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Campaign Donor Survey: Women, Online Donors, and Youth Explain Obama's Small Donor Fundraising Success

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More individuals gave more money to candidates for federal office, national and state party committees, and political action committees or other interest groups in 2007–08 than in any previous election. The surge in numbers of individuals contributing rose substantially from 2004 to 2008. Researchers define small donors as individuals who contributed less than \$200 to a candidate or party committee during 2007 and 2008. Large donors were also more active in 2008 than previously. Who are these donors and why did they contribute in 2008? Of special interest is the large group of donors giving under \$200. The Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy (CSED) at Brigham Young University is conducting a groundbreaking survey of donors to federal candidates, national party committees, and political action committees during the 2008 election cycle. This report is a preliminary examination of data from that survey.

*Who Gives?*

Obama had over 3.7 million donors compared to slightly fewer than 827,000 for McCain. Those donors in turn contributed just under \$700 million to Obama and \$316 million to McCain.<sup>1</sup> But the gap was widest among small donors. Donations from individuals giving \$200 or less represented nearly a quarter (\$178 million) of Obama's fundraising total but only 7% (\$35 million) of McCain's.

Much has been made in press reports of the Obama advantage among small donors—and it was substantial—but Obama also did very well among other groups of donors, raising more money than McCain at every level of donation. Among donors who gave between \$200 and \$500, Obama raised another \$90 million, compared to \$25 million by McCain. Obama also outraised McCain among large donors, even though McCain relied more on large donors. Obama raised nearly \$135 million from individuals giving at or near the legal limit of \$4,600, compared to McCain, who raised just under \$110 million from this group.

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<sup>1</sup> These numbers were calculated by combining the number of individuals who were reported by the FEC as having donated to the McCain or Obama campaigns (or to their affiliated committees and joint Victory committees) in amounts \$200 or greater, with the number of smaller (and thus unreported) donors to each campaign as reported by the campaigns (3.2 million for the Obama campaign and over 600,000 for the McCain campaign). The numbers may not agree completely with the official tallies due to errors in the matching process or to other sources of contributions (ActBlue, for example). See the methodology section for more on how individual donations were matched to individuals.

Thanks to unprecedented cooperation from the Barack Obama and John McCain presidential campaigns, researchers at CSED were able to collect information from a random sample of small donors provided by the two campaigns as well as data on larger donors available from the Federal Election Commission (FEC). Combining these sources paints a more comprehensive picture of the fundraising story in 2008, and investigators found some surprising patterns. Obama small donors were disproportionately female (56%) while McCain small donors were 61% male. Past studies of donors have found that men are more likely than women to give to candidates.<sup>2</sup> Men made up more than 60% of McCain’s small donors and over 70% of his donors giving more than \$200. Individuals giving to Obama in total amounts ranging between \$200 and \$2,500 were about equally divided between women and men. Obama’s donors giving over \$2,500 were three-fifths male.

Like women, non-whites have long been underrepresented as donors. Most donors to both Obama and McCain were white, but 27% of Obama’s small donors were non-white compared to 7% of McCain’s. Compared with McCain’s donors, Obama’s were less affluent and generally more educated. Obama’s donors, both those who gave under \$200 and those who gave in larger amounts, were more likely to have graduate or professional degrees than McCain’s donors.

Another key difference between Obama and McCain donors was their age. More than half of McCain small donors (53%) were over 65 years of age compared to 16% of Obama small donors. Proportionally, Obama had three times as many donors who were under the age of 30 as McCain.

#### Small (under \$200) Donors by Age Group

	Obama	McCain
18–29	15%	5%
30–39	16	7
40–49	20	10
50–64	33	25
65+	16	53

Note: Cell entries are column percentages.  
Columns may not total to 100 due to rounding.

There were also major differences in how donors to the two nominees gave their contributions. About two thirds of Obama’s small donors made contributions online; this compares to only about one third of McCain’s small donors. The Internet allows campaigns to cheaply—and repeatedly—ask for donations, and Obama used this to his benefit. About 40% of Obama’s small online donors gave multiple times. Less than one quarter of McCain’s small Internet donors made multiple donations.

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<sup>2</sup> Aaron Kiersch, “Women Still Lag Behind Men in Campaign Contributions, Study Says,” Center for Responsive Politics, <http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2009/06/women-still-lag-behind-men-in.html> (accessed June 19, 2009); Clifford W. Brown, Lynda W. Powell, and Clyde Wilcox, *Serious Money* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 40–45.

Obama's small-donor profile looks very similar to that of his voters, who were also more likely to be women, less affluent, younger, and better educated. This is most likely a testament to the way the Obama campaign made a concerted effort to engage new groups of individuals.

Donors to both nominees at all levels viewed the candidate they gave to as well qualified, although Obama donors were more likely to hold this opinion than were McCain donors. McCain donors were substantially more likely to see Obama as unacceptable than Obama donors were to see McCain as unacceptable. Higher proportions of Obama donors thought Obama represented their views than McCain donors thought McCain represented their views. These findings suggest that Obama was more closely connected in positive ways to his donors than McCain was to his donors and that McCain donors were more often motivated by opposition to Obama than Obama donors were by opposition to McCain. McCain donors at all levels saw Obama as an extreme liberal while Obama donors at all levels saw McCain as less extremely ideological. Generally speaking Obama small donors were more likely to describe themselves as moderate in than McCain small donors.

### *Methodology*

The preliminary results presented here make innovative use of publicly available records from the FEC as well as from organizations and companies who assemble voter files. With cooperation from the two major campaigns, the study also includes random samples of individuals whose contributions did not reach the \$200 reporting threshold. This group has been of special interest in 2008 because of the greater number of such donors and the important role they played in financing the Obama campaign. Making use of recent technical innovations by computer scientists at BYU, the study draws on a more comprehensive sample of donors and has already produced several intriguing findings about who gave to the Obama and McCain campaigns in 2008. Individuals are continuing to complete questionnaires, so the results reported here are not all complete. A future release will report full results from the survey.

The sample of donors is drawn in part from FEC records, a historically difficult source to accurately sample from. FEC records list individuals who give \$200 or more to a single candidate or party committee, but multiple donations from a single donor are listed separately and may be labeled differently, making it difficult to know exactly how many people have contributed. Political and computer scientists at BYU recently succeeded in merging FEC contribution data, allowing them to describe in a much more comprehensive way than previously possible the activity of donors in 2007–08 and to sample individual donors rather than contributions.

The BYU study has also benefitted from the cooperation of Catalist, a corporation that assembled a large national database for use in political campaigns and for other purposes, which has provided some key variables on the samples of disclosed donors to the FEC and the samples provided by the Obama and McCain campaigns. Catalist also provided a random sample of individuals, which allows the BYU study to compare donors and non-donors.

## **About CSED**

The Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy (CSED) is a nonpartisan academic research center operating under the auspices of the Department of Political Science at Brigham Young University. Beginning in 1998 CSED has conducted several research projects to examine how money is raised and spent in federal elections. For more information see <http://csed.byu.edu>.

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