

CAMPAIGN CASH: **The Outsized Role of Money** **in Oakland Elections**

Analysis by MapLight



Overview

Money in politics influences who runs for office, who they talk to, who wins, and what policies get enacted – at every level of government. The analysis below outlines key patterns and trends on how candidate campaigns in Oakland, California, have been funded since 2014. The report examines the sources of candidate fundraising, where donors live, the size of contributions, and the demographics of who donates to campaigns. **Our analysis shows that wealthy donors and outside spending have played a significant role in Oakland elections.**

Key Findings:

- **Money in Oakland candidate elections rose to its highest level in eight years during the 2020 election.** Fundraising by candidates peaked in 2014 at \$3.5 million. However, after including outside spending, total money in Oakland elections hit an eight-year high in 2020 with \$2.4 million in independent expenditures on top of the \$2.6 million in direct fundraising.
- **Money made a difference.** During the last four elections, 77 percent of the contested races (24 of 31) were won by the candidate who raised the most money.
- **Just half of all fundraising by candidates came from Oakland residents.** Even after including donations from candidates to their own campaigns and public funds, city residents provided just half of the funds received.
- **Special interests were a substantial part of candidates' fundraising.** Contributions from corporations, nonprofits, unions, trade associations, and political committees comprised 13 percent of all candidates' funding and 17 percent of the winning candidates' funding.
- **Campaign contributions came disproportionately from Oakland's richest and whitest neighborhoods.** The three majority-white zip codes in Oakland were responsible for 45 percent of the contributions from Oakland residents, while comprising just 21 percent of the city's population. Residents of the Oakland zip codes with a median household income greater than \$75,000 were responsible for 66 percent of the contributions in Oakland while comprising only 40 percent of the population.
- **Less affluent and less white neighborhoods were underrepresented in campaign contributions.** A quarter of the money raised from Oakland residents came from the six Oakland zip codes with a median household income below \$60,000, while nearly half of Oakland residents live in these neighborhoods. The four Oakland zip codes with less than 25 percent white residents were responsible for 16 percent of the money from Oakland donors while containing 40 percent of Oakland's population.
- **Nearly half of all fundraising in the four candidate elections came from high-dollar donors.** People giving \$500 or more, including candidates contributing

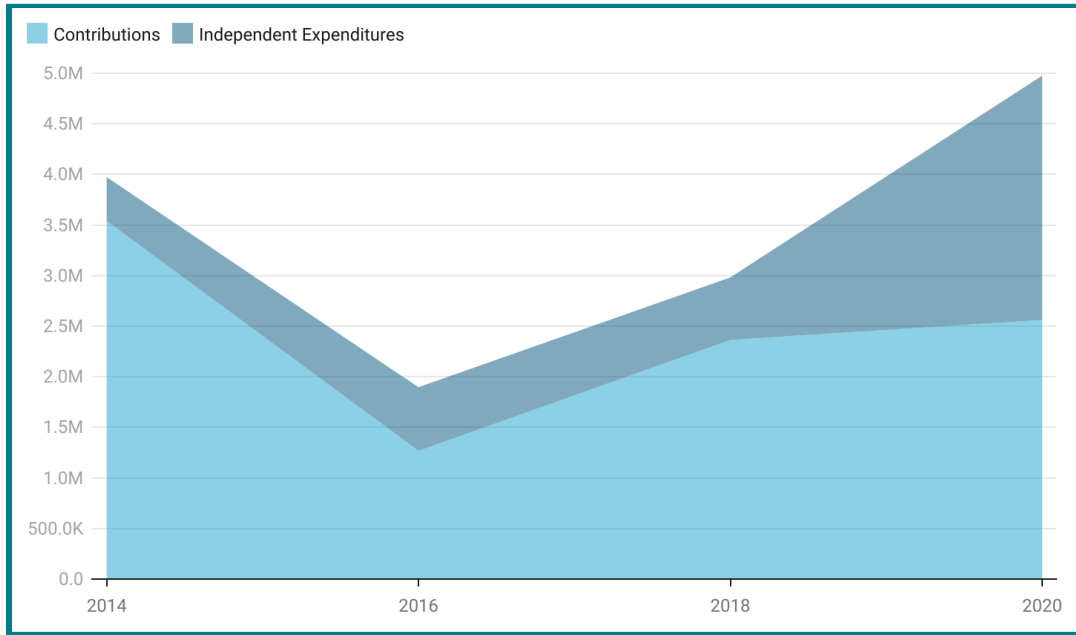
to their own campaigns, contributed 45 percent of all funds taken in by candidates' campaigns.

- **Small donors comprised a tiny portion of candidate funding.** Donors giving less than \$100 provided just 6 percent of all candidate funding.
- **Easy victories still attracted large donors.** During her reelection bid, Mayor Schaaf, who received more than twice as many votes as her nearest competitor, received \$501,000, almost equaling the \$504,000 she received during her 2014 election.
- **Eight organizations and individuals gave at least \$75,000 apiece to independent groups seeking to influence candidate elections over the last eight years – accounting for nearly half of outside money during that time.** These spenders included Michael Bloomberg (\$920,000), Lyft (\$439,000), East Bay Working Families (\$141,000), Quinn Delaney (\$120,000), T. Gary Rogers (\$100,000), Arthur Rock (\$99,000), the East Bay Community Foundation (\$80,000), and the San Francisco Foundation (\$75,000).

| | |
|--|----|
| Campaign Funding in Oakland | 1 |
| Overview | 1 |
| Total Contributions | 3 |
| Source of Contributions | 6 |
| Where do Individual Contributors Live? | 8 |
| How Much Do Individual Donors Give? | 10 |
| Contributions by Zip Code | 12 |
| Appendix: Other Elected Offices | 14 |
| Methodology | 16 |

Total Contributions

Figure 1: Money in Oakland Elections



Due in large part to the contested mayoral race in 2014, direct campaign contributions have yet to exceed the amounts raised that year. **Yet, the 2020 election surpassed 2014 total spending by more than \$1 million due to a remarkable rise in outside spending.** Independent expenditures – spending to support or oppose a candidate that is not coordinated with the candidate’s campaign – have grown over the last several years, particularly in the Oakland school board races. In 2020, independent expenditures supporting or opposing school board candidates accounted for nearly half of the \$2.4 million spent by these outside groups.

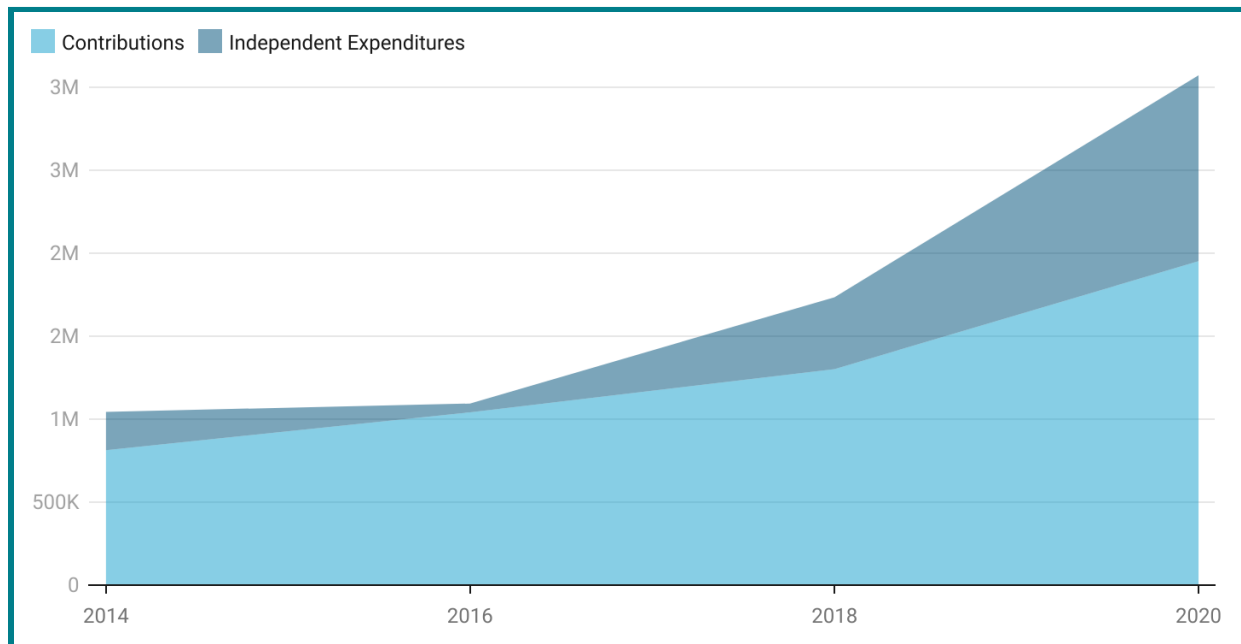
Table 1: Money behind Mayoral Candidates

| Election Year | Contributions | Independent Expenditures |
|---------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| 2014 | \$2,437,961 | \$69,185 |
| 2018 | \$821,217 | \$12,536 |

During the tightly contested 2014 election, five candidates received at least 10 percent of the first-round vote, with average fundraising topping \$362,000 among them. Mayor Libby Schaaf and incumbent Jean Quan were first and second in fundraising and votes, receiving \$504,000 and \$416,000 respectively. The 2018 election was not nearly as close, as Mayor Libby Schaaf received more than 50 percent of the first-round vote, avoiding further elimination rounds. Even with less competition, Mayor Schaaf raised more than \$500,000, dwarfing her opponent's sums. The other two candidates who received at least 10 percent of the vote were Cat Brooks and Pamela Price, who raised \$191,000 and \$98,000 respectively.

Independent expenditures were less than \$100,000 in both mayoral elections. The recipient of the most outside support was Bryan Parker in 2014. He received support from the Oakland Chamber of Commerce (\$10,400) and the group Citizens for Oakland (\$8,450) that received its financial backing from 18 individual donors.

Figure 2: Money behind City Council Candidates

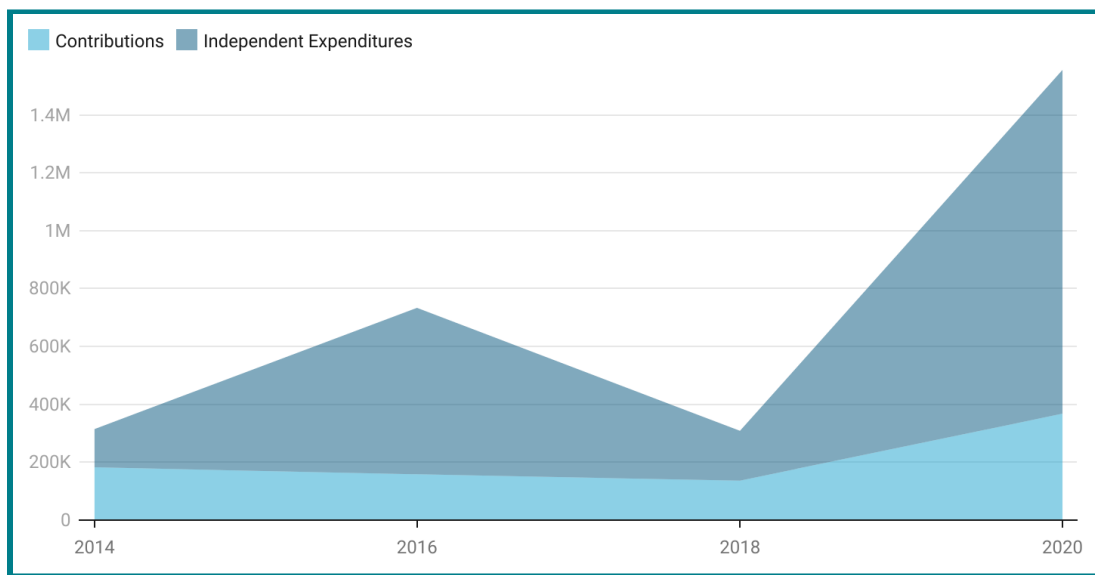


The total amount raised by candidates for city council has increased each election from \$814,000 in 2014 to \$1.95 million in 2020. In the 16 races since 2014, 12 have been won by whoever raised the most money. However, in seven of those twelve instances, the candidate who won was also the incumbent. If we include independent expenditures alongside a candidate’s fundraising, in 14 races the candidate with the most funding won, and the two candidates who did win while having less financial support were both incumbents.

The average amount raised by candidates who received at least 10 percent of the vote fell slightly from \$90,400 in 2014 to \$81,200 in 2016. Fundraising jumped to \$115,700 in 2018 and

again to \$134,300 in 2020. Candidate fundraising was not the only thing that grew over the last few years. Independent expenditures rose both in amount and in proportion to all money spent on elections. Outside spending accounted for \$231,000 in 2014 (22 percent of the money behind candidates) and rose to over \$1.1 million in 2020 (36 percent of the total).

Figure 3: Money behind School Board Candidates



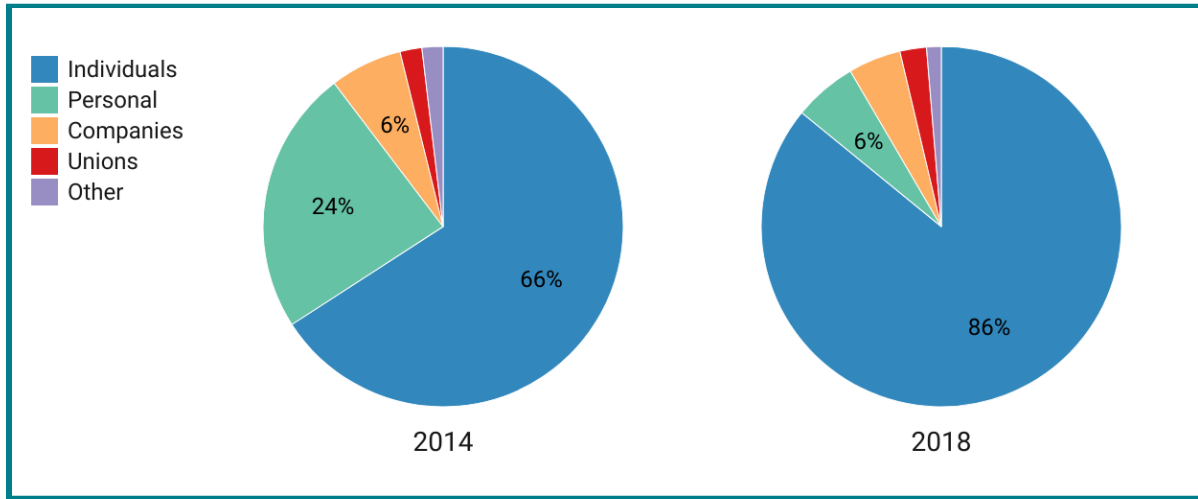
Between candidates for mayor, city council, and school board, the least money went to candidates for the school board. The average amount raised by a successful school board candidate is about a third of the fundraising total of victorious city council candidates. In the 13 contested elections, ten were won by the candidate who raised the most money. In five of these instances, the winning candidate was also the incumbent.

Independent expenditures surpassed direct contributions in all but the 2014 election. The charter school interest group, GO Public Schools, which received nearly all its funding from Mike Bloomberg, was responsible for 98 percent of the outside spending in school board races between 2014 and 2018. During 2020, they still spent the most of any individual group (\$383,700). However, joining them was another charter school group, also financed by Mike Bloomberg, Power2Families (\$302,900), the local teachers union (\$259,400), a political committee formed in opposition to California proposition 20 (\$127,500), and the California Charter Schools Association (\$108,800). **Once we incorporate this outside spending alongside candidate fundraising, only 9 of the 13 contested elections were won by the candidate with the most financial support. While likely influential, outside spending did not preclude the possibility of a less-financed candidate winning.**

Source of Contributions

There are six funding sources that candidates can tap into when raising money for their campaigns: companies, nonprofits, unions, political committees, individual donors, and their personal funds. City council candidates can qualify to receive some public funding through reimbursement for eligible campaign expenses.

Figure 4: Source of Contributions to Mayoral Candidates

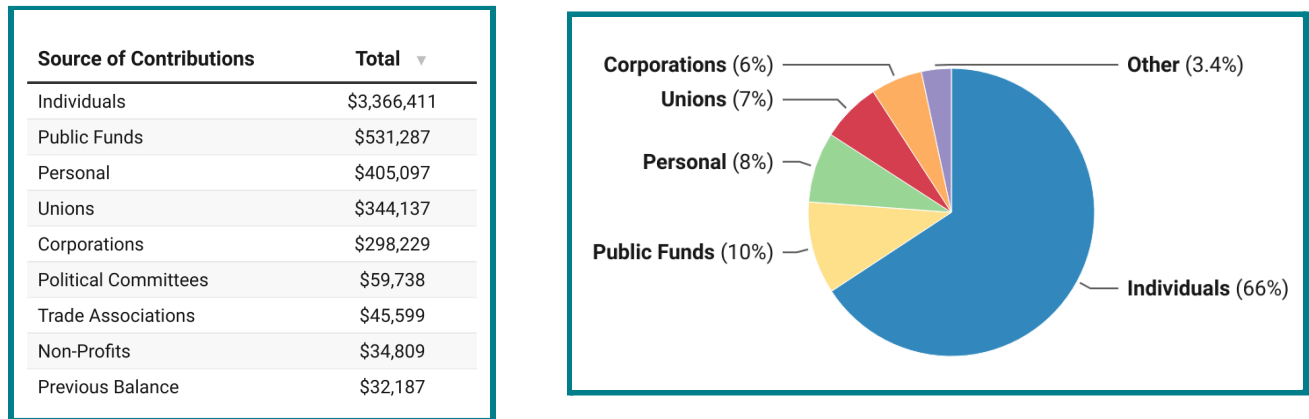


| Source of Contributions | 2014 | 2018 ▼ |
|-------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Individuals | \$1,605,565 | \$705,313 |
| Personal | \$580,416 | \$46,689 |
| Companies | \$158,020 | \$38,865 |
| Unions | \$47,975 | \$19,550 |
| Political Committees | \$7,750 | \$7,700 |
| Non-Profits | \$13,950 | \$1,900 |
| Trade Associations | \$6,550 | \$1,200 |
| Previous Balance | \$17,734 | \$0 |

The vast majority of the money in both mayoral elections came from individual donors. Many of the candidates in 2014 spent their own money to support their candidacies. If we include self-funding with contributions from individual donors, then more than 90 percent of fundraising came from individual people rather than corporations, unions, or political committees.

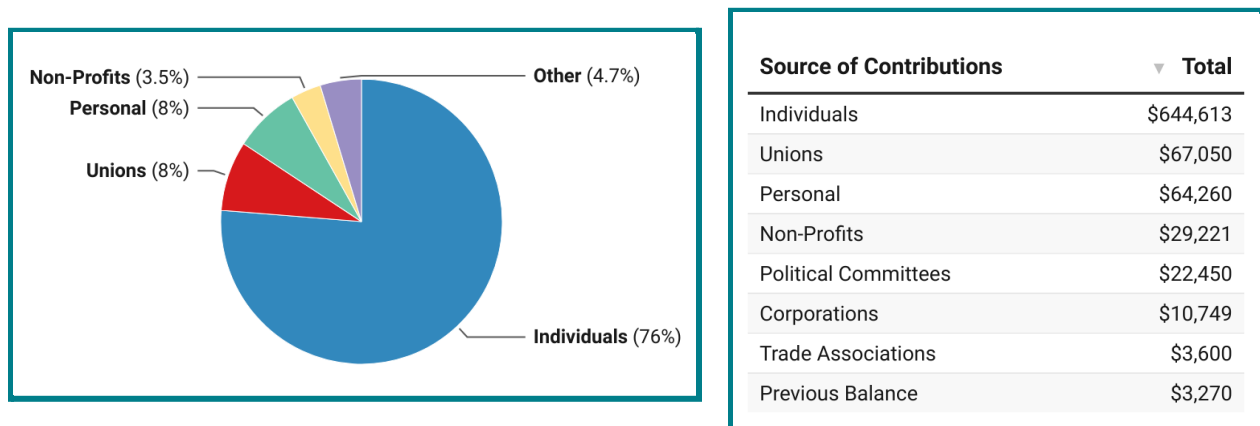
While the vast majority of the money came from individual people, the incumbent mayor in each election received significantly more money from unions than their competitors. In 2014, Jean Quan raised \$24,500 from unions compared to Libby Schaaf (\$8,800) and Rebecca Kaplan (\$8,100). During the 2018 election, the current incumbent, Libby Schaaf, received \$17,300 from unions compared to the \$1,500 and \$750 received by Cat Brooks and Pamela Price.

Figure 5: Source of Contributions to City Council Candidates



Oakland’s existing publicly-funded reimbursement program made up a portion of funding for city council candidates, comprising between 7 and 15 percent of all the money raised depending on the election year. Most money still came from individual donors, though incumbents often received more from unions and corporations than their challengers. On average, incumbents received \$12,800 from unions and \$14,700 from corporations, compared to the \$5,900 and \$3,400 received by non-incumbents who received at least 10 percent of the vote.

Figure 6: Source of Contributions to School Board Candidates



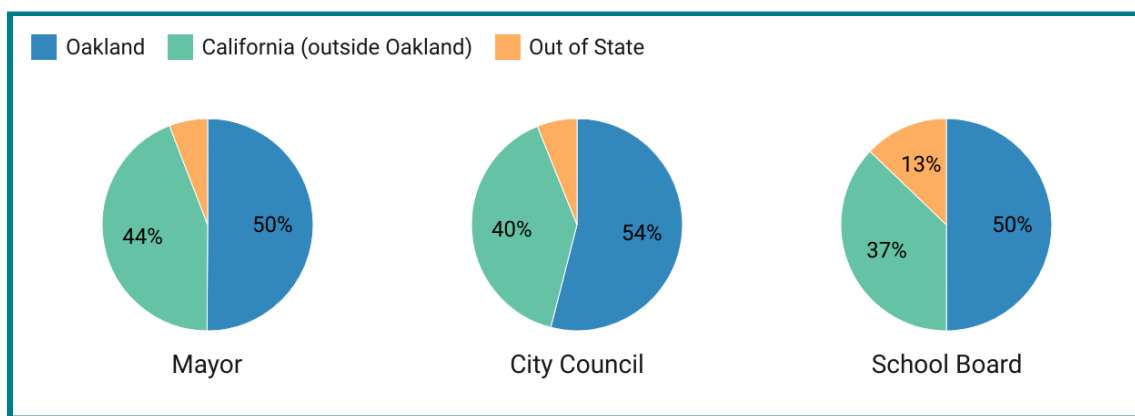
The distribution of funding sources for school board candidates more closely mirrors mayoral candidates than city council candidates due to the lack of a public reimbursement program. Mayoral candidates received 90 percent of their money from individual donors and personal contributions. School board candidates received 84 percent from these same sources, and city council candidates, 74 percent.

Unions and corporations did not favor incumbents, but candidates who won their races received an average of \$4,200 from unions and \$400 from corporations compared to \$1,400 and \$200 received on average by runners-up who received at least 10 percent of the vote. The same divide was not present in nonprofit giving, with both groups receiving similar amounts on average.

Where do Individual Contributors Live?

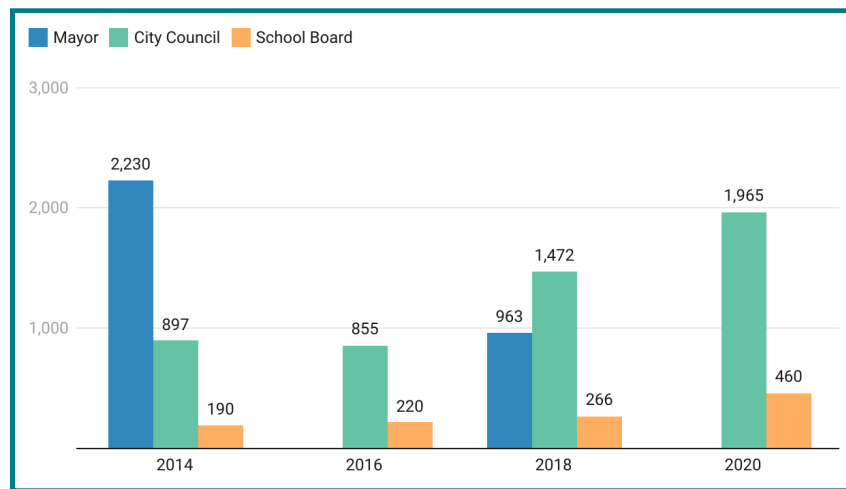
Across Oakland elections between 2014 and 2020, the largest source of candidate funding remained the same: individual donors. In Oakland, city of residence is only disclosed for people who contribute \$100 or more. Therefore, this section only examines contributions from these donors.

Figure 7: Where do Individual Contributors Live



About half of the funding from individual donors giving at least \$100 came from Oakland residents. Considering their distance from Oakland, donors from out of state still provided a sizable portion of campaign funding. Over the four elections, city council candidates combined received \$186,100, mayoral candidates raised \$127,300, and school board candidates took in \$71,700 from donors living outside California.

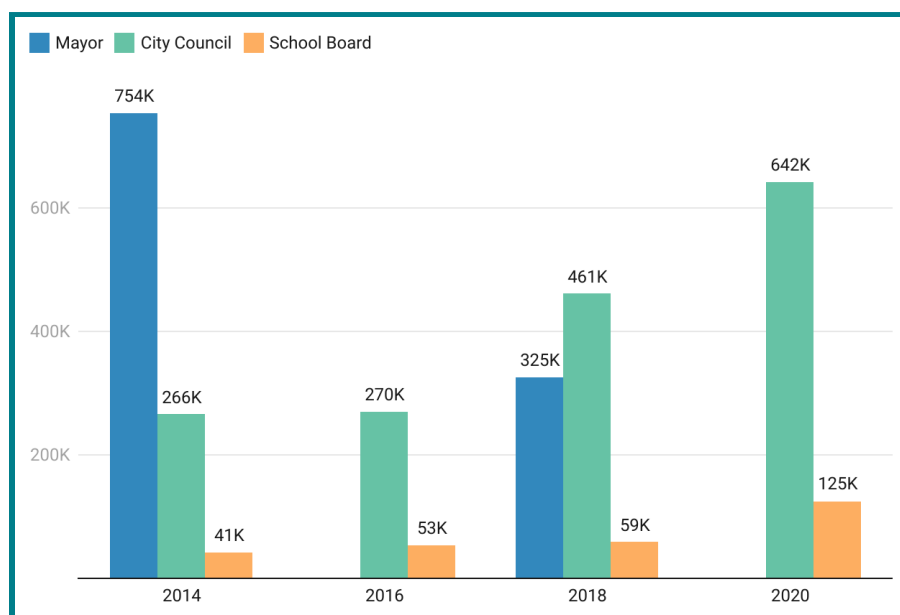
Figure 8: Number of Oakland Residents Contributing to Candidates



Drilling down further on just the money coming from Oakland residents, fewer than 3,500 people contributed \$100 or more in each election cycle. For a city of 440,000 people, this means that less than 1 percent of residents contributed at this level during each election.

Highlighting the disparity between a candidate's donor base and their constituents is the fact that candidates for the Oakland school district, which serves more than 38,000 students and has a staff of 5,000, received financial support (in amounts of \$100 or more) from less than 500 residents each election.

Figure 9: Contribution Amounts from Oakland Residents



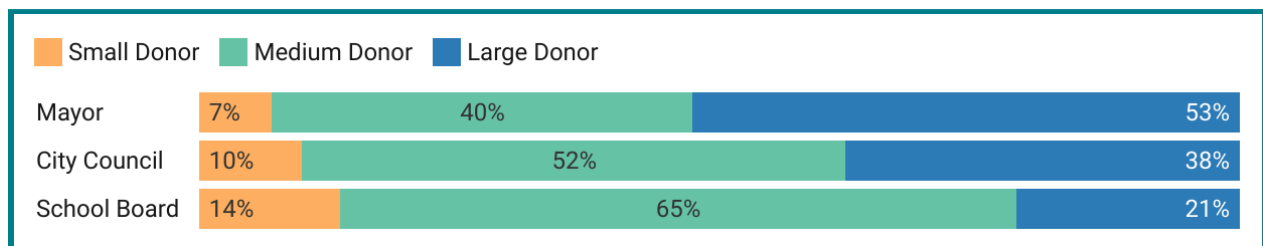
While only a small percentage of Oakland’s residents contributed to candidates, they provided a significant portion of all fundraising. For instance, during the 2018 mayoral election, less than 1,000 residents contributed \$325,200 or 40 percent of all the money raised by mayoral candidates.

How Much Do Individual Donors Give?

Again focusing on money from individual donors, we’ve divided the contributors into three groups: small, medium, and large donors. Small donors are individuals giving less than \$100. Medium donors are those who contribute between \$100 and the maximum amount. Finally, large donors gave the maximum amount allowed during the election cycle: either \$700, \$800, or \$900, depending on the election.¹

The vast majority of funding from individuals came from those contributing at least \$100 apiece. These donors were responsible for 93 percent of the money from individual donors in 2014, 92 percent in 2016, 90 percent in 2018, and 89 percent in 2020.

Figure 10: Amount Contributed by Individual Donor Type

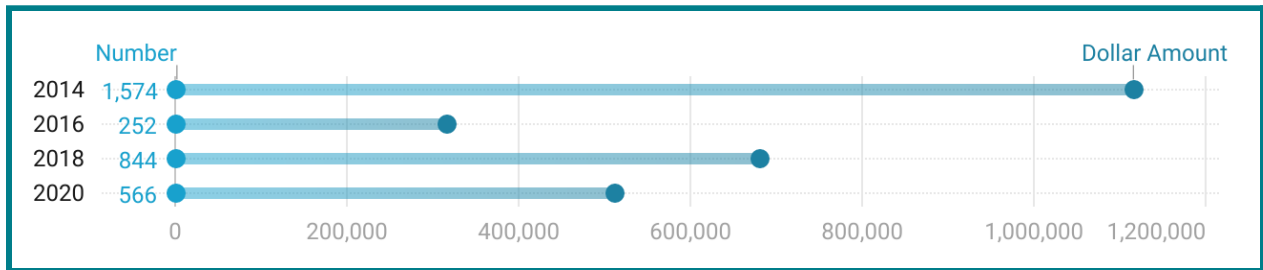


In total, 42 percent of funding coming from individual donors came from people giving the maximum amount. More than half of the Mayor Libby Schaaf’s fundraising in 2014 and 2018 came from donors giving at the contribution limit.

For each office, both incumbents and winning candidates relied less heavily on small donors than their non-incumbent and runner-up counterparts. **Winning city council candidates received an average of 4 percent of their total fundraising from small donors, compared to 8 percent amongst runners-up who received at least 10 percent of the vote.** Victorious school board candidates took in 10 percent of their money in small donations compared to the 12 percent raised by runners-up. The greatest disparity was between Mayor Schaaf, who received less than 2 percent in 2018 from these small donors, and Cat Brooks, the runner-up, who took in 22 percent of her money from small donors.

¹ The maximum contribution from individual donors was \$700 in 2014 and 2016, \$800 in 2018, and \$900 in 2020.

Figure 11: Money from Large Donors



Since candidates are not required to disclose the number of donors who gave less than \$100 we do not know their total number. However, we know the number of donors who gave the maximum amount.

During the 2014 election, approximately 1,600 large donors, those giving the maximum amount allowed, contributed \$1.1 million. This amount comprised 31 percent of all the money raised by candidates that year. This elite group was responsible for at least 20 percent of all contributions in the following three elections.

Incumbents generally relied more heavily on large donors than their challengers. The average city council incumbent received 32 percent of their money (\$42,400) from large donors compared to an average of 20 percent (\$25,600) among other candidates who received at least 10 percent of the vote. The average incumbent school board member took in 20 percent of their money (\$5,800) from large donors compared to the 14 percent (\$3,500) received from such donors from their average challenger. The mayoral election did not follow this pattern. Mayor Schaaf received far more than half of her funds from large donors, and incumbent Jean Quan received only a quarter of her funding from the large donor class.

Contributions by Zip Code

Looking at the contributions from individual donors to candidates over the last eight years by zip code allows for comparisons to Census demographic data, illustrating trends about the origins of candidate funding.²

Figure 12: Individual Contributions by Racial Demographics and Zip Code

Percentage of White Residents (a) Less than 25% White Residents (b) Between 25 - 50% White Residents (c) Between 50 - 75% White Residents (d) More than 75% White Residents

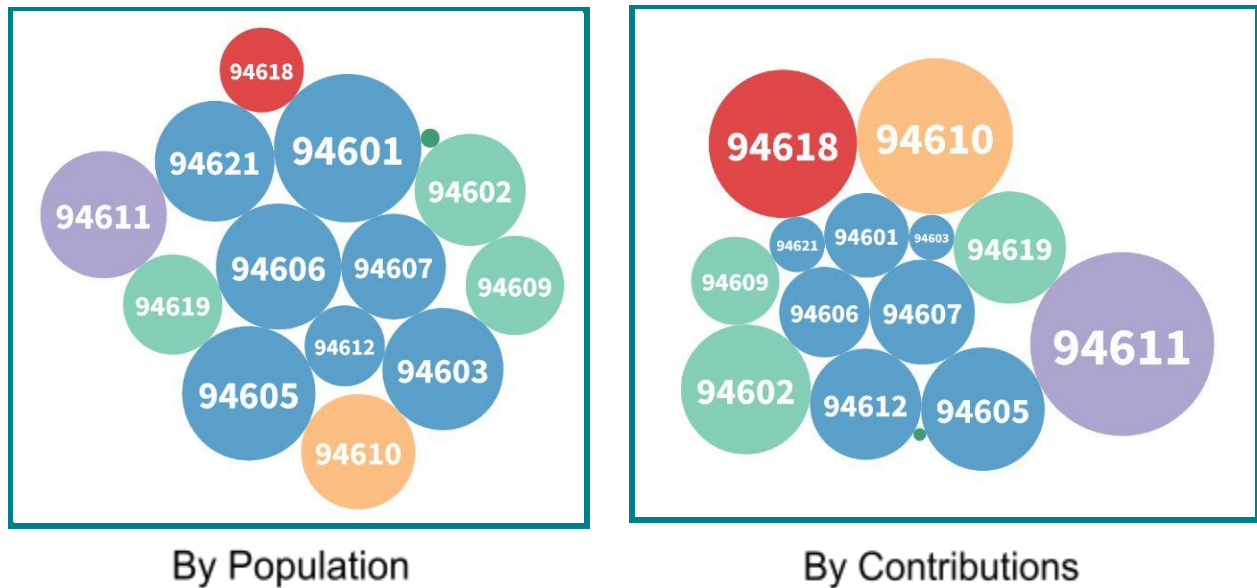


The size of each bubble on the left depends on the population of its corresponding zip code. Each circle on the right is scaled based on the amount residents of each zip code contributed. **The three majority-white zip codes in Oakland contributed the most money, altogether giving \$1.4 million to local candidates.** These three zip codes contributed 45 percent of the money from Oakland residents while representing just 21 percent of the Oakland population. On the other hand, the four zip codes with less than 25 percent white residents contain 40 percent of Oakland’s population but gave just 16 percent of the money from Oakland.

² The visualizations in this section come from screenshots of an [interactive tool](#) created to examine contributions in Oakland elections by geography and demographic characteristics.

Figure 13: Individual Contributions by Median Household Income and Zip Code

Median Household Income (a) Less than \$75,000 (b) Between \$75,000 and \$100,000
 (c) Between \$100,000 and \$125,000 (d) Between \$125,000 and \$150,000 (e) More than \$150,000 NA



In this second figure, the size of the circles on the left is again based on population and circles on the right on total contributions. The only difference is that the color now corresponds to the median household income of each zip code. The same three zip codes with the greatest proportion of white residents also have the highest household median income in Oakland. **The seven zip codes with a household median income of less than \$75,000 comprise 60 percent of the Oakland population, but just 33 percent of the money given by Oakland residents.**

The trend of wealthy majority-white zip codes contributing more continued outside Oakland. Berkeley residents of the 94705 zip code contributed \$116,700 – a sum larger than that which came from the residents of either the 94621 or 94603 Oakland zip codes. The 94705 zip code has a household median income of more than \$125,000 and more than 75 percent of its residents are white.

Appendix: Other Elected Offices

Between 2014 and 2020 there were two elections each for the city auditor and city attorney.

2014 Auditor Election

The two candidates for auditor in 2014 raised a combined \$107,000. The vast majority of the fundraising came from the two candidates' own loans and contributions. Just \$13,300 between the two candidates came from individual and union donors.

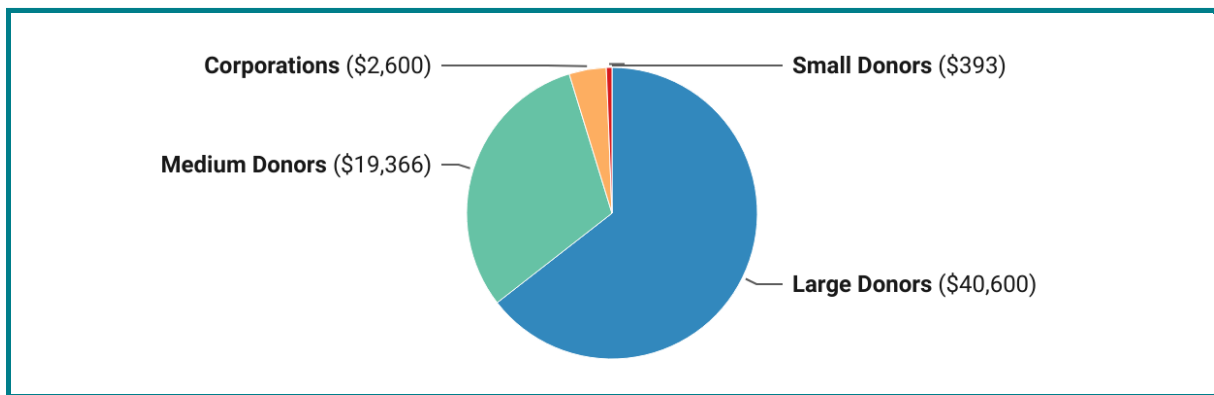
2018 Auditor Election

In 2018, Brenda Roberts ran for reelection, contributing \$53,800 of the \$57,000 she raised. Her opponent Courtney Ruby raised \$47,200, with \$37,700 coming from individuals contributing between \$100 and \$800.

2016 City Attorney Election

Incumbent Barbara Parker ran unopposed in 2016. However, she still raised more than \$67,000 for her reelection campaign with most of her funding (\$40,600) coming from 58 people who contributed the maximum amount.

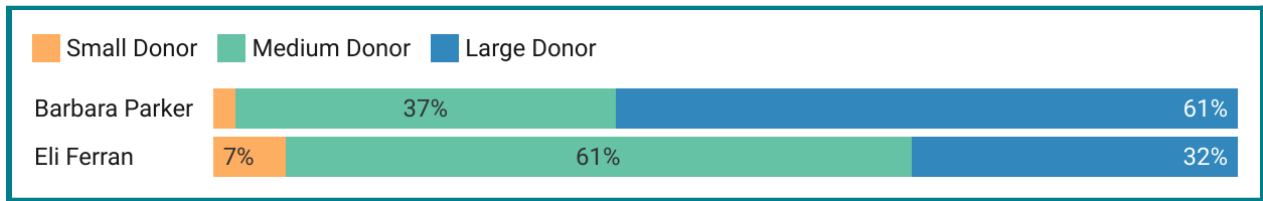
Figure 14: Source of Contributions to Barbara Parker (2016)



2020 City Attorney Election

In 2020, Eli Ferran ran to unseat Parker. Both candidates raised more than \$120,000 and Ferran received another \$100,000 in outside spending on his behalf. Unions, trade associations, and corporations backed Ferran to a tune of \$24,200, but Parker offset these contributions with a \$50,000 loan to her campaign. Both candidates received nearly the same amount of money from individual donors: \$71,100 to Parker and \$76,200 to Ferran.

Figure 15: Contributions by Individual Donor Type



Once again, Parker received a significant amount (\$44,100) from 49 individual donors giving the maximum amount and less than \$1,600 from people giving less than \$100. Ferran also received a sizable portion (\$26,100) from 29 large donors, but received more from people giving less than \$900 than from those giving the maximum amount.

Methodology

The most recently amended campaign records were retrieved from Oakland’s public [Netfile portal](#) on November 16, 2021. **This report examines only contributions to candidate committees and independent expenditures made to support or oppose candidates for local office.** Contributions to a candidate’s officeholder committee were not included. Candidates’ total contributions for a given election cycle include monetary, non-monetary, and unitemized contributions received between January 1st of the calendar year three years before the election through December 31st of the election year, as well as any previous contributions in a candidates’ committee as of January 1st of the calendar year three years before the election. Any outstanding loans which were not paid off as of December 31st of the election year were included as personal contributions.

Unique contributors were estimated by grouping contributions by donor first name, last name, city, state, and zip code. All discussions of resident contributors were based on whether the donor reported an Oakland address.

This report was written by Bergen Smith with assistance from Laura Curlin, Daniel Newman, Chad Outler, and Alec Saslow. To contact MapLight about this report, please call (510) 609-3700 or email press@maplight.org.