

## POLITICAL CROWDFUNDING

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### Definition

Political crowdfunding refers to the practice of soliciting small financial contributions from a broad base of supporters to fund political campaigns, events, or initiatives. While often facilitated through digital platforms, the method itself predates the digital era and can take both online and offline forms. By fostering inclusivity in fundraising, political crowdfunding empowers ordinary citizens to influence political outcomes and reduces dependence on large contributions from a small number of affluent donors. Actors engaged in political crowdfunding include political parties, social movements, lobbying groups, and civic associations.

### Context

Political crowdfunding refers to a form of collective action focused on mobilizing financial resources, often employed by political parties to support their campaigns and initiatives. It embodies characteristics such as the pursuit of social and political change, the presence of collective agency, and, more recently, the use of digital communication tools to activate support. From the perspective of politicians, small donations signal electoral viability and grassroots legitimacy. For citizens, contributing online is a convenient way to express political alignment and civic engagement (Kusumarani & Zo, 2019). Although digital platforms and social media (e.g., Twitter, X, ActBlue, party websites) have accelerated the use of crowdfunding, offline methods, such as direct mail, have historically served similar functions.

The symbolic value of political crowdfunding is just as significant as its financial impact. It reflects horizontal participation, anti-establishment sentiment, and digital democracy in practice. In Spain, for instance, Podemos and the X Party adopted crowdfunding methods to capitalize on the participatory momentum of the 15-M movement (González-Cacheda & Outeda, 2021). Similarly, Italy's Five Star Movement funded its 2013 electoral campaign through donations gathered on its blog. In the United States, Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential bid raised millions through small-dollar donations, following earlier grassroots fundraising models introduced by Howard Dean in 2004 and scaled up by Barack Obama (Kreiss, 2012).

This trend reflects a shift toward what scholars term “small money democracy”, a fundraising model that prioritizes widespread citizen contributions over large donors

(Cmar, 2004; Rubenstein, 2022). In Europe, economist Julia Cagé has advocated for institutional reforms to scale this model, while critical views question its actual impact on political equality (Raya & Albert, 2025).

Still, this model brings its own set of challenges. It relies heavily on digital presence and constant online engagement, which can marginalize those with limited digital skills or access. Regulatory concerns also remain significant, including compliance with campaign finance laws, monitoring foreign donations, and holding platforms accountable. In Spain, for instance, political crowdfunding has raised concerns about transparency and donor oversight.

### Related Concepts

Digital activism; Digital engagement; Digital party; Political crowdsourcing

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