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Most political donors are white males

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By Jim Drinkard, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — A growing body of research confirms that political donors are disproportionately white and male — and a new law that increases the amounts they can give is expected to magnify their clout.

The most recent evidence of the influence of the political money elite comes from a North Carolina study that identified by race and gender all 1,436 people in the state who gave \$200 or more to presidential candidates during the first half of this year. The study, by the non-partisan group Democracy North Carolina, found that 96% are white and 67% are men. The state's registered voters are 80% white and 45% male.

Supporters of using public money to finance campaigns say the current system skews politics in favor of those with money and lessens the voices of minorities and the less privileged.

Other reports have found similar results. Studies last year of donors to state races in New Jersey and Texas found that political money flows most heavily from a small number of upscale white ZIP codes.

Preliminary findings of a national study by the group Public Campaign, which pushes for public financing of elections, show 90% of contributions to congressional candidates come from predominantly non-Hispanic white ZIP codes.

In the run-up to next year's presidential election, fundraising is the first test for candidates. Long before voters cast ballots in Iowa or New Hampshire, the candidates' money totals are watched closely as a gauge of their appeal. Success can mean survival; failure often means a candidate is more likely to fall out of the race early. Potential donors are highly sought after, and the voices of those who don't give can be diminished.

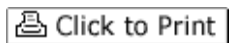
"White males, particularly those involved in business, have more disposable income to invest in politics and are more likely to see returns from those investments," says Paul Herrnson, a University of Maryland political scientist. He and a team of colleagues are publishing a book this fall that examines the donor class. The authors predict that the new law governing campaign contributions, which doubles the limit for individual contributors to \$2,000 per election, will increase their political influence. Because donors tend to be more conservative and business-oriented than the population as a whole, Republican candidates also are likely to be advantaged, Herrnson says.

John Bonifaz of the National Voting Rights Institute, a Boston-based legal group that pushes for public financing of campaigns, says the political fundraising system "excludes people based on their economic status, and that has a disproportionate impact on people of color."

Several groups are challenging the increased giving limits in the new campaign-finance law in a case to be argued before the Supreme Court on Sept. 8.

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http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-08-25-donor-money_x.htm



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