donors' concerns are thus generally better able to raise sufficient resources to mount a competitive campaign.[2]

The current big money system of politics does not incentivize candidates to listen to their potential constituents; rather, it incentivizes candidates to seek out wealthy donors.[3] This influences what candidates view as the most important issues facing their constituents and the policy positions taken to align with these constituents. And, because donors can determine which candidates are in the candidate pool, donors shape the policy agenda regardless of the outcome of the election.[4]

Non-donor constituents are marginalized in this "wealth primary" because they do not have an equal voice in determining which candidates run in an election.[5] Non-donor constituents are less likely to be heard by their elected officials relative to donors.[6] As shown in Figure 1 below, this creates a self-perpetuating cycle of money and influence: candidates need funds to run and communicate their platform to voters, donors determine who raises sufficient funds for a competitive campaign, and candidates therefore spend more time talking with donors and hearing their interests. Once elected, these candidates are more likely to be responsive to donor interests. Conversely, this cycle can result in non-donor constituents feeling less and less invested in the democratic process.[7] Small donors are discouraged from contributing at all, as they perceive that their smaller contribution does not make a difference against those of wealthier donors.[8] This perpetuates a cycle of non-engagement, as residents are disconnected from the political process, candidates seek out donors and try to win support from those who already vote, leaving those who are not engaged outside of the political process.

Figure 1 below illustrates this self-perpetuating cycle of disengagement. A candidate needs to communicate their platform to voters, which requires funds to do. This funding need disincentivizes candidates from engaging with low-contribution areas. Instead, the candidate seeks out donors and fosters political support from higher contribution areas and prior voters based on household data. Low-contribution areas are not engaged by the candidate, and in turn disengaged from the campaign process. This cycle continues as candidates continue to need funding and do not engage low-contribution areas, and low-contribution areas do not engage because candidates do not focus their campaign efforts on those areas.

Figure 1. The Need for Funding Leads to Candidates Seeking Out Donors at the Expense of Non-Donor Constituents.
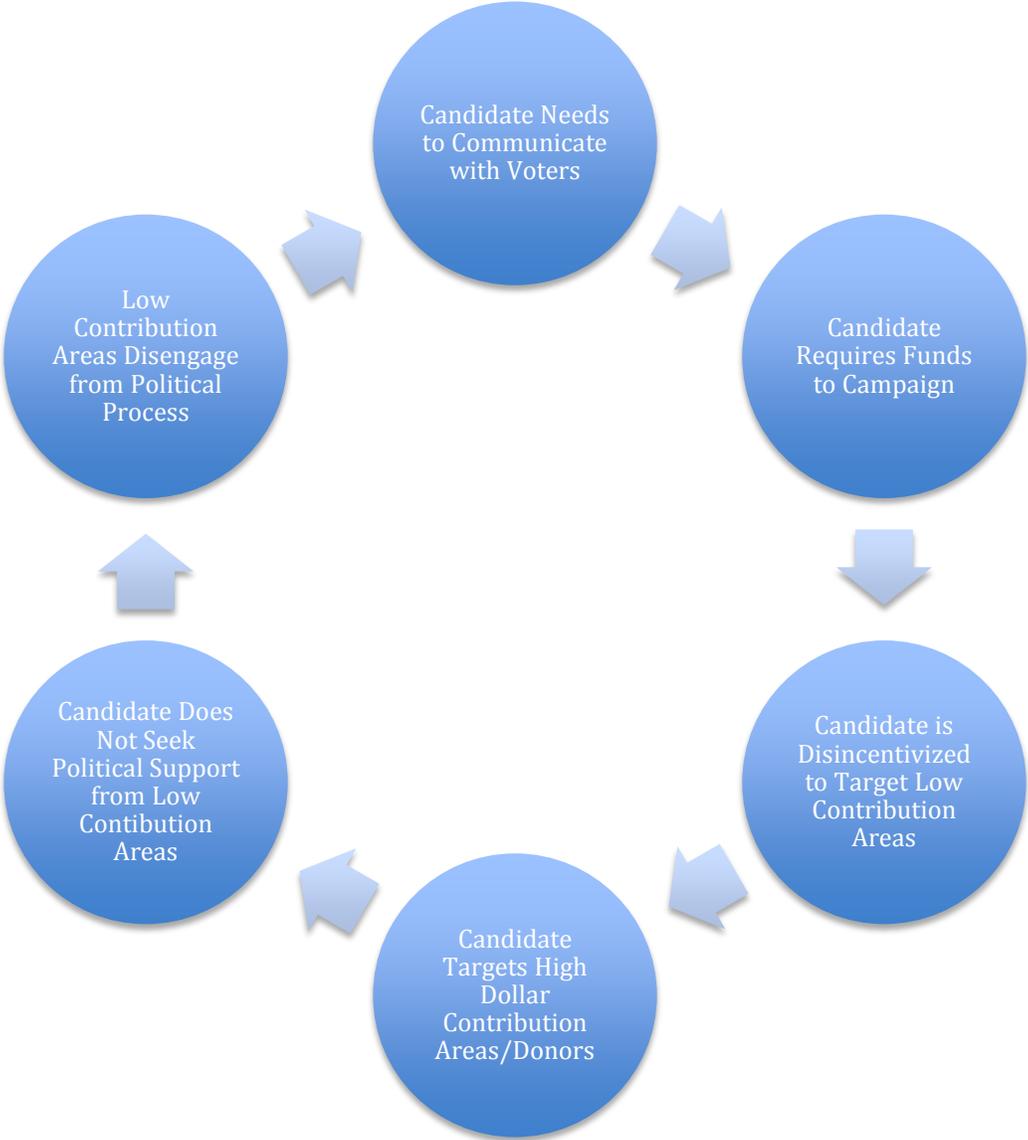
Race and Money in Politics

Race intersects with money in politics in two key ways.[9] First, people of color are disproportionately harmed by the influence of large donors because donor interests often diverge significantly from those of working families, and people of color compose a larger percentage of the poor and working class in America.[10] Second, the historic racialization of politics depresses the political power of communities of color. This makes it much more difficult for people of color to exert power and influence in a political process dominated by a small and predominantly white share of the population.[11]

The dominance of the political process by wealthy, white donors decreases the likelihood that candidates will prioritize the needs of communities of color. Candidates of color face increased barriers to running for office because they typically raise less money than white candidates.[12] As such, candidates of color are less likely to hold office than white candidates.[13] Figure 2 below shows that the racial composition of the donor class at the federal level is overwhelmingly white.

Figure 2. Racial composition of the donor class
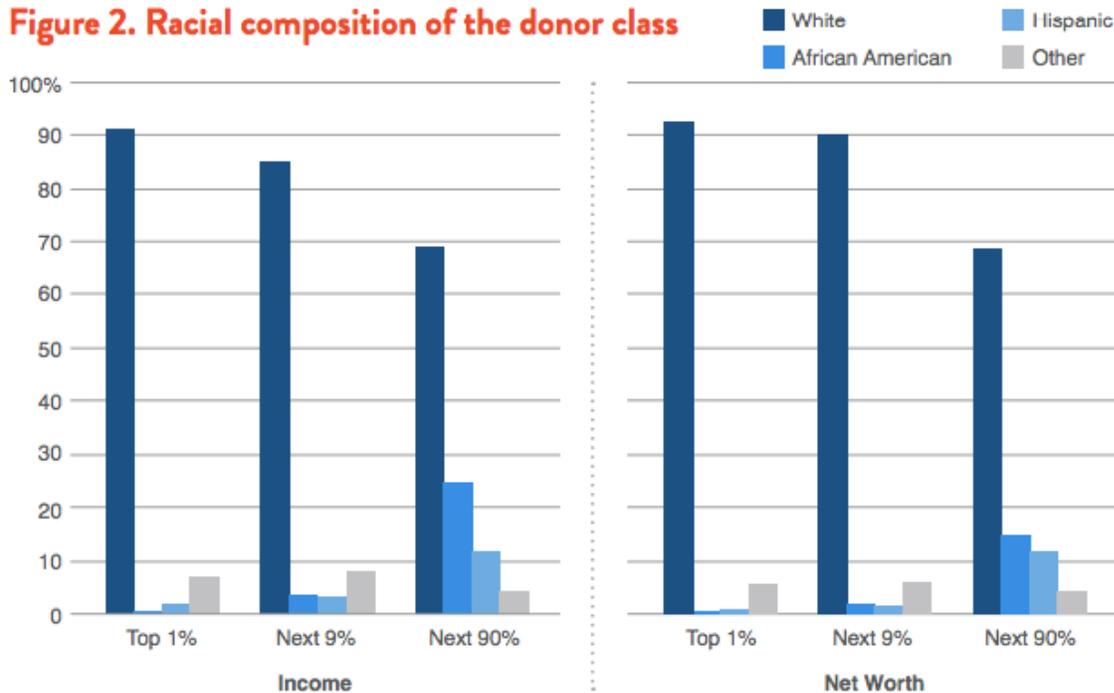
Source: Lisa Keister, The One Percent, 40 Ann. R. of Sociology 347 (2014)

Small donors tend to be more reflective of the general population's racial diversity. For example, donors participating in New York City's matching funds program tend to live in more racially diverse neighborhoods wherein people of color comprise 62 percent of the neighborhood's population, versus 56 percent of the city's overall population.[14]

At the national level, progress in terms of the racial diversity of representatives is improving: the current Congress is the most diverse in U.S. history.[15] Yet, nonwhite representatives make up only 19 percent of the current Congress, despite nonwhite Hispanics and minorities constituting

38 percent of the U.S. population.[16] Indeed, the gap between white representation in Congress and the percentage of the white U.S. population has actually widened over time: in 1981, whites constituted approximately 80 percent of the U.S. population, and 94 percent of Congress was white. Today, whites represent approximately 62 percent of the population but constitute 81 percent of Congress.[17] This widening gap is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Whites Make Up a Larger Share of Congress than of the U.S. Population.

Whites make up larger share of Congress than of U.S. population

% white of ...
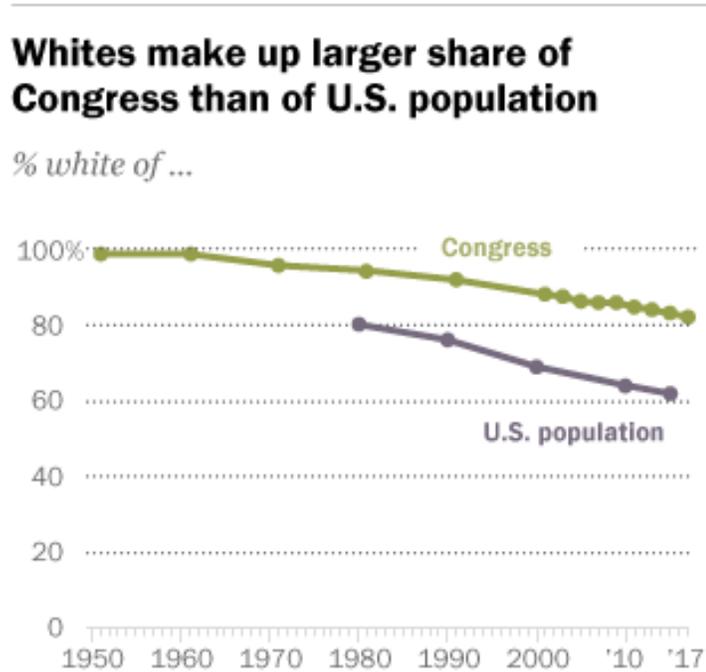
Note: Nonvoting delegates or commissioners excluded. Makeup of Congress reflects composition on session's first day. For 1980, 1990 population figures, whites include only non-Hispanics. For 2000 and later, whites include only non-Hispanics who reported a single race.
Source: CQ Roll Call, Congressional Research Service, Brookings Institution, Census Bureau population figures.

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Over the past two centuries in America, only two percent of members of Congress have come from working class backgrounds.[18] The preferences of individuals in the bottom third of the income distribution have no apparent impact on how elected officials govern.[19] This is where race and wealth meet: African-American and Latino households compose the majority of households in the bottom third of the income distribution.[20] Figure 4 shows that black and Latino households constitute a majority of households in the lowest third of the income distribution nationally.

Figure 4. Share of US Households in the Lowest Third of the Income Distribution.
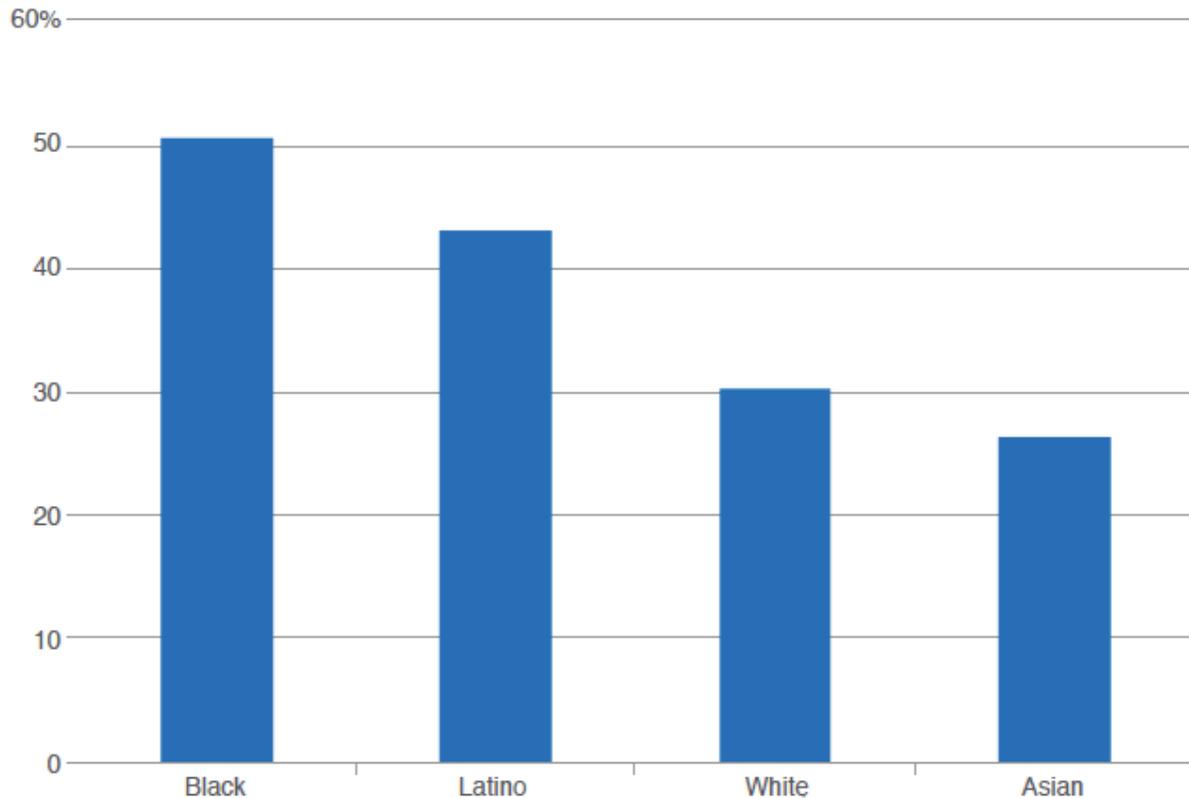
Source: Demos calculations of Current Population Survey, 2013

Contributions in Oakland come from wealthier, whiter neighborhoods.

Campaign contributions in Oakland are heavily dominated by a small group of donors: 93 percent of contributions in the 2014 and 2016 elections came from less than one percent of the city's population.[21] These direct contributions to candidates constituted more than the amount spent through Oakland's public financing program and independent expenditures combined.

Figure 5. Contributions and Independent Expenditures by Election Cycle.

Contributions and independent expenditures by election cycle

■ 2012 ■ 2014 ■ 2016
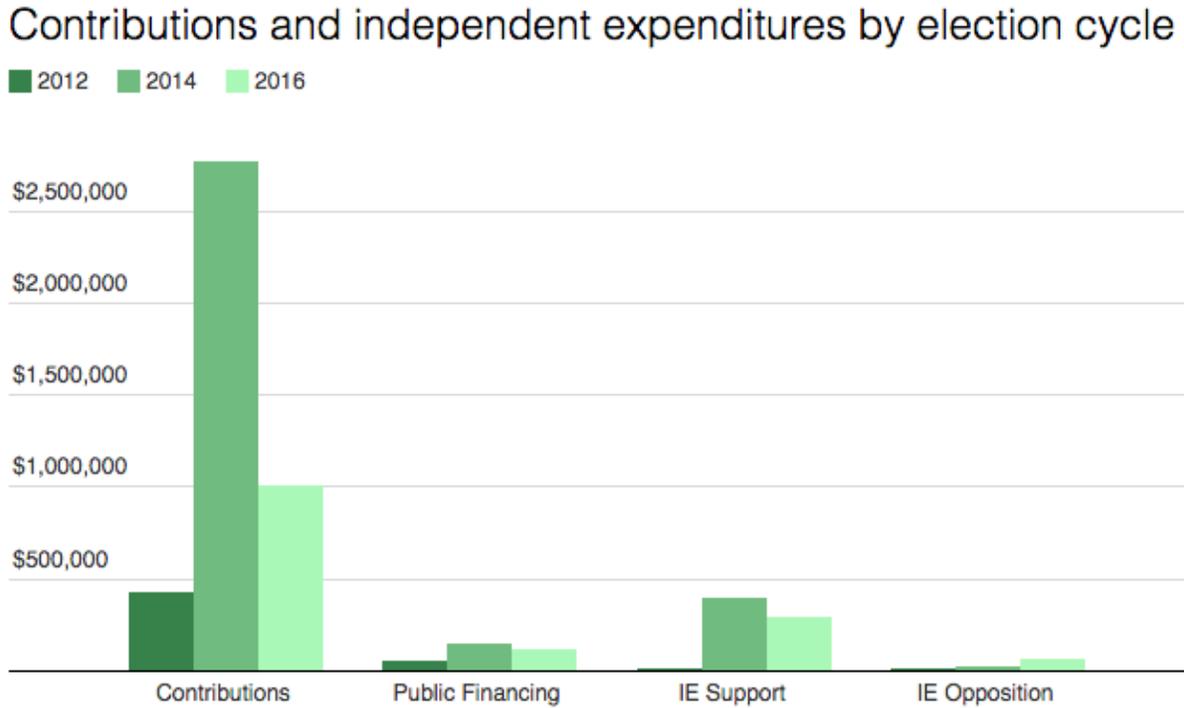
Itemized contributions, public financing, and independent expenditures supporting or opposing Oakland city candidates.
Source: MapLight • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 5 above shows that direct contributions to candidates dwarf the amount candidates receive from the public financing program and independent expenditure spending. Of the approximately $5 million raised in the past three election cycles, over three-fourths of direct contributions came from individual donors, and donations of $100 or less made up only one percent of direct contributions.

Donors are concentrated within wealthier areas of Oakland. Figure 6 below shows donor contribution levels by the green circles, with zip codes with higher median household incomes in darker shades of blue. We see that contributions are concentrated in Oakland's wealthier zip codes, which tend to be in the Oakland hills areas. West and East Oakland make up a much smaller percentage of donor contributions.

Figure 6. Donor Contribution Levels in Oakland by Zip Code.
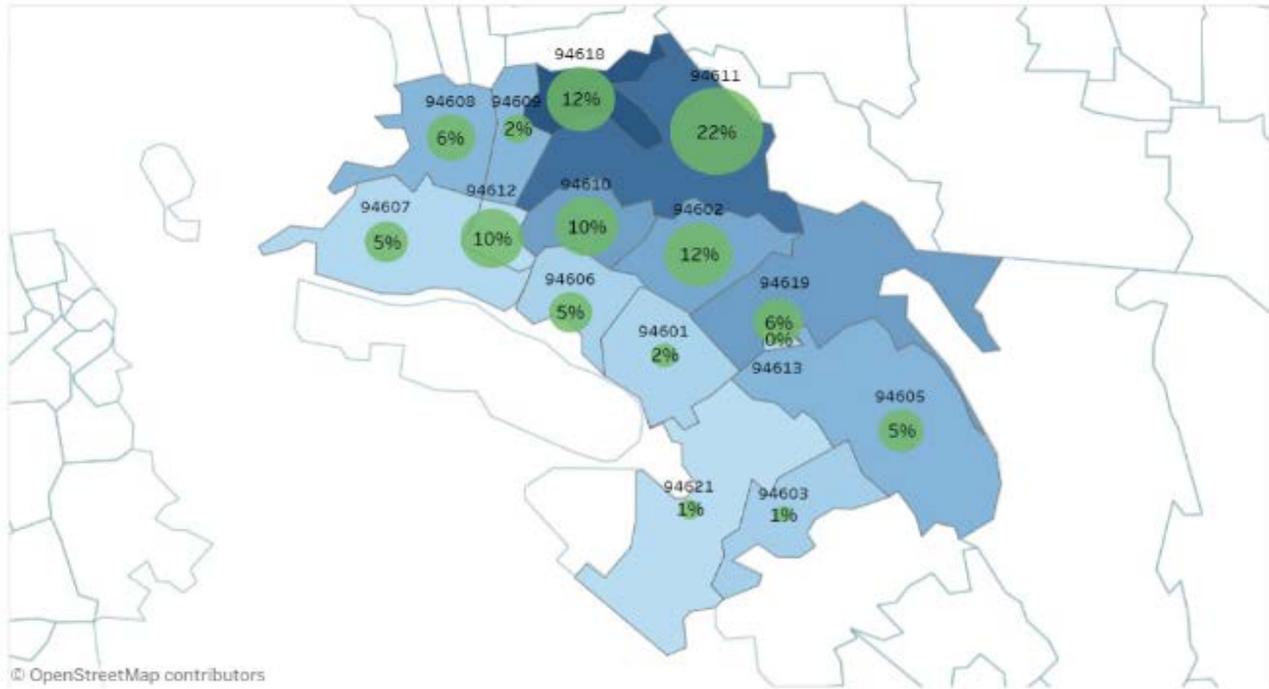
These wealthier areas with a higher concentration of donors also tend to have a higher proportion of white residents, as shown in Figure 7 below. Purple indicates zip codes where a majority of the population is white, and tan indicates zip codes where a minority of residents are white.

Figure 7. Donor Contribution Levels by Race and Zip Code.
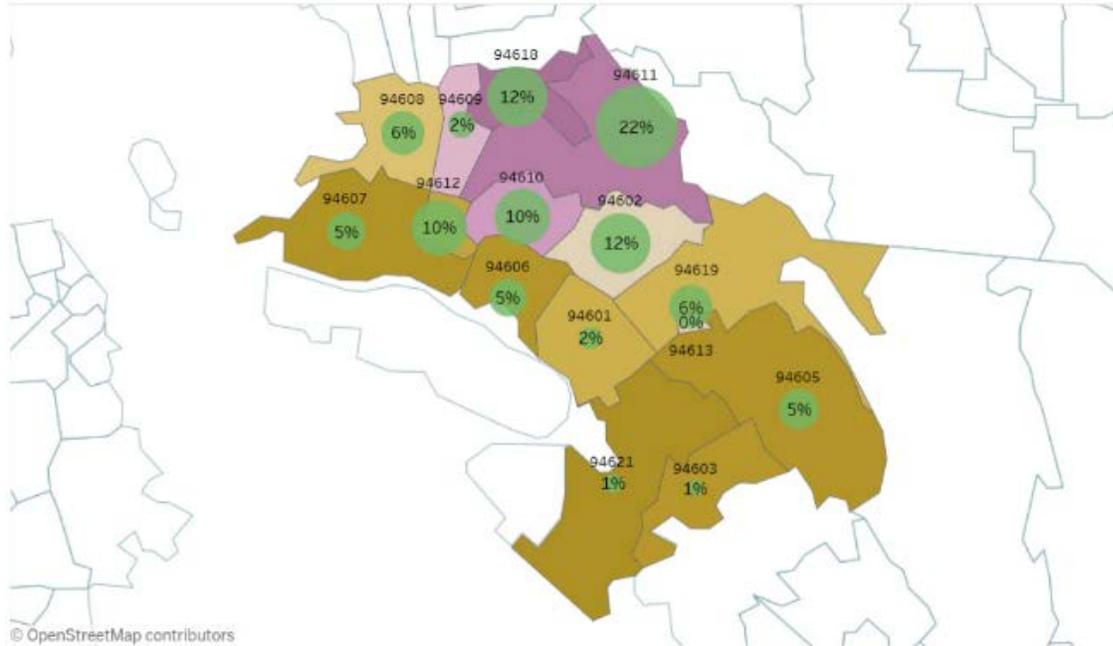
This data shows that in Oakland, political donations come mostly from wealthier, whiter neighborhoods. However, this data does not tell us whether donations are actually coming from white donors as opposed to people of color who live in whiter neighborhoods. To better understand who is giving in Oakland, Oakland would need to track demographic data from donors, in addition to the names and addresses it currently collects.

It is also unclear how money and race interact in terms of who is elected in Oakland. While at the federal level our representatives are disproportionately white, Oakland has a more diverse City Council. In 2015, approximately 39 percent of Oakland residents were white, 26 percent were black, 16 percent Asian and 26 percent Latino.[22] Currently, the Oakland City Council includes three black representatives, two Latino representatives, and three white representatives. Additional research is needed to consider whether this is associated with any impacts on policy outcomes in the city.

The Incumbency and Campaign Finance

Incumbents benefit from greater name recognition than challengers.

Name recognition is important, and can play a larger role in low-information elections.[23] This is particularly important in local elections, where races are non-partisan and voters have little additional information about candidates. Name recognition may also influence perceptions of a candidate's viability and thereby influence voter behavior, as more recognized candidates may be perceived as "winners".[24]

Incumbents can benefit from being perceived as a less risky choice than a challenger.

Incumbents may appeal to voters who are less risk-averse because incumbents are viewed with more certainty compared to challengers. Voters and interest groups are familiar with incumbents and their actions in office, but must make prospective judgments about how a challenger will behave in office or their ability to bring benefits to their district.[25] Risk-averse voters and interest groups prefer to support the known quantity, the incumbent, over an unknown quantity in the challenger.

The incumbency advantage translates into more campaign funds.

> **THE SAN FRANCISCO MAYORAL RACE**
>
> The incumbency is influential. In the San Francisco mayoral race, candidate Mark Leno went to court to prevent candidate London Breed from describing herself as "acting mayor" on the November ballot this year. Breed became acting mayor of San Francisco following Mayor Ed Lee's passing earlier this year, and was acting mayor at the time of the mayoral race's filing deadline. However, Breed was replaced by Mark Farrell as acting mayor two weeks later. Leno, a former state assemblyman and senator, could not use his prior political titles because he is currently not in office. Leno successfully argued that the "acting mayor" title misled voters.

The incumbency advantage translates into the ability to raise more campaign funds. One analysis found that incumbency was responsible for, on average, an increase of approximately 20 to 25 percentage points in the Democratic Party's share of contributions at the state and federal level.[26]

One factor that contributes to the incumbent advantage in fundraising is the belief that donations may result in increased access to the incumbent. Interest groups, in particular, can benefit from such a strategy. Interest groups target incumbents over challengers with their contributions because "contributors must develop a relationship of mutual trust and respect with officeholders in order to receive tangible rewards for contributions."[27] A single donation to an incumbent likely does not result in benefits to the group, but donations over time in conjunction with discussions between the donor and incumbent may come to yield benefits later.[28] These access-motivated interest groups account for approximately two-thirds of the financial incumbency advantage at the state and federal level.[29] Interests that have the most to win or lose from new government regulation, in particular, are more likely to target their contributions towards incumbents, regardless of party affiliation.[30]

Incumbents on the Oakland City Council win.

Incumbents on the Oakland City Council have a strong advantage over challengers. All incumbents running in the 2014 and 2016 elections won their re-election bids against challengers. Incumbents also significantly outraised their opponents in five out of six races, with the exception being the 2016 at-large race. Incumbents are marked in blue in the table below.

Table 1. Total Fundraising and Results of the 2014 and 2016 City Council Races in Oakland.

District	Candidate	Total Amount of Funds Raised	Result of Race
2016 City Council Race			
At-Large	Rebecca Kaplan	$ 169,232	Won
At-Large	Peggy Moore	$ 316,893	Lost
At-Large	Bruce Quan	$ 75,623	Lost
At-Large	Francis Hummel	$ 1,750	Lost
At-Large	Nancy Sidebotham	$ 396	Lost
1	Dan Kalb	$ 111,577	Won
1	Kevin Corbett	$ 42,542	Lost
3	Lynette Gibson McElhaney	$ 126,757	Won
3	Noni Session	$ 10,634	Lost
5	Noel Gallo	$ 80,101	Won
5	Viola Gonzales	$ 69,742	Lost
7	Larry Reid	$ 73,353	Won
7	Nehanda Imara	$ 27,941	Lost
7	Marcie Hodge	$ 20,349	Lost
2014 City Council Race			
2*	Abel Guillen	$ 110,441	Won
2	Dana King	$ 93,612	Lost
2	Kevin Blackburn	$ 59,307	Lost
2	Ken Maxey	N/A	Lost
2	Andrew Park	$ 66,162	Lost
4*	Anne Campbell Washington	$ 101,707	Won
4	Jill Broadhurst	$ 85,821	Lost
4	Paul Lim	N/A	Lost
6	Desley Brooks	$ 69,149	Won
6	Michael V. Johnson	N/A	Lost
6	James Moore	N/A	Lost
6	Shereda F. Nosakhare	$ 26,945	Lost

Data on 2016 total funds raised from opendisclosure.io. Data for the 2014 races from the Oakland Public Ethics Commission. *Districts 2 and 4 were open seat races.

Incumbents also outspent their opponents in all 2016 City Council races except the at-large race, as shown in Table 2 below. Incumbents in the 2016 City Council races also won even when facing significant amounts of independent expenditure spending opposing their candidacy. Table 2 shows the total amount of funds raised, total expenditures, and expenditures opposing candidates in 2016. The two incumbents facing independent expenditures opposing their candidacy, Dan Kalb and Noel Gallo, nevertheless won their races.

Table 2. Total Funds Raised, Total Expenditures, Expenditures Opposing Candidate, and Votes Won in 2016 Oakland City Council Races.

District	Candidate	Total Amount of Funds Raised	Total Expenditures	Expenditures Opposing Candidate	Votes Won	Result of Race
At-Large	Rebecca Kaplan	$ 169,232	$ 175,382	$ --	83,365	Won
At-Large	Peggy Moore	$ 316,893	$ 402,323	$ --	31,925	Lost
At-Large	Bruce Quan	$ 75,623	$ 75,911	$ --	27,342	Lost
At-Large	Francis Hummel	$ 1,750	$ 5,148	$ --	11,593	Lost
At-Large	Nancy Sidebotham	$ 396	$ 646	$ --	5,799	Lost
1	Dan Kalb	$ 111,577	$ 147,917	$ 12,417	25,102	Won
1	Kevin Corbett	$ 42,542	$ 77,187	$ --	5,917	Lost
3	Lynette Gibson McElhaney	$ 126,757	$ 134,876	$ --	13,147	Won
3	Noni Session	$ 10,634	$ 9,611	$ --	10,108	Lost
5	Noel Gallo	$ 80,101	$ 87,107	$ 40,013	7,838	Won
5	Viola Gonzales	$ 69,742	$ 69,842	$ --	6,053	Lost
7	Larry Reid	$ 73,353	$ 76,661	$ --	8,464	Won
7	Nehanda Imara	$ 27,941	$ 35,137	$ --	3,324	Lost
7	Marcie Hodge	$ 20,349	$ 16,624	$ --	3,947	Lost

Data from opendisclosure.io.

Individual contribution limits can lead to more competitive races.

Individual contribution limits can be an effective tool for increasing competitiveness in races and addressing the incumbency advantage. An analysis of 42 states over a 26-year period found that individual contribution limits between $1,001 and $2,000 reduced an incumbent's margin of victory by 5 percentage points, relative to states with individual contribution limits of $2,000 or more.[31] An incumbent's margin of victory fell further as contribution limits decreased: individual contribution limits between $501 and $1,000 reduced an incumbent's margin of victory by 9.5 percentage points, and individual contribution limits of $500 or less reduced an incumbent's margin of victory by 14.5 percentage points.[32]

Lower contribution limits were also linked to more viable and competitive challengers. Viable challengers were defined as races in which the incumbent's vote share was less than 85 percent. Relative to states with individual contribution limits of over $2,000, states with contribution limits between $501 and $1,000 saw the likelihood of a viable challenger increase by 14 percent, and by 15 percent in states with contribution limits of $500 or less.[33] Challengers in states with contribution limits of $500 or less also had a 10 percent greater likelihood of being elected than in states with contributions limits of $2,000 and above.[34]

Public financing programs can lead to more competitive races.

The same study considered the impact of public financing in two states: Maine and Minnesota. The study found that, on average, an incumbent's margin of victory was 57 percentage points in states with contribution limits but no public financing program. In Maine and Minnesota, which had both contribution limits and public financing programs, an incumbent's margin of victory dropped to 30 percentage points. Overall, an incumbent's margin of victory was 16.7 percentage points lower in states with public financing than in states without public financing. Further, states with public financing programs had a 29 percent lower likelihood of the incumbent winning with more than 85 percent of the popular vote, and a 4 percent higher likelihood that the election would be close.[35]

Term limits can lead to more competitive races.

A separate analysis found that term limits reduced campaign expenditures in California state elections and increased competitiveness in electoral races. California passed term limits that came into effect in the 1992 elections. In 1988, California State Assembly and Senate general election races cost an average of $345,218 in real 1982 dollars. In 1992 and 1994, the cost of State Assembly and Senate general election races fell to $232,805 in real 1982 dollars.[36] Real campaign expenditures for the three general elections from 1984 to 1988 averaged $309,144. This was 44 percent higher than the three general elections following the passage of term limits, which averaged $215,019.[37] This analysis further concluded that term limits had a greater impact in lowering the amount spent in an election than campaign donation limits passed in 1990.[38]

The incumbency is a barrier for candidates in Oakland.

Name Recognition

Former candidates for city council in the 2014 and 2016 elections identified the challenges of gaining name recognition as a key barrier when running against incumbents. Candidates shared that the majority of their campaign activities focused on building name recognition through mailers, signs, and attending events. "I think if I ran two more times, maybe by the third time I would have name recognition and maybe I would have a chance," said one candidate.

The Endorsement Process

Candidates stated that incumbents benefit by winning more endorsements from risk-averse interest groups choosing to support an incumbent rather than a challenger. "It's very hard to go against an incumbent because people feel they know the incumbent, it's a known quantity," said one candidate. "Especially interest groups, what are they buying by going out on a limb [and supporting a challenger]? It isn't that they might not like you or appreciate that you're running, but they'll tell you, 'I can't openly support you, so here's my $99.'"

Another candidate felt that "the endorsement process is already decided by these implicit, but mandatory, loyalties to sitting incumbents." Not all endorsements carry the same importance, however. Candidates overwhelmingly felt that endorsements from the labor and service unions in Oakland carried great weight, as union endorsements come with funding and volunteer manpower. Several candidates expressed that the manpower that comes with union endorsement was more important than the funding, because this means more boots on the ground to get out the vote as the election nears.

Following the unions, candidates largely felt that the Democratic Party was the next most important endorsement to receive. A Democratic Party endorsement can operate as a signaling tool to voters with low information on the candidates, leading voters to select the endorsed candidate because they trust the Democratic Party's endorsement.

Other groups identified by candidates as carrying influence in their endorsements were the Sierra Club, the Chamber of Commerce, neighborhood groups, and local and state level officials.

Forums

Candidates expressed mixed feelings about the endorsement forums hosted by organized interests. Candidates felt that questions were biased to favor incumbent candidates. Additionally, the forums only allowed candidates to reach a particular subset of the community. "Even though [forums are] described as a way to be in the community, it actually works against you [as a candidate] because these forums are not really a way to be in touch with a wide range of people. It's really about a special interest," said one candidate. "The way that the system is set up now, unless you're part of [an organized interest], you're not going to be engaged."

Political equity should be central to efforts to improve political engagement.

Money plays a key role in any campaign, allowing candidates to engage in advertising and publicity efforts to gain name recognition and win support for their platforms. When the wealthy are able to contribute more money to candidates, they have greater opportunity to persuade other voters to agree with their positions than non-donors do.[39]

Traditionally, America has understood political equality as "one person, one vote."[40] This focus on the ability to cast a vote has led to the courts striking down legislation aimed at restricting the right to vote at the polls, such as grandfather clauses and poll taxes. The franchise has been extended to non-white citizens, women, and those without property. However, this form of political equality is not political equity.

The electoral process consists of more than just the final act of voting. Before heading to the polls, the electorate engages in a process wherein competing groups attempt to persuade the undecided bloc of the electorate to agree with their positions.[41] In order to have truly equal opportunity to participate in the electoral process, groups must have equal opportunity to attempt to persuade the undecided electorate to agree with them.[42] When the campaign process is dominated by a narrow set of donors, more wealth can translate into increased opportunities to persuade. While simply having greater means to persuade will not always result in electoral victory, a greater opportunity to persuade is an inherent advantage denied to lesser-funded opponents.[43]

Our democracy therefore requires that a person's opportunity to participate fully in the electoral process not depend on that person's wealth. The electoral process "must be wealth-neutral in order to be fair to rich and poor alike."[44] This argument is rooted in an anti-plutocracy approach to electoral engagement. The hypothetical below illustrates the point that wealthier groups have a greater ability to attempt to persuade others simply because they have more money:

> Suppose that in a particular community of one million inhabitants there are two citizens with equally firm -- but opposing -- views about distributive justice. The first citizen, Alice, supports a local referendum that would increase taxes on the wealthy in order to increase the income of less affluent citizens. The second citizen, Bob, opposes this referendum. Alice has an income of only $20,000 per year, and therefore she feels that she can spend only $10 to support the referendum. Bob has an income of $200,000 a year and is willing to spend $1000 to oppose the referendum.

> Do not assume, however, that this difference in the amount Alice and Bob are willing to spend reflects a difference in their levels of interest in the referendum. On the contrary, suppose instead that the difference is caused solely by their difference in income. In other words, if Alice had an income of $200,000, she would spend $1000 to support the referendum. Likewise, if Bob had an income of $20,000, he would spend only $10 to oppose the referendum.

In this particular community there are 10,000 citizens just like Alice, each with an income of $20,000, who form a group called Citizens Advocating Support for Equity (CASE). They each contribute $10 to CASE (although each would have given $1000 if they each made $200,000 instead). Assume also that there are just 1000 citizens like Bob in this community, each with an income of $200,000. They form a group called Citizens Against New Taxes (CANT), to which each gives $1000 (although each would have given only $10 if each had only made $20,000 per year). Thus, solely because of the income difference of their memberships, CASE has $100,000 to spend on advertising and publicity in support of the referendum, whereas CANT has $1 million to spend in opposition. In other words, CANT has ten times the financial resources of CASE, even though CASE has ten times as many members as CANT -- and even though the interest level of every member of CASE and CANT is identical.[45]

This hypothetical demonstrates that the amount of money spent to support or oppose a candidate or issue does not necessarily demonstrate the strength of that support or opposition. However, as discussed previously, more money often translates into greater opportunity to persuade the voting public to agree with your stance. Those with less financial means cannot donate money at the same rate as higher income communities or individuals, giving these communities and individuals higher amounts of visibility, access and influence. The ability to donate and racial disparities in income levels interacts with racial disparities in voter turnout, leading to some voices being heard louder than others.

Racial disparities in voter turnout disproportionately affect communities of color.

As of July 2016, Oakland had a population of 420,000; of these 420,000 individuals, 232,278 are registered voters.[46] Voter turnout in Oakland rises and falls, with higher turnout during U.S. presidential election years and lower turnout in midterm election years. For example, in the 2016 and 2012 presidential election cycles, Oakland saw voter turnout rates of approximately 73 percent and 76 percent, respectively. However, the midterm elections in 2014, which included the Oakland mayoral race, saw turnout at approximately 45 percent.[47]

Race and socioeconomic status come into play when considering voting patterns. In California, significant racial disparities exist in voting between white citizens and Latino and Asian-American citizens.

Table 3 below shows voting rates for the 2004, 2008, and 2012 presidential election cycles and the 2006, 2010, and 2014 midterm elections. On average, 68 percent of white citizens in California voted. Only 51 percent of Latino citizens and 48 percent of Asian-American citizens voted on average over that timespan. Significant drops between white citizen voting rates and those of black, Latino and Asian-American citizens are also seen during midterm elections. Fifty-three percent of white citizens voted over that time in midterm elections, and only 38 percent of black citizens and 32 percent of Latino and Asian-American citizens voted on average

during midterm elections. White citizens vote at higher rates, and this means that whites are more likely to have their voices heard than communities of color.

**Table 3. Voting Rates Among Adult Citizens.[48]**

Presidential Voting	2004	2008	2012	2004-2012 Average	Midterm Voting	2006	2010	2014	2006-2014 Average
Nation	64%	64%	62%	63%	Nation	48%	46%	42%	45%
California	62%	63%	58%	61%	California	48%	47%	37%	44%
White	71%	69%	64%	68%	White	56%	56%	47%	53%
Black	67%	66%	62%	65%	Black	38%	44%	33%	38%
Native American	63%	58%	54%	58%	Native American	16%	28%	27%	24%
Pacific Islander	59%	53%	48%	53%	Pacific Islander	36%	44%	42%	41%
Latino	47%	57%	49%	51%	Latino	37%	35%	25%	32%
Asian American	45%	52%	48%	48%	Asian American	34%	35%	27%	32%

Source: Authors' analysis of U.S. Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey Voter Supplements*.
Note: Data for all ethnicities represent California only, and represent Non-Hispanic individuals in each race except for the category of Latino. The category "Latino" in this table comes from the U.S. Census category "Hispanic or Latino", "Native American" comes from the U.S. Census category "American Indian or Alaska Native", and "Pacific Islander" comes from the U.S. Census category, "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander".

Disparities in voter turnout correlate with other factors that impact voting behavior, such as age, income level, and education levels.[49] Resources that influence voting behavior include time, money, civic knowledge (such as an understanding of political processes), and civic skills (such as the ability to obtain political information).[50] Language barriers, insufficient information, and lack of civic infrastructure and political mobilization also impact voter participation.[51] Importantly, those with lower income levels and education are less likely to be engaged by politicians and encouraged to vote.[52]

These disparities exist at the local level as well. Figure 9 below shows racial disparities in voting in California local elections. Thirty-two percent of white voters participated in local elections, while only 23 percent of black voters, 16 percent of Asian-American voters, and 14 percent of Latino voters participated.

Figure 9. Racial Disparities in Voting in Local Elections in California.[53]
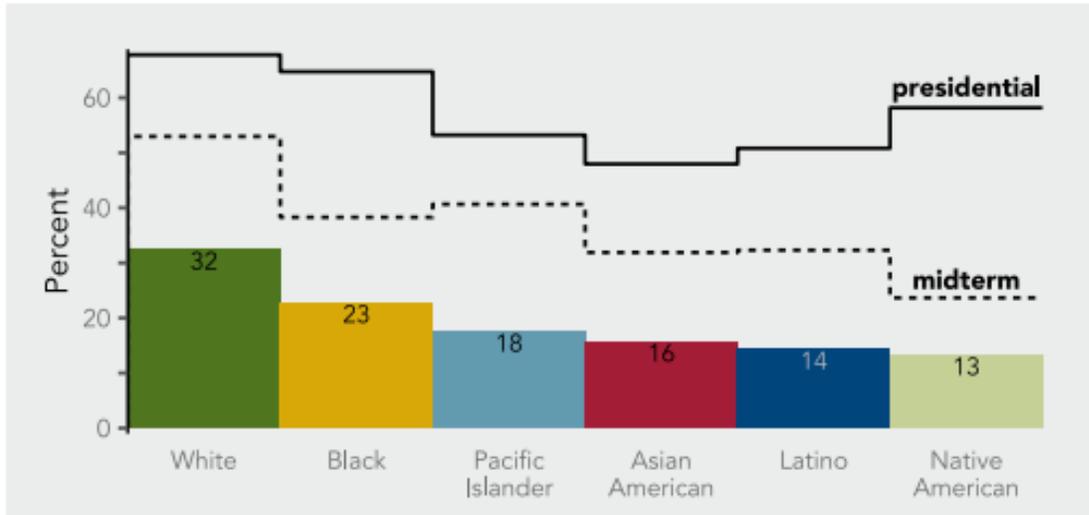

Source: Authors' analysis of US Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey Civic Engagement Supplements.*
Note: Data are averages of voting rates among adult citizens as follows: over 2011 and 2013 for those who say they "always vote" in local elections; over 2004, 2008, and 2012 for those who reported voting in presidential elections; and over 2006, 2010 and 2014 for midterm elections.

Differences in participation at the local level also correlate with socioeconomic and racial factors. Homeowners and individuals with higher education and income levels are more likely to participate in local elections. Whites are more likely to participate in local elections than Latinos or Asian-Americans across income levels, as shown in Figure 10 below.

Figure 10. Voting in California Local Elections Across Race and Socioeconomic Factors.[54]
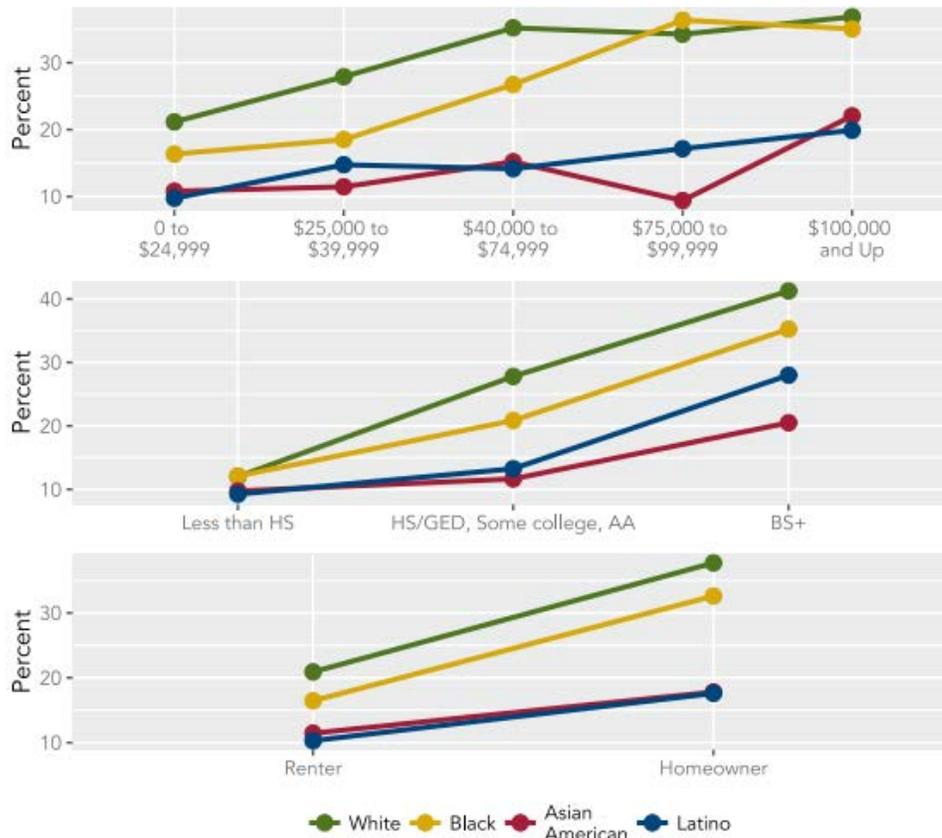
Source: Authors' analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey Civic Engagement Supplement*, 2011 & 2013.
Note: Data on renters includes both cash renters and those renting with public assistance.

Political engagement includes activities beyond the voting booth.

Engagement in the political process consists of behaviors beyond voting on election day. Defining engagement in terms of voting means that only citizens have a say in our political processes. Political engagement also should not be limited to citizens, because decisions made by elected officials impact all people living in Oakland. Engagement must go beyond the voting booth if our goal is to strengthen our democracy.

Democracy requires public involvement in the political process to maintain its legitimacy. This public involvement includes political activities between election cycles that allow the public to participate in deliberative processes to shape government action.[55] To do so, constituents must be sufficiently informed about government to participate in the democratic process.[56]

Today, the public is less respectful of authority, more distrustful of government and less likely to vote than in the past.[57] People are seeking different ways of influencing policy outside of simply voting in elections, including more direct means of influencing policy-makers, such as involvement in community and public interest groups, political action, and political consumerism.[58] Engagement in "elite-challenging" forms of political action has increased and largely replaced the traditional political organization structure that served as the mobilizer of political engagement in the past.[59]

Figure 11 below shows changes in political participation over time. Voting rates have dropped since the 1950s, but participation in campaigns, civic groups, petitions, protests, and community actions have increased.

Figure 11. Trends in American Political Participation.[60]
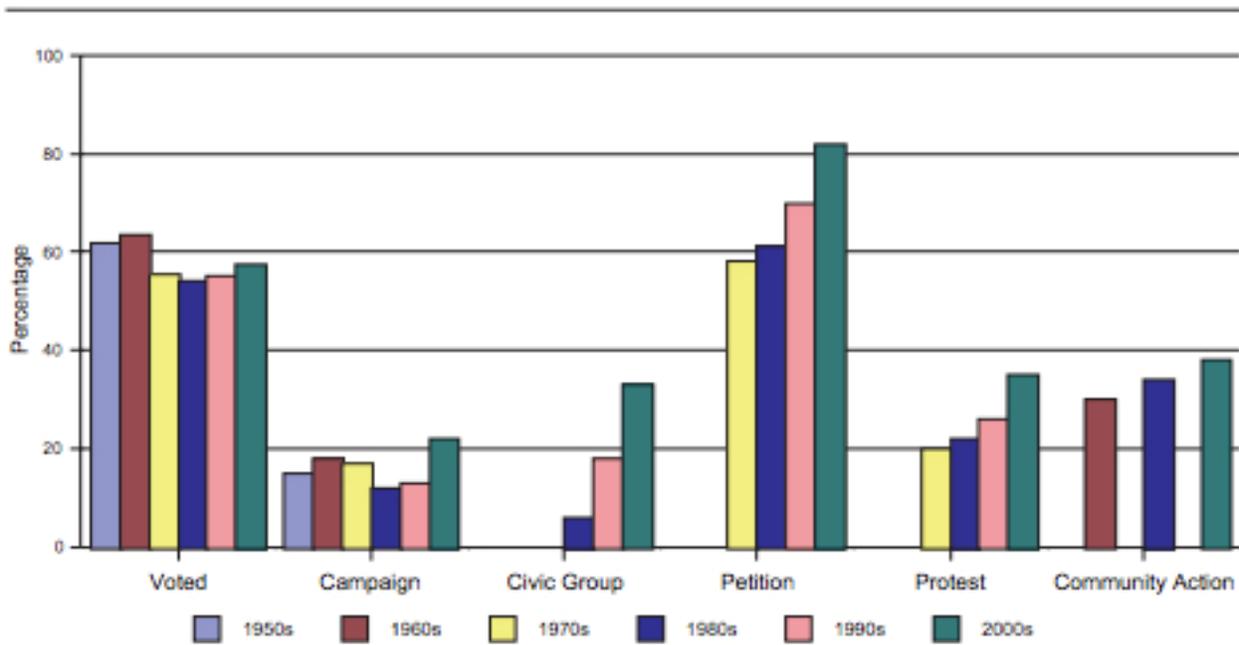
Sources: Voting: average of presidential turnout (VEP) from http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm; campaign activity: participated in two or more campaign activities, ANES time series; civic group: member of at least one public interest group, WVS (1980, 1990, 1999); petition: signed a petition, Political Action Survey, WVS (1980, 1990, 1999); protest: participated in one of four challenging acts, WVS (1980, 1990, 1999); community action: worked with group on local problem, Verba/Nie 1967, 1987; Social Community Survey 2000.

Californians also participate in political activities beyond voting. However, while individuals are participating in political activity outside of voting in elections, racial disparities exist amongst these activities as well.

Table 4. Participation in Political Activities Beyond Voting, Among Adult Citizens.[61]

	White	Black	Asian American	Latino	CA	NATION
Contact public official*	16%	9%	6%	5%	12%	13%
Support campaign**	23%	18%	11%	11%	18%	16%
Attend political meeting**	15%	11%	7%	6%	12%	11%
Protest**	6%	4%	4%	3%	5%	3%
Consumer activism*	20%	7%	8%	7%	14%	13%

Source: Authors' analysis of *Current Population Survey Civic Engagement Supplement*.
Note: There are insufficient sample sizes to estimate participation rates for these outcomes for Native Americans and Pacific Islanders. Information derived from the most recently available datasets: * denotes pooled between 2011 and 2013, and ** denotes data from 2008.

In particular, Table 4 above shows large disparities in the percentage of whites that contact public officials and the percentage of black, Asian-American and Latino citizens contacting public officials. These disparities may be attributable to challenges facing these groups regarding familiarity with various facets of government and language barriers.[62] These disparities exist across differences in age, education, and income level, as shown in the figure below. This underscores the impact of other barriers, such as language and access to civic institutions.

Figure 12. Frequency of Contacting Public Officials Across Race and Socioeconomic Factors.[63]
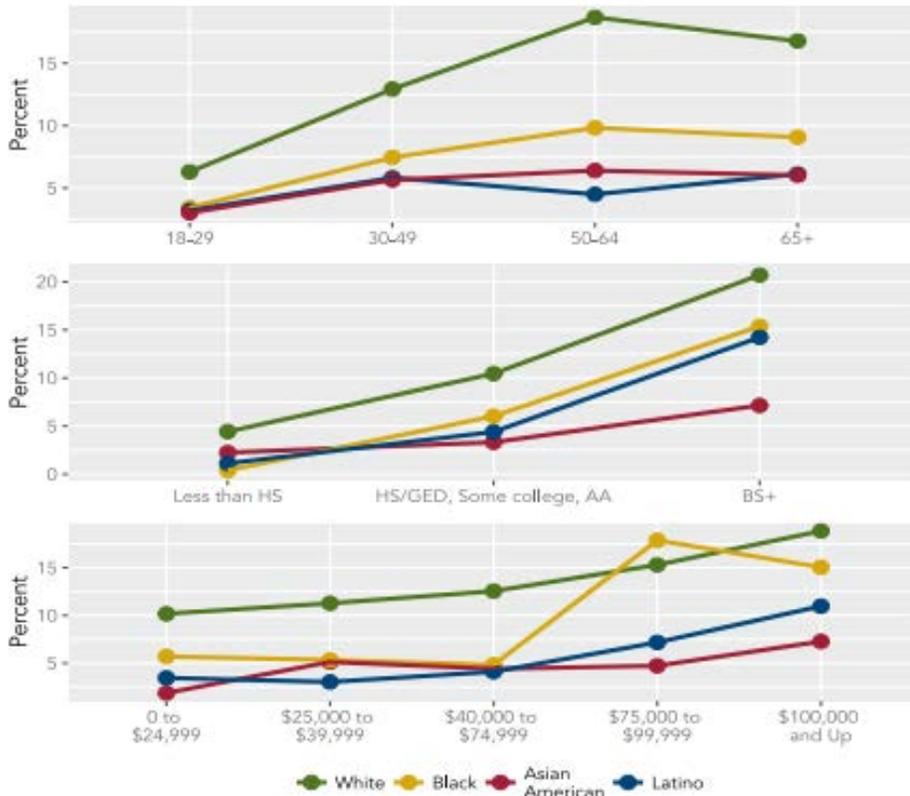
Source: Authors' analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's *Current Population Survey Civic Engagement Supplement*, 2011 & 2013.

Disparities exist in the percentage of individuals supporting campaigns as well. This impacts access to decision-makers because donors are more likely to be able to have face-to-face meetings with candidates than non-donors.[64] This can also be attributed to language barriers, lack of outreach, and limited civic infrastructure limiting participation amongst Asian-American and Latino communities.[65]

Barriers to Engaging with Constituents in Oakland

Language and community distrust towards the government were identified as barriers to engagement in the political process by candidates and community groups in Oakland during interviews with the author.

Immigrant communities may be wary of government interaction in today's political climate. Other Oakland communities distrust government authority and may be reluctant to engage with a system viewed as hostile and indifferent to their needs. One candidate shared that it is "difficult to have such a diverse community engaged, because there are language barriers, there are issues about authority, and especially now with immigration, you have a fearful community."

Distrust towards government authority may dampen political engagement in those communities. The city should make strategic efforts to build public trust and strengthen our democracy by implementing programs that focus on the users of our political systems: the community.

Case Study: New York City's "DemocracyNYC" Plan

On February 13, 2018, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio introduced his "DemocracyNYC"[1] plan at his fifth "State of the City" address. DemocracyNYC is a 10-point plan that seeks to increase voter turnout and civic engagement in New York City.

The DemocracyNYC plan creates a Charter Review Commission to work on reforming the City's campaign finance system, led by a Chief Democracy Officer. The Commission will be mandated to propose a plan for increased public financing of local elections in an effort to reduce the influence of big money. The Plan includes $500,000 in funding to prevent election hacking, and $4.3 million for efforts to increase participation in the 2020 U.S. Census.[1]

Then Plan includes a goal of registering 1.5 million new voters by 2020 in an effort to increase voter turnout in the City. This strategy includes a civics course to be introduced in the City's public schools, and each public high school will receive $2,000 to model the participatory budgeting process established by the New York City Council. It also includes an effort to reach 17-year-olds who will be eligible to vote in the next election as well as voter registration drives on college campuses and citywide. All city agencies will also receive set goals to register voters.

The City will create an online portal with information on how to run a campaign, such as which paperwork must be filed and how to open a campaign bank account. In an additional effort to increase transparency, Commissioners and individuals who report directly to the mayor are required to disclose all lobbyist meetings. These meetings will be published on a public disclosure website by the City.

Key Findings

Based on my interviews with former candidates, current elected officials, and community organizations, three main themes emerged:

1. The cost of campaigning impacts how candidates engage with constituents;
2. The need for improved voter education and rebuilding community trust in government, and
3. The lack of knowledge that first-time candidates have when trying to mount a campaign.

The cost of campaigning impacts how candidates engage with constituents.

When campaigning, candidates operate under time and financial constraints. Smaller campaigns are largely self-funded, and larger campaigns tended to employ campaign consultants to help candidates tap into funding networks. However, candidates in Oakland shared that they spent the majority of their time going door-to-door, not fundraising. All candidates (including currently elected officials) interviewed targeted their door-to-door efforts towards households that had voted in prior elections. As such, candidates are targeting voters already engaged in the political process. Candidates further engage already-engaged voters through the forums hosted by organized interests in the city. These forums and going door-to-door are valuable opportunities to engage the public, but do not bring in new communities to the political process. Additionally, the most valuable endorsements were not those that came with the most financial backing, but rather those that come with volunteers to support a campaign.

The Limited Public Financing Act (LPFA), Oakland's current public financing system for campaigns, does not impact how candidates run their campaigns or which constituents they target. As essentially a reimbursement program, the LPFA reduces some fundraising pressure for candidates but does not encourage candidates to engage new communities or encourage those communities to increase their involvement in Oakland's political processes. Further, the LPFA program still requires candidates to raise the money needed for their activities up-front. This can be more of a burden for smaller campaigns and limit their ability to participate in the program.

Low levels of voter education and community distrust of government impact engagement.

Interviewees identified voter education and community distrust towards government as barriers to political engagement for communities. Voters do not always know what role different offices play, such as what the city council does as opposed to the school board. This can also be impacted by language barriers. Further, community distrust towards government can impact whether a community engages in the political process. When communities do not trust government institutions to serve their interests or be responsive to their needs, they do not believe that being involved will lead to any real outcomes.

First-time Candidates lack a basic understanding of the campaign process.

Candidates who ran as political "outsiders" expressed that they struggled to compete with opponents who had greater knowledge of the political environment and campaign process,

whether those opponents were incumbents or candidates with a background in local politics. One candidate expressed this as being "outmaneuvered" by his opponent at every turn, often without even realizing that they were being outmaneuvered until later in the campaign process. Candidates felt that first-time candidates would benefit from a base-level of understanding around the campaign process, such as which documents to file and when and the key staff for a campaign. This is particularly difficult for challengers, as campaign consultants may be reluctant to work with a challenger going up against an incumbent. Campaign consultants can also be a significant cost for a campaign, one which smaller candidates likely will not be able to bear.

Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Institute a Voucher or Matching Funds Program for Public Financing of Campaigns

Justification

Candidates need funding to run a campaign. In Oakland, smaller campaigns are largely self-funded by the candidate, with additional funds coming from the candidate's personal network. Larger campaigns depend on personal networks, fundraising calls, fundraisers, endorsements, and public financing for campaign funds. Candidates who raised more money spent more time during the campaign on fundraising, but the majority of candidates did not feel that they had spent too much time fundraising or that fundraising needs significantly impacted their ability to engage in other campaign activities. All candidates expressed that the majority of their time on the campaign trail was spent going door-to-door and speaking with constituents.

However, candidates focus their door-to-door efforts on households that have voted in prior elections. While candidates are engaging constituents, they are campaigning in those communities that are already engaged.

Current Status: Oakland Campaign Reform Act and Limited Public Financing Act

Oakland Campaign Reform Act (OCRA)

The Oakland Campaign Reform Act (OCRA) governs campaign spending and contributions for all city office elections by establishing a voluntary expenditure limit. Candidates choose to either opt in or opt out of OCRA's voluntary expenditure limit. A candidate who agrees to OCRA's expenditure limit may receive contributions in higher amounts than a candidate who does not opt in to OCRA's expenditure limits. Thus, a candidate who does not opt in to OCRA's requirements may only receive up to $200 from individual contributors, and $400 from broad-based political committees. A candidate who does opt in to OCRA's requirements, however, may receive up to $800 from individual contributors and $1500 from broad-based political committees. The expenditure ceiling for each City office covered by OCRA is adjusted annually based on the Consumer Price Index for the San Francisco Bay Area.

Voluntary Expenditure Limit

- Opt Out
  - No overall spending limit
  - Lower individual contribution limits: $200 for individual contributors, $400 for broad-based committee contributors
- Opt In/Accept Limits
  - Limits total campaign spending
  - Higher contribution limits: $800 for individual contributors, $1,500 for broad-based committee contributors
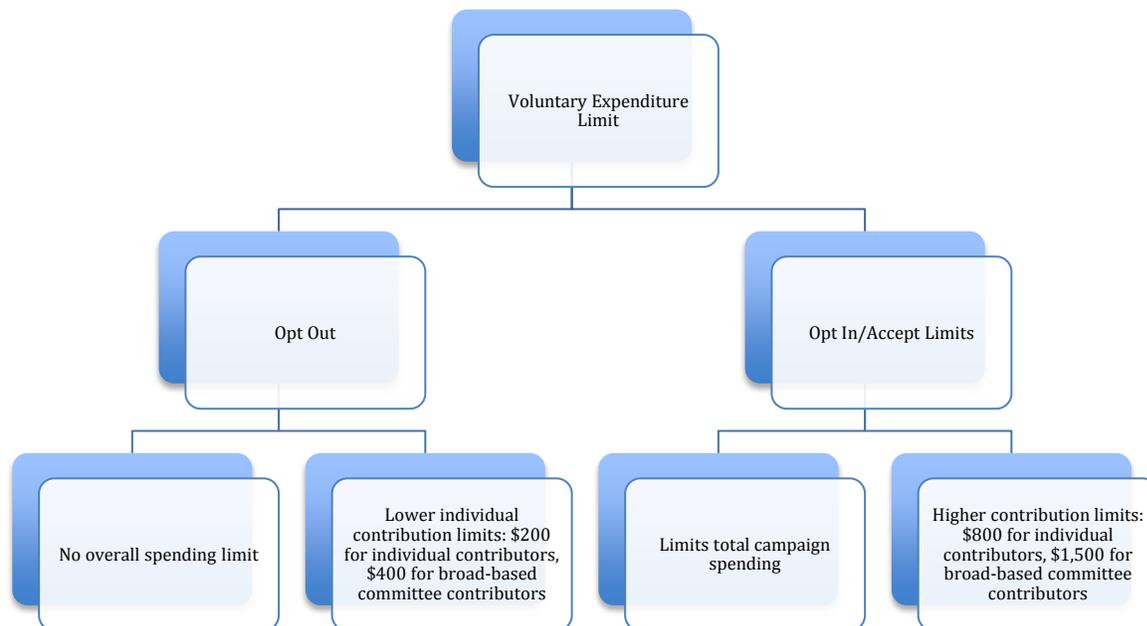
However, the expenditure ceilings are lifted if (1) a candidate who agreed to the limit is opposed by a candidate who did not opt in to OCRA's limits, and the candidate who did not agree to the limits makes expenditures or receives contributions equal to 50 percent of that race's expenditure ceiling, or (2) if an independent expenditure committee spends more than $15,000 on a City Council or School Board district election or $70,000 in a City Attorney, Auditor, City Council at-large, or Mayoral election.

Even when the expenditure limits are lifted, the candidate who opted in to OCRA's limits may still raise contributions at the higher level. OCRA thus provides candidates a strong incentive to opt in to the spending limits because candidates know that they will be able to spend beyond the expenditure ceiling if facing an opponent who either does not opt in and spends or receives 50 percent or more of the ceiling, or an opponent who has independent expenditure backing.

OAKLAND'S LIMITED PUBLIC FINANCING ACT

Oakland enacted the Limited Public Financing Act (LPFA) in 1999 and amended the Act in 2010. The LPFA provides reimbursements to qualified candidates running for city council of up to 30 percent of Oakland's voluntary expenditure ceiling for specified campaign expenditures. The City Council budgeted approximately $155,000 for the LPFA program in the 2016 elections.

The LPFA's stated purpose is to:

- Ensure that all individuals and interest groups in Oakland have a fair and equal opportunity to participate in elective and governmental processes;

- Reduce the influence of large contributors with a specific financial stake in matters under consideration by the city, and to counter the perception that decisions are influenced more by the size of contributions than by the best interests of the people of Oakland;
- Limit overall expenditures in campaigns, thereby reducing the pressure on candidates to raise large campaign funds beyond the amount necessary to communicate reasonably with voters;
- Reduce the advantage of incumbents and thus encourage competition for elective office;
- Allow candidates and elected City Officials to spend a smaller proportion of their time on fundraising and a greater proportion of their time dealing with issues of importance to their constituents and the community;
- Ensure that serious candidates are able to raise enough money to communicate their views and positions adequately to the public, thereby promoting public discussion of the important issues involved in political campaigns; and
- Help restore public trust in governmental and electoral institutions.

To qualify for the program, a candidate must meet the below conditions:

1. Be certified by the City Clerk as a District City Council candidate in the upcoming election;
2. Make an irrevocable decision to participate in the public financing program within 14 days of being certified to appear on the ballot;
3. Raise campaign contributions (exclusive of any personal contributions) and incur campaign expenditures of at least 5 percent of the voluntary expenditure ceiling for the office sought;
4. Be opposed by another candidate for the same office;
5. Agree to abide by Oakland's voluntary expenditure ceilings and not lend or contribute personal funds to their respective campaigns of more than 10 percent of the voluntary expenditure ceiling;
6. Timely file all pre-election and post-election campaign statements and agree to submit to any reasonable audits or reviews;
7. Attend (or have the campaign treasurer or designee attend) a training program conducted by the Public Ethics Commission.

While a qualified candidate may receive up to 30 percent of the expenditure ceiling in reimbursements, the actual amount that may be disbursed may be lower depending on the amount allocated for the program and number of candidates utilizing the program. If there are insufficient funds to provide reimbursements for 30 percent of the expenditure ceiling for each qualified candidate, the Public Ethics Commission may revise the amount available to each candidate.

To be reimbursed for a qualifying expense, a candidate must apply for reimbursement in minimum increments of $500 within ten days of the election. Qualifying expenses include:
- Candidate filing and ballot fees
- Printed campaign literature and production costs
- Postage
- Print advertisements

- Radio airtime and production costs
- Television or cable airtime and production costs
- Website design and maintenance costs

In the 2016 city council races, a total of $113,139.71 was disbursed by the LPFA program amongst four candidates. Overall, $1,126,890 was raised by all candidates running, including the funds disbursed by the LPFA program.

Candidate Feedback for the LPFA Program

Candidates interviewed by the author who participated in the LPFA program felt that the program was very helpful for their campaigns and that it helped alleviate pressure to fundraise, particularly from wealthier donors. The LPFA program was credited with giving candidates more time at the end of the campaign to focus on going door-to-door and engaging with constituents. In particular, all candidates interviewed for this project who received public financing stated that the LPFA program allowed them to send an additional mailer at the end of their campaign, assisting in voter outreach efforts.

However, the LPFA program has no impact on how candidates decide to run their campaigns or which constituents candidates target. One reason is that the LPFA program is a reimbursement program, and therefore serves mostly as a "bill pay" because candidates must still raise the funds upfront. Candidates are therefore required to fundraise first in order to pay for expenses, and then wait to be reimbursed later. This makes it harder for smaller candidates to participate in the program at all. Four smaller candidates stated that they did not participate in the program because they failed to qualify, and so the LPFA program did not help these smaller candidates.

Implement a voucher or matching funds program for public financing of campaigns.

Oakland should consider implementing a voucher or matching funds program to replace the current LPFA program for public financing of campaigns.

How a contribution incentive program is structured plays a significant part in the program's success.[66] For example, the federal government ran a tax credit program for small political contributions from 1972 to 1986. While the program successfully encouraged people to donate, it did not result in large increases in small-dollar donations.[67] The program had no mechanism to incentivize candidates to solicit credit-subsidized contributions rather than larger contributions from wealthy donors.[68] It was also not accompanied by any kind of public education outreach to encourage small donors to participate.[69] Programs that have increased small-dollar donations make it easier to claim the incentives relative to filing for a tax credit.[70] Successful programs encourage participation in the incentive program through voter education and easy-to-claim incentives, and encourage candidates to actively solicit small dollar donations.[71]

The PEC should implement a public financing program that increases equity by bringing more a broader, more diverse donor base. Any public financing program should also encourage engagement by incentivizing candidates to go into communities to raise funds and empowering residents to indicate their preferences through contributions. Finally, it is essential that any

program be transparent to build public trust and empower voters to learn and understand where a candidate's funding comes from. The PEC should build on its efforts to increase transparency around campaign donations in Oakland regardless of which public financing program is pursued, including by expanding its cooperation with Open Oakland to make tracking and understanding campaign donations easier and more user-friendly.

A voucher program presents the best opportunity to increase equity and political engagement while ensuring transparency.

Criteria Alternatives	Equity	Political Engagement	Transparency
Status Quo: Continue with current LPFA program.	Low	Low	High
Voucher Program	High	High	High
Matching Funds Program	Medium	High	High

Status Quo: Continue with the current LPFA Program

Continuing with the LPFA program as it currently operates would not increase equity or political engagement in Oakland. The LPFA program helps candidates to engage in some additional important activities, such as sending additional mailers to foster name recognition. However, it does not encourage candidates to talk to residents that are not already engaged in the political process. It also does not encourage residents to express their preferences through political donations or to engage with the political process in other ways. Transparency, though, would continue to be high as the PEC expands on its current disclosure activities.

Vouchers

Voucher programs are the most promising form of political contribution incentive program because the ability to participate in the program does not require having any disposable income available to donate or filing a tax return.[72] A voucher program removes financial barriers to donating because a voucher program does not require an individual to have any disposable income that may be donated to a campaign. Candidates are incentivized to compete for funds by communicating their ideas to all voucher holders, not just wealthy, potential donors.[73]

A voucher program thus presents the best opportunity to promote engagement between candidates and Oaklanders. Infusing campaign money into communities will incentive candidates to go into communities and speak with all constituents. A voucher program may also allow challengers to run more competitive campaigns against incumbents with larger war chests, and allow candidates that do not have ties to more traditional donor networks to mount more financially competitive campaigns.

A voucher system would also encourage engagement from more constituents by putting incentives for candidates—campaign funding—literally in the hands of voters. In particular,

communities that currently have less political influence will be equipped with a tool that brings candidates to them in their communities. The City would empower all individuals to indicate their preferences through vouchers, regardless of an individual's income level or ability to contribute personal funds to a political campaign.

However, a voucher program may be less indicative of the intensity of voter preferences because all residents will have similar means to contribute. Allowing individuals to continue to donate personal funds outside of the voucher program may alleviate this potential concern. There may be some potential for misuse of the vouchers, such as voucher holders selling their vouchers on a "black market" to those who would use additional vouchers to support a candidate. However, this type of fraud may be regulated against by tracking voucher contributions similarly to how monetary donations are tracked currently to ensure that individuals comply with the program's regulations.

Matching Funds

Political engagement would likely increase under a matching funds program, similar to the increase in the number of residents from a broader and more diverse base donating funds that has been seen in New York City. A matching program would incentivize candidates to seek donations from under-engaged communities because the match, if high enough, would sufficiently increase the value of small donor donations. Matching funds programs offer flexibility in setting the match amount and collapses the gap between those who can give a lot and those who can give less.

A matching funds program would increase equity relative to the current status quo under the Limited Public Financing Act, but not as much as a voucher program potentially would. A matching funds program still requires participants to have some disposable income to donate to a campaign to be matched. Thus, low-income groups may still not be able to participate in the program. Matching funds programs may thereby exacerbate the gap between those who can give at all and those who cannot give at all.

In 2015, Seattle voters approved the Honest Elections Seattle ballot initiative, creating the Democracy Voucher Program. The Democracy Voucher Program seeks to encourage more Seattle residents to participate in the political process by donating to campaigns and/or running for elected office.

The Democracy Voucher Program distributes four $25 "Democracy Vouchers" to every Seattle resident for use in local elections for representative office. To qualify, candidates must agree to spending limits, contribution limits, gather a minimum number of signatures supporting their candidacy, and collect a minimum number of qualifying contributions between $10 and $250 from Seattle residents.[74] All registered voters in Seattle automatically receive four $25 vouchers. Seattle residents whom are not registered voters can request four $25 vouchers from the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission (SEEC), which administers the program. Funding for the Democracy Voucher Program comes from a property tax on commercial, business, and residential properties of $3 million per year until 2025, costing the average homeowner approximately $11.50 per year.[75]

Residents assign vouchers to candidates and return them either directly to the candidate's campaign or to the SEEC. Each voucher is signed and dated by the resident. The SEEC verifies the signature on each voucher before releasing funds to the designated campaign. Each voucher contribution is public and published on the SEEC's website.

An analysis conducted in 2013 found that only 1.5 percent of adults in Seattle contributed to candidates.[76] Two-thirds of those contributions were from only 0.3 percent of Seattle adults, and more than a quarter came from just 0.07 percent of adults in Seattle.[77] The neighborhoods with the highest levels of contributions consisted of only 4 percent of Seattle's population.[78] These

high donation neighborhoods were also 31 percent whiter and 85 percent richer than the neighborhoods that donated the least.[79]

Seattle used Democracy Vouchers for the first time in 2017 in two at-large city council races and the city attorney race. An initial analysis by Win/Win and Every Voice found that at least 25,000 Seattle residents donated in the 2017 election cycle using both democracy vouchers and monetary donations—this was three times the roughly 8,200 residents who donated to candidates in 2013.[80] Of these 25,000 donors, an estimated 84 percent were new donors, 71 percent of which were voucher donors. Additionally, small donations ($250 or less) and Democracy Voucher donors constituted 87 percent of contributions to candidates, versus only 48 percent for the same races in 2013.[81]

The Win/Win and Every Voice analysis also compared donors in the 2017 city council and city attorney races, which participated in the democracy voucher program, to the mayoral race, which did not. Democracy Voucher donors better reflected Seattle's population, with increased participation by young people, women, people of color, and less affluent residents.[82] Notably, neighborhoods with household incomes below the city median experienced a 44 percent improvement in their share of giving among voucher donors as compared to giving in the mayoral race. Similarly, minority-majority neighborhoods saw a 46 percent improvement in their share of giving among voucher donors compared to donations to the mayoral campaigns.

Seattle plans to expand Democracy Vouchers to additional citywide races in future election cycles.

Case Study: New York City's Matching Funds Program

New York City has operated a matching funds program since 1988. The program is intended to encourage candidates to finance their campaigns by engaging with average residents instead of seeking large contributions from select donors.[83] Qualifying candidates receive public matching funds at a 6-to-1 match for contributions up to $175 made by New York City residents.[84]

To qualify, candidates must collect a minimum number of contributions of $10 or more from the area they seek to represent, raise a minimum amount of matchable contributions, agree to spending limits, and must run in a contested race. The maximum amount of public funds that a candidate may receive is limited to 55 percent of the candidate's spending limit.[85]

A 2012 study by the Brennan Center for Justice compared donations to New York City Council races, which are part of the matching funds program, with races for the New York State Assembly, which does not participate in a matching fund program. The study found that 90 percent of census blocks in New York City included at least one small donor contributing $175 or less to a City Council candidate. Only 30 percent of census blocks included a small donor contribution to a candidate in the State Assembly races.[86] Another study by the Center for Urban Research at the CUNY Graduate Center found that registered voters who contributed to a campaign in New York City were more likely to later vote in those elections than non-contributing residents.[87]

Recommendation 2: Improve Voter Outreach and Bring Candidates to Communities to Enhance Political Engagement.

Justification

Candidates expressed the need for improved voter education efforts in Oakland, noting that many people do not know what the city council does and that candidates often spent time explaining ranked choice voting to voters.

Organizations often host candidate forums as part of their endorsement process. Only invited candidates participate in a forum. While forums hosted by organized interests allow that organization's members to be engaged, it does not engage the broader public. Candidates are speaking to already-engaged voters and failing to access larger groups of people that not part of these organized interests.

Trying to engage with City Hall also often requires communities to come to City Hall, rather than City Hall coming to those communities. As one candidate put it: "Right now, anything that neighborhoods want or need, they have to go to City Hall or one of the various meetings that happens during the day while they're at work." This makes it particularly challenging for low-income communities to engage with City Hall.

> **More young people are registering to vote, presenting an opportunity to encourage youth engagement in the political process.**
>
> A California state program has pre-registered over 100,000 young people as voters since September 2016. Young voters have been mobilized to register in higher numbers amongst a groundswell of student activism in recent months, and particularly since the Parkland shooting. This presents an opportunity to engage young people in the political process and foster an understanding of how their voices can be heard.

The PEC should implement a voter education strategy that promotes equity and engagement in a transparent manner.

Recommendation

The PEC should work with trusted community partners to host neutral candidate forums within targeted communities to promote engagement between candidates and those communities. By doing so, the PEC can play a key role in rebuilding community trust with City Hall and fostering an improved sense of fairness in the campaign process. The PEC currently administers the campaign finance programs in Oakland, and public financing for campaigns should be tied to participation in PEC-hosted candidate forums. Forums can also be a mechanism to show communities how they can be involved in the political decision-making processes and leverage their votes in their interest.

Participation in candidate forums should be required for all candidates receiving public financing for their campaign, similar to the public debate requirement for candidates receiving public funds for their campaigns in San Francisco.[88] Forums should be in communities that are less engaged in the political process with topics and questions coming directly from community members. For

example, the PEC could host a candidate forum in Chinatown by working with a trusted, politically-neutral partner within the Chinatown community to identify a public location to host the forum, raise awareness in the community to bring people to the forum, and field questions from the community directly and through the use of a translator as necessary. All candidates receiving public financing must attend, and those candidates not receiving public financing may choose to participate.

Such a forum would bring candidates to communities, addressing barriers to engagement such as lack of access to candidates and travel challenges that some communities face when forums are hosted downtown or infrequently. The PEC may also provide voter registration forms and information to community members at the event.

A majority of candidates supported the idea of PEC-hosted forums in under-engaged communities.

Recommendation 3: Host Candidate Workshops and Develop a Candidate Handbook to Lower Barriers to Entry for Candidates.

Barrier

Candidates largely felt that they did not understand what it takes to run a campaign the first time that they ran. Several candidates hired campaign consultants, noting the difficulties that a new candidate faces in trying to access funding streams and influential groups. The need for campaign consultants significantly increases the cost of campaigning. The influence of the incumbency comes into play here as well, as candidates often experience difficulty finding campaign consultants willing to work for a challenger given a challenger's low odds of winning.

Candidates found out about Oakland's public financing program when they received their candidate packets after registering their campaign. The PEC currently hosts workshops for candidates on the LPFA program and provides key campaign information on its webpage.

Recommendation

The PEC should consider hosting candidate workshops to explain the campaign process, documents which need to be filed, and the basics of running a campaign and staff roles. General information on the endorsement process would also help lower barriers to entry for new candidates. These workshops should be available to interested persons prior to their decision to run for office. The PEC can also develop a candidate handbook with key information to accompany the workshops. This would allow all candidates to begin their campaigns with a base level of knowledge and understanding about the process.

Case Study: New York City Campaign Finance Handbook and King County Candidate Manual

The New York City Campaign Finance Board publishes a comprehensive Campaign Finance Handbook for candidates.[89] The Handbook explains how to start a campaign, beginning with forming a campaign committee, and different ways to fundraise while maintaining compliance with campaign finance regulations. The Handbook also covers how the Campaign Finance Board helps candidates to share their message through voter guides and their debate program, and a section on recommended best practices to establish internal controls for a campaign. This best practices section also includes tips on hiring political consultants, how to manage a campaign bank account, and key elements to establishing a successful control environment for a campaign. The Handbook also includes several examples to guide candidates on how to comply with regulations and illustrate distinctions that may make an activity legal in one case but noncompliant in another.

King County Elections in Washington also produces a Candidate Manual.[90] This Manual contains important dates in the campaign cycle and key information for candidates to file their documents to ensure compliance with all regulations. The Manual also provides tips and examples for items, such as candidate statements.

Limitations and Next Steps

The barriers to public engagement in the political process discussed in this analysis are based in large part on the feedback provided by former candidates for city council in Oakland. However, it was more challenging to solicit input from community organizations and current City Councilmembers. As such, the barriers and recommendations included in this report do not reflect the views of a critical mass of community organizations or current elected officials. Additionally, the PEC is currently in the process of conducting a public survey to learn more about the average Oaklander's experience with the campaign and political processes in Oakland. The results of this public survey are not yet available.

The PEC may want to seek additional input from community organizations, current elected officials and the public to ensure that its decision-making reflects lessons learned from these community members as well.

The PEC may also consider how to improve how it tracks political donations in the city. Currently, only those donations greater than $100 are disclosed. This means that we do not know the number of donations less than $100 being made in the city, who is making those donations, or who is receiving those donations. The PEC also does not collect racial or socioeconomic data for contributors, which makes it difficult to determine how contributions reflect the racial and socioeconomic demographics of Oakland.

The PEC should also consider how to address the power and influence of the incumbency in Oakland, including whether term limits for City Council seats would improve electoral competitiveness. As discussed earlier in this report, one analysis found that term limits for California statewide seats led to less money spent on average during campaigns. This analysis, however, focused more on the barriers facing candidates when running campaigns rather than on how to address the incumbency. The PEC may wish to consider whether the incumbency is really a problem in Oakland and if so, how it may best be addressed.

Finally, the Federal Election Commission is currently considering whether a female candidate for office in New York may use campaign funds to pay for childcare while she campaigns.[91] The PEC may want to consider how other barriers faced by candidates may also be addressed to foster greater equity in terms of who can run for office in our City.

Conclusion

Money plays a significant role in our democracy, influencing who runs for office and the choices available to voters at the ballot box. The need for money in a campaign gives donors more opportunity to influence candidates and voters to agree with a position, and potentially more access to elected officials. Name recognition, a desire by interests to increase access, and a reluctance to support unknown candidates increase the power of the incumbency and dampen electoral competitiveness.

The power of the incumbency and the need for money in our campaign system can discourage political engagement from the public. Candidates seek out donors to fund their campaign and target their door-to-door efforts on households already participating in the voting and political process. This leaves non-donor areas that are not currently engaged left out of the political process, perpetuating a cycle of non-engagement by both those constituents and candidates. The result is some voices becoming louder than others in our democracy.

We have tools that can address these challenges. A voucher or matching funds program for public financing of campaigns would empower small-dollar donors and amplify their voices in the campaign process. A voucher program would ensure that all Oakland residents have an opportunity to participate in our campaign process regardless of wealth by putting money in the hands of voters. A public financing program can be coupled with voter outreach efforts to bring candidates to communities, ensuring that all communities have an opportunity to have their voices heard by those running to represent them. Entry barriers faced by first-time candidates can be addressed through candidate workshops and a handbook to support candidates with little political background.

Money may continue to play a significant role in our democracy, but we can enhance our democracy by giving Oaklanders tools to amplify their voices be heard and influence in the political process.

Appendix A: Interview Questions

A.1. Questions for Former Candidates

I.   THE CAMPAIGN PROCESS

1. What words come to mind when you think about the campaign process?
    a. Why?

2. Why did you decide to run for office?

    a. What factors played the largest role in influencing your decision to run?

    b. Were you encouraged to run by any individuals or groups?

3. What does it take to run an effective campaign? What was your campaign strategy or focus?

    a. What are the barriers/challenges to running for office?

    b. What do you think of the way candidates have to run for office?

    c. What skills or experience does a candidate need to run for office?

4. Who has power in the campaign process?

5. How did you spend your time campaigning?

    a. Fundraising
            i. Time spent: _____
    b. Talking about issues with constituents
            i. Time spent: _____
    c. Learning about issues
            i. Time spent: _____
    d. Other:_____
            i. Time spent: _____

6. What was your fundraising strategy?

    a. Where did you conduct most of your fundraising? Who did you target?

    b. What mediums did you use to fundraise? Which were more effective than others? Which did you spend the greatest amount of time and resources on?

7. Were you able to engage with a broad range of constituents over the course of your campaign? Why or why not?

8. What was the most effective means of engagement for you? Why was this more effective?

9. How did you determine your policy positions on issues as a candidate?

10. Did independent expenditures play a role in your race? How so? Why do you think these expenditures were made?

11. Did your donor and non-donor constituents share similar policy goals?

12. Do you think the campaign process is a good test of who will make a good elected official?
    a. Yes
        i. Why?

    b. No
        i. Why not?

13. If we designed our campaign system around the users—both candidates and the community—how would it look? How would you change the process for campaigning for office (to improve public engagement, participation, interaction)?

II. PUBLIC FINANCE

1. What words come to mind when you think about money in politics?

2. Were you aware of Oakland's public financing program before deciding to run for office?
    a. Yes
        i. Did the public financing program influence your decision to run? How?

        ii. How did you learn about the public financing program?

    b. No

3. Did you participate in the public financing program?
    a. Yes
        i. Why did you participate in the public financing program?

    b. No
        i. Why didn't you participate in the public financing program?

4. If you did participate in public financing, what was the impact of public financing on your campaign? Please rank your choices.

    a. ____Decreasing the influence of money or wealthier donors over policymaking.
    b. ____Increasing the amount of time that I spent learning about the issues.
    c. ____Increasing the amount of time that I spent talking about the issues.
    d. ____It allowed me to talk to more people in the community and spend less time fundraising.
    e. ____It gave me the means to run a competitive campaign.
    f. ____No impact—my activities were the same.
    g. ____Other:

5. Does the current public financing system make any difference in how campaigns are conducted and/or which constituents are heard?

6. What are or what should be the most important and/or most effective aspects of the public financing program?

7. If the city were to improve its public financing system for campaigns, what suggestions would you have?

A.2. Questions for Elected Officials

I.   THE CAMPAIGN PROCESS

1. What words come to mind when you think about the campaign process?

2. Why did you decide to run for office?

    a. What factors played the largest role in influencing your decision to run?

    b. Were you encouraged to run by any individuals or groups?

3. What does it take to run an effective campaign? What was your campaign strategy or focus?

    a. What are the barriers/challenges to running for office? To building an effective campaign organization/structure?

    b. How much do you need to budget to run for office? How did you reach this estimate?

    c. What do you think of the way candidates have to run for office?

    d. What skills or experience does a candidate need to run for office?

4. Who has power in the campaign process?

5. How did you spend your time campaigning?

    a. Fundraising
        i.   Time spent: _____
    b. Talking about issues with constituents
        i.   Time spent: _____
    c. Learning about issues
        i.   Time spent: _____
    d. Other:_____
        i.   Time spent: _____

6. What was your fundraising strategy?

    a. Where did you conduct most of your fundraising?

    b. What mediums did you use to fundraise? Which were more effective than others? Which did you spend the greatest amount of time and resources on?

7. Were you able to engage with a broad range of constituents over the course of your campaign? Why or why not?

8. What was the most effective means of engagement for you? Why was this more effective?

9. How did you determine your policy positions on issues as a candidate?

10. Did independent expenditures play a role in your race? How so? Why do you think these expenditures were made?

11. Did your donor and non-donor constituents share similar policy goals?

12. Do you think the campaign process is a good test of who will make a good elected official?
    a. Yes
        i. Why?

    b. No
        i. Why not?

13. If we designed our campaign system around the users—both candidates and the community—how would it look? How would you change the process for campaigning for office (to improve public engagement, participation, interaction)?

II. PUBLIC FINANCE

1. Were you aware of Oakland's public financing program before deciding to run for office?
    c. Yes
        i. Did the public financing program influence your decision to run? How?

        ii. How did you learn about the public financing program?

    d. No

2. Did you participate in the public financing program?
    c. Yes
        i. Why?

    d. No
        ii. Why not?

3. If you did participate in public financing, what was the impact of public financing on your campaign? Please select all that apply and rank, if possible.

    a. ____Decreasing the influence of money or wealthier donors over policymaking.
    b. ____Increasing the amount of time that I spent learning about the issues.
    c. ____Increasing the amount of time that I spent talking about the issues.
    d. ____It allowed me to talk to more people in the community and spend less time fundraising.
    e. ____It gave me the means to run a competitive campaign.
    f. ____No impact—my activities were the same.
    g. ____Other:

4. Does the current public financing system make any difference in how campaigns are conducted and/or which constituents are heard?

5. What are or what should be the most important and/or most effective aspects of the public financing program?

6. If the city were to improve its public financing system for campaigns, what suggestions would you have?

III. ENGAGEMENT

1. How do you spend your time as an elected official?

2. How do you learn about issues and form issue positions?

3. How do you engage with your constituents?

    a. What is the most effective way for you to engage with your constituents? Why?

4. Do fundraising needs impact your ability to govern? How so?

5. Are you satisfied with your ability to engage (communicate with, hear from) with constituents now (including those who do not attend council meetings, etc)?
    a. What are the biggest barriers to engaging with constituents?
    b. How would you change this?
    c. What would allow you to shift the way you engage with your constituents?
    d. Do you receive enough input from your constituents to understand their views and concerns? What would be more helpful to receiving input?

6. To what extent do you make decisions based on
    a. What you think is the right decision?
    b. What organizations think should happen?
    c. What your constituents think should happen?
    d. What you think is best for your constituents?

7. How often do you feel you must make decisions without enough information, or would like to have more information before making your decision?
    i. Always
    ii. Often
    iii. Sometimes
    iv. Rarely

8. How many hours per week do you work on behalf of Oaklanders as an office holder?

9. Do you make an adequate salary that enables you to do your job well?
    a. What would an appropriate salary be?
    b. Do you work outside of your council position?

A.3. Questions for Community Organizations

I. THE CAMPAIGN PROCESS

1. To what extent does your organization participate in campaign activities by candidates running for local office in Oakland?
   - (a) Ballot measures
   - (b) Candidates
     - i. Select and put forward candidates
     - ii. Endorse candidates
     - iii. Advocate for or against candidates
     - iv. Contribute to candidates (monetary donations)
     - v. Mobilize organization members to participate
       - a. How do you mobilize? (vote, walk, advocate, etc)
     - vi. Track/monitor votes of elected officials to use during campaign process
     - vii. Make independent expenditures
     - viii. Activities through Political Action Committee
     - ix. Other:

2. What are the barriers? Can you put your own candidates forward?

3. Are you able to gather the information you want about candidates running for office in Oakland?
   - (a) Yes
   - (b) No

   Why or why not?

4. What are your biggest challenges when it comes to participating in the campaign process?

5. What solutions to those challenges might you suggest?

6. Do you believe that money influences (a) who is elected in Oakland; (b) policy outcomes in Oakland; (c) the amount of access to an elected official in Oakland?
   - (a) Yes
   - (b) No
   - (c) Don't Know

   Please explain:

7. Is the amount of money used for political donations in Oakland a problem?
   - (a) Yes
     - i. Why? Please rank (1: highest)
       - a. ____My voice does not matter in elections.
       - b. ____Some people have more influence than I do.

49

  a. Who has more influence than you?
    i. ____Wealthy people
    ii. ____Organized groups
    iii. ____Special Interest groups
    iv. ____Other: _____
    v. ____Don't Know
  c. ____Candidates only meet with and listen to people that give them money.
  d. ____It gives the perception that politics is corrupt, even if there is no actual corruption.

 (b) No
 (c) Don't Know

8. Who has power in the campaign process in Oakland?

9. How does this impact your organization?

10. If we designed the campaign process around the users, how would it look?

II. VOTING

1. Do you organize in your community to encourage community members to vote for Oakland city candidates?
 (a) Yes
 (b) No

Why or why not?

2. Do you believe that elections in Oakland are fair?
 (a) Yes
  a. Why?

 (b) No
  a. Why not?

 (c) Don't Know

3. What are barriers to your organization and community members voting in Oakland?

4. What solutions do you suggest to address these barriers?

III. ENGAGEMENT

1. Are you involved in city government decisions and discussions?
    (a) Yes
        i. How?

    (b) No

2. Do you have access to your city elected officials and their staff to share your concerns?
    (a) Yes
        i. Please explain:

    (b) No
        i. Why not?

3. Can you find the information that you want about city government?
    (a) Yes

    (b) No
        i. Why not? (not user friendly, not available, etc)

    (c) What additional information would be helpful?

4. Do you interact with city council members or their staff?
    (a) Yes
        i. How often?

        ii. How do you want to hear from and engage with your representatives? What does engagement mean for you?

    (b) No
        i. Do you want to hear from your representative?
            1. Yes
                a. How would you want to hear from and engage with your representative? What does engagement mean? What do you want more of?

            2. No
                a. Why not?

5. Do you feel that elected officials listen to and respond to your concerns and/or your community's concerns?
    (a) Yes
    (b) No

6. What are barriers to engaging with city government for your community? Which are the biggest?

7. What solutions should be prioritized to address these barriers?

IV. ALTERNATE APPROACHES TO SELECTING AND ENGAGING LEADERS

1. Which of the following approaches do you think would encourage broader and more diverse political participation from Oakland communities? Please rank your choices.
   a. I would like:
      i. ____More and better information about local candidates running for office
      ii. ____To see for myself who makes contributions to local candidates
      iii. ____To see for myself who makes independent expenditures for or against local candidates
      iv. ____The ability to watch an online video interview of each candidate
      v. ____To watch candidates debate each other
      vi. ____To be able to look up how my elected official has voted on issues that are important to me
      vii. ____To talk with someone in my community about potential candidates
      viii. ____To be given $100 in payment coupons or vouchers to contribute to the candidate of my choice as a method of raising my own ability to influence campaigns and reduce the influence of wealthy donors
      ix. ____My own $100 contribution to be matched 6:1 to help increase my individual power and reduce the influence of big money in the campaign process
   b. City government should:
      i. ____Make or require more candidate/campaign information to be available in more languages
      ii. ____Provide more information online about candidates
      iii. ____Provide legislative voting history for elected officials so I can see how elected officials voted on issues that matter to me
      iv. ____Give each candidate public funds to use for their campaigns in order to reduce the influence of money in politics
      v. ____Engage (share information, invite input, listen to feedback) with Oaklanders more regarding issues facing the City, including programs such as participatory budgeting
      vi. ____Require that elected officials may serve no more than 2 or 3 terms (terms are 4 years currently)
      vii. ____Pay elected officials as if they are full-time positions so they have time to adequately research and understand the issues, and do not need additional outside income to support themselves financially
   c. I have other suggestions for enhancing and diversifying civic engagement in Oakland:

2. What else can the City do to encourage broader and more diverse political participation?

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