HOW TO CONNECT WITH VOTERS ON MONEY IN POLITICS

This is a condensed version of Every Voice’s comprehensive candidate briefing book on democracy issues. You can download the full version at http://everyvoice.org/briefingbook.

Voters are tired of a political system corrupted by big money. They feel shut out and that politicians don’t listen to them. And they want candidates who’ll do something about it. Fixing our broken political system is a winning political issue and by making it a central part of your campaign, you can show voters that, like them, you believe our democracy works best when it represents everyone, not just lobbyists and corporate special interests.

Eighty-four percent of Americans think the wealthy have too much influence in politics, according to a 2017 poll by the Associated Press. Sixty-five percent think lobbyists do too.¹ Ninety-four percent of people blame “wealthy political donors” as a cause of dysfunction in our political system.² Voters around the country believe our elections are too often dominated by big money from corporations, the wealthy, and special interests. With a Congress and an executive branch doing the bidding of wealthy donors, people across the country are looking to hear from candidates about how to create a democracy that works for everyone.

Voters understand that in order to have a government that is working in their best interests—on issues from health care to the economy—we need a government that is not dependent on the wealthy people who traditionally fund campaigns. In order to connect with cynical voters, a critical component of your stump speech may be to explain you understand that to create an economy that works for all of us, we need to create a democracy that does too.

TYING MONEY IN POLITICS TO EVERYDAY ISSUES

The number one issue for most Americans is the economy. People want job security, they’re trying to put food on the table, and they’re worried about how to pay for health care and their kids’ college tuition. A lot of these voters, though don’t trust politicians to put their interest first because they think our political system is broken and corrupt. That’s why it’s important to talk about the role that money in politics plays in blocking progress on these and other issues as you promote your policy platform. Here are some examples of how to do this.

The Economy and Money in Politics:

When government works for big donors, corporations keep wages down and politicians prioritize the economic interests of the ultra-rich. Making our economy work for all of us starts with making sure lobbyists and big donors can’t buy access and special favors.


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The Tax Bill and Money in Politics:

The tax bill passed last year is nothing more than a handout to big donors and corporate special interests at the expense of everyone else through cuts to vital programs like Medicare and Social Security. That’s not how our government should work. That’s why I support policies that reduce the power of big money in politics and give regular people a bigger voice.

Health Care and Money in Politics:

One reason health care in this country is so expensive is the power of drug companies and health insurers. They get the ear of elected officials and buy sweetheart deals. In order to reduce the cost of health care we must reduce the power of big money by passing policies that give everyday people a bigger voice in our elections.

Gun Safety Policy and Money in Politics:

Following tragedy after tragedy, Americans have come together to demand our leaders take action to prevent gun violence and make our communities safer, yet money from the gun lobby has scared politicians away from passing popular, commonsense policies—even as 90 people a day die by gun violence in this country. The NRA and their army of lobbyists have spent millions to buy votes and silence politicians. I will stand up to the gun lobby, and I’ll work to create a democracy in which the voices of everyday people matter more than big money.

As an example of how to tie issues of the day to money in politics, we can look at the 2018 Pennsylvania special election. In Conor Lamb’s surprising victory in that congressional race, faced with an onslaught of attack ads on the tax bill passed last year, Lamb responded tying the bill’s passage to the influence of big donors. He said on the stump that the bill was a, “tax relief to their donors, to the 1 percent and big corporations,” and during a debate that it, “was written for corporate donors.”

OTHER KEY MESSAGES

In addition to tying the lack of progress on issues voters care about to our broken campaign finance system, referencing our American ideals of government of, by, and for the people is a powerful, and effective way to connect with voters. Offer a positive, aspirational vision of how we can strengthen our democracy. Here are some example talking points:

- The rules of our democracy are rigged in favor of wealthy donors, special interests, and their lobbyists. It leaves elected officials unable to solve the problems facing most Americans.
- We need to build a democracy where everyone participates, every vote is counted, and everyone’s voice is heard; where people from all walks of life can run for and win

3 https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/
office, not just the wealthy and well-connected.

- The Founders envisioned that in our democracy, the government is supposed to be of, by, and for the people. But right now, we are far from that. There are straightforward steps we can take to raise the voices of everyday people, reduce the power of big money, and ensure that everyone has an equal say in our government.
- To make sure our children and grandchildren have a free and fair America, we can come together to make our democracy work for all of us, through commonsense reforms that empower everyday people and reduce the power of wealthy donors.

**A SIMPLE POLICY PITCH**

Here’s a simple, concise paragraph you can add to your stump speech to talk about money-in-politics policy.

I want to reduce the power of big money and give everyday people a bigger say in politics. We can do this by giving small donors more power in elections, limiting the size of large contributions, making political spending more transparent, and holding accountable people who break the rules. A comprehensive reform plan will restore voters’ faith in their elected officials and strengthen our democracy.

Small-donor public financing, contribution limits, accountability, and transparency are key components of any reform plan. A comprehensive plan to make our democracy work for everyone will also include protecting and expanding the right to vote and, if you’re a state-level lawmaker, fair redistricting plans too.

This election cycle, dozens of candidates⁶ have also said they won’t accept PAC money for their campaign.⁷ In his successful election, Lamb promoted this pledge in his very first TV ad,⁸ on social media, and during his victory night speech.⁹

Some have also pledged to forswear money from the oil industry, the NRA, or lobbyists. If a tactic like this fits the needs of your campaign or your community, you could combine this with a commitment to working to reform our broken system when you enter office.

**RESPONDING TO CRITICS**

There will always be entrenched interests—big donors, lobbyists, or your opponents—who benefit from the status quo and don’t want it to change. But when it comes to reforming the way our elections are funded, the reform position is the popular one. Americans are tired of the current system and want candidates who’ll fight to change it.

Here are some simple responses if your opponents attack your support for these policies, or call you a hypocrite:

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⁸ [https://twitter.com/ConorLambPA/status/953991405353013248](https://twitter.com/ConorLambPA/status/953991405353013248)
⁹ [https://twitter.com/_EthanGrey/status/973794610572156929](https://twitter.com/_EthanGrey/status/973794610572156929)
• My opponent is just trying to distract from the fact that I’m the only candidate in the race who wants to change the system so we can reduce the power of big money and give everyday people a bigger voice in politics.

• I believe that Americans can do anything we set our minds to, and that includes making our democracy work for everyone. I can pledge that if elected, I’ll fight for a system in which everyone’s voices are heard—not just big donors—so we can focus on creating an economy that works for all of us.

• Right now, who’s able to run and win office is often too decided by a handful of elite donors. While my opponent might be OK with that kind of system, I’m not. That’s why I’ve proposed a comprehensive plan that’ll empower small donors and rein in the excesses of corporate spending in our elections.

• First Amendment rights are upheld when we are able to fully engage in the political marketplace of ideas. When a handful of wealthy donors are able to drown out the rest of us, that hurts your and my free speech.

By showing leadership and a commitment to money-in-politics reform on the campaign trail and in office, you can show voters that, like them, you believe our democracy works best when it represents everyone, not just those able to write the biggest campaign checks.

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