



Political Giving Should Be Private

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A third of Americans fear being fired for their political beliefs. Unfortunately, for those who wish to support political campaigns, federal and state laws leave no place to hide.

“Cancel culture” has divided First Amendment advocates. Some argue that private actors must tolerate differing views for free speech to survive, while others say the only concern should be government intrusions on speech. But when private individuals target and harass other Americans for their political donations, the government can’t say it plays no role.

Campaign contributions are public because the law requires it. Every American who gives more than \$200 to a candidate for president or Congress, or to a political party, has his name, address and employer published in an online, searchable database. Every state has similar laws for reporting contributions to state candidates, many with substantially lower donation thresholds.

It wasn’t always this way. The earliest laws mandating that donations be reported date only from the late 19th century, and weren’t seriously enforced, by states or Congress, until the 1970s. Even then accessing reports required visiting a government office and digging through paper or microfiche records. Unless donors’ contributions caught the attention of investigative journalists, few were widely exposed.

Today, the laws haven’t changed, but the technological and cultural landscapes have shifted dramatically. Anyone can look up your donations in seconds. Most Americans still prefer to judge candidates through news coverage and campaign materials. But others regularly mine these databases not so much to inform their decisions but to gain information that can be used to harm candidates—and, more important, donors to candidates—that they oppose.

In 2019 Rep. Joaquin Castro tweeted the names and employers of opposition party donors in his district, leading some to receive threatening phone calls. Allegations that companies like Olive Garden and SoulCycle were Trump donors—in fact, it is illegal for corporations to contribute to candidates—fueled boycotts and prompted enough fury that the companies had to respond. In Olive Garden’s case, calls to boycott were based on the personal contributions of a handful of the nationwide chain’s employees, totaling \$886. A vegan-friendly breakfast chain in western Michigan was boycotted after someone posted on [Facebook](#) a screenshot of its owner’s contributions to Trump’s campaign.

Many Americans see all this and remain silent, leaving our political discourse deprived of important views. A recent Cato Institute poll found that a majority of Americans feel the current climate prevents them from saying things they believe. These respondents aren’t paranoid: Half of strong liberals support firing business executives who donated to Mr. Trump, and 36% of strong conservatives support firing executives who donate to Joe Biden. It is hard to imagine anything more mainstream than supporting a major party nominee for president, but today it’s enough to get you “canceled.”

Lawmakers have historically played down the costs of making donations public. Search engines, social-media mobs, and a newfound willingness to punish those with opposing views mean the calculus in 2020 is vastly different than it was in the 1970s. Yet some politicians now want to force advocacy groups and nonprofits to expose their supporters, too. Want to see cancel culture on steroids? Follow their lead.

If, on the other hand, you think Americans have a right to support candidates without losing their livelihoods or their sense of security, then it’s time to revisit compulsory disclosure laws. With billions of dollars spent each campaign cycle, those who give hundreds of dollars aren’t corrupting anyone. They shouldn’t be forced to disclose their contributions any more than they are forced to disclose their votes.

Lawmakers should substantially raise thresholds for donor disclosure, and end the requirement that campaigns report donors’ employers. Doing so could take a big bite out of cancel culture.