Field Note

Public Opinion on Private Funding of Public Elections

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Abstract

More than half of American states have sharply limited or banned private donations to public entities for the purpose of supporting election administration. Such legislation is largely consistent with public opinion: Americans are more wary than supportive of such funding, with support for outright bans about as strong as support for regulation, leaving very few who endorse an unregulated, laissez-faire approach. There is, however, a good-sized pool of undecided individuals, who might be nudged into the pro- or anti-ban camps by persuasive arguments. Our evidence, however, is that neither the main pro- nor the main anti- argument vetted in debates to date moves opinion dramatically, though the anti-ban argument might be a little more effective.

Keywords

election administration, private grants, public opinion

Background

Elections cost money. Democracy depends on periodic elections, so democratic governments must allocate funds for election administration. As a proportion of total public expenditure, the money spent organizing elections in any advanced democracy is always a tiny fraction. But it is the nature of public finance that budgeting is usually difficult, and trade-offs drive spending levels, even for laudable programs. There are, moreover, incentives for bureaucrats to maximize budgets, so that public officials can be expected to request or demand more funding ubiquitously (Niskanen 1996 [1971]). All the same, at least some experts concur that election administration is chronically under-funded (Stewart 2022; for an overview of costs, see Mohr et al. 2024).

Not all trade-offs in election management directly relate to monetary cost. An obvious conflict in recent controversies over election rules is between convenience and ease on the one hand, and security and confidence on the other. Creating remote-voting mechanisms, for instance, reduces the difficulty of voting for many citizens, but with the downside of also greatly diminishing privacy, secrecy, and security. Debates revolve around whether easier voting delivers higher turnout (e.g., Hall 2024), and whether the attendant new opportunities for intimidation, vote buying, and ballot tampering

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are exploited, or are worrying even in the absence of clear evidence of widespread abuse (e.g., Faulí et al. 2020). Which mode of voting is more costly to implement, meanwhile, depends on the extent to which in-person and remote voting are treated as substitutes or, instead, co-existing options.

In the United States, the exceptionally close 2000 presidential election drew public attention to fine details of voting, vote tabulation, and, generally, election administration. In its aftermath, numerous small errors or controversies over variations in how elections are run suddenly became salient. Congress reacted with the Help American Vote Act of 2002 (HAVA), passed overwhelmingly in both chambers and signed into law by George W. Bush just before his first midterm election. HAVA certainly did not federalize elections, but it mixed temporary funding for various "modernization" efforts and a variety of unfunded mandates. Some states made independent efforts to update and improve their election infrastructure. Most observers welcomed HAVA, though analyses of how much the organization of US elections improved because of HAVA and parallel efforts differ, not only on net effects, but also on what constitutes improvement (compare, e.g., Bali and Silver [2006] and USEAS 2022).

In 2013, President Obama created, by executive order, a bipartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration, which issued a report with recommendations and accompanying research papers early in 2014. One theme across much of that research was an "impending crisis in voting technology" in the absence of new federal financial assistance to states, counties, and other local jurisdictions. Many of the participants traced the challenge to HAVA and the spurt of funding that was not sustained or repeated.

Amid controversy over foreign—especially Russian—interference in the 2016 presidential campaign, Congress allocated more money to localities and states for improving cyber-security (Nelson 2025). As funding and equipment updates remained a preoccupation of election officials, the COVID pandemic prompted an abrupt, nearly universal rush to reform electoral rules to facilitate remote voting and modify in-person voting infrastructure. Expanding early voting opportunities, including remote ballot completion, had already been one of the recommendations of the 2013 PCEA, even without a public-health justification. With the parade of lockdowns and stay-at-home orders having kicked off in late winter and early spring of 2020, the timeframe for changes was extremely tight. The abrupt near-cancellation of normal life for most Americans coincided with the beginning of the primary-election season.

Some states tapped various emergency funds to address election adjustments, primarily by creating or expanding opportunities for remote voting and by developing infrastructure to reduce congestion at polling stations, including screens, signs about desired-distance separation, cleaning supplies, masks, and so on. In the fall, Facebook founder and billionaire Mark Zuckerberg, along with his wife Priscilla Chan, made major donations to two non-profit organizations (the Center for Tech and Civic Life and The Center for Election Innovation and Research), which then passed the money on to local election officials. The couple eventually gave away more than $400 million, distributed, in this two-step process, to more than 2,500 jurisdictions (Scheck et al. 2020). Fairly late in the season, the USC Schwarzenegger Institute also made more modest grants to assist with election administration (Shanton 2023).

Controversy and litigation quickly ensued. By October 2020, before Election Day, Zuckerberg (2020) was publicly rebutting allegations of partisan favoritism in the disbursement of money. In a Facebook post, he wrote:

> Since our initial donation, there have been multiple lawsuits filed in an attempt to block these funds from being used, based on claims that the organizations receiving donations have a partisan agenda. That's false. These funds will serve communities throughout the country – urban, rural and suburban – and are being allocated by non-partisan organizations. The Center for Tech and Civic Life shared data on the grant applications so far that shows that while a number of large jurisdictions have applied, the majority of applications have come from jurisdictions with fewer than 25,000 registered voters. All qualified jurisdictions that apply for the funds will be approved.

The aftermath of the election witnessed streams of dueling analyses claiming to show: (a) skew in grants toward Democratic strongholds, with accompanying turnout boosts; or, instead, (b) no evidence the grants actually boosted Democratic turnout enough to be decisive (contrast, e.g., Doyle [2021] and follow ups with Lal and Thompson [2024]).

While academics crunched numbers and pundits pontificated, multiple states quickly acted to head off any repeats of Zuckerberg's grants (derisively nicknamed Zuckbucks or Zuckerbucks). By the end of 2021, eleven states had passed laws banning or strictly limiting and regulating private donations to election administrators. As of June 2026, twenty-nine states have such laws (Lee et al. 2025; NCSL 2025). Most of these laws were enacted under unified Republican control, often with nearly perfect party unity in the majority republicans, and some division in the smaller minority caucus of democrats. For instance, in Wyoming, the most recent state to adopt a ban, the House final-passage roll call saw fifty-four republicans and two democrats vote in favor of the measure, against zero republicans and four democrats opposing it, with two republicans abstaining. The Senate numbers were twenty-eight republicans and two democrats in support, and one republican opposing.[1] In a few states where such limitations were not largely or exclusively the handiwork of Republicans, usually Democratic governors signed measures passed by Republican legislative chambers. In Pennsylvania, Democratic Governor Tom Wolf signed into law a large budget package that included a ban but, as a compromise, also increased public funding for election administration (Sullivan 2022).

Two states shed some light on broader public opinion. In Louisiana, a constitutional amendment narrowly passed the 2/3 threshold in the Senate, with all twelve opposing votes having been cast by Democrats, before it was overwhelmingly endorsed in an October 2023 referendum, 73% yes to 27% no.[2] In purple Wisconsin no Democratic legislators endorsed the constitutional amendment, but the April 2024 ballot measure approving it passed comfortably, if not overwhelmingly, 54%–46%.[3]

"Zuckerbucks" Experiment

Design

To assess whether very many people have formed preferences on this somewhat remote, even arcane matter, we undertook a survey experiment, in two rounds. The first instantiation was fielded in The American Social Survey (TASS) by NORC for the WUSTL Weidenbaum Center, from August 1–9 of 2024. Respondents were 1,031 American adults. Wave 2 respondents were 2,000 adults, interviewed by YouGov in November of 2024, as part of the post-election wave of the Cooperative Election Study (CES).[4]

A challenge with this issue was to write succinct, clear questions that did not swamp respondents with extraneous detail. The bans in place vary considerably in specifics (CEIR 2025). We tried to select wording that captured the quiddity of the policy at a high level. Our respondents were given the following introduction:

> In the last four years, more than half of the states (28) have passed laws that regulate, limit or ban non-governmental organizations providing funding to election administrators.

One of four completions followed. Some got one of the two arguments below, some got both, and some got neither (always without the all-caps labels). Each of the four possible versions of the question (pro-ban, anti-ban, both, neither) was assigned with equal probability.

PRO-BAN: "Supporters of such laws argue that they prevent private donors from picking and choosing jurisdictions to fund with the intention of helping one party and harming the other, giving the donors unfair influence."

ANTI-BAN: "Opponents of such laws argue that most election officials need more money—no matter where it comes from—to hire more staff or obtain better equipment, increasing security and ease of voting for everyone."

Table 1. Views of Banning Private Election-Administration Funding, by Treatment.

	Neither	Only pro-ban	Only anti-ban	Both
A. Pre-election (NORC) Responses				
Ban	0.38	0.48 (+0.10)	0.28 (−0.10)	0.39 (+0.01)
DK	0.45	0.32 (−0.13)	0.45 (0.00)	0.33 (−0.12)
Regulate	0.15	0.18 (+0.03)	0.26 (+0.11)	0.24 (+0.09)
Allow	0.02	0.02 (0.00)	0.01 (−0.01)	0.04 (+0.02)
B. Post-election (YouGov) Responses				
Ban	0.34	0.26 (−0.07)	0.31 (−0.02)	0.25 (−0.08)
DK	0.38	0.49 (+0.11)	0.37 (−0.01)	0.43 (+0.06)
Regulate	0.27	0.23 (−0.04)	0.31 (+0.04)	0.28 (+0.01)
Allow	0.02	0.02 (0.00)	0.01 (−0.01)	1.3 (+0.01)

Note. Chi-squared tests comparing distributions for neither to pro-, neither to anti-, and neither to both for the pre-wave have *p*-values of .01, .03, and .003, the latter two both with the caveat that small cell counts might make the approximation poor. For the post-election wave, those values (in the same order) are: .005, .43, and .02, respectively. Unweighted frequencies for the pre-election row sums are: 400 (ban, unweighted 39%, weighted 38%); 389 (DK, 38%, 39%); 205 (regulate, 20%, 21%); 19 (allow, 2%, 2%). We dropped 18 respondents who skipped the item. Unweighted frequencies for the post-election row sums are: 617 (ban, unweighted 31%, weighted 29%); 765 (DK, 38%, 42%); 571 (regulate, 29%, 27%); 46 (allow, 2%, 2%). 1 skipper was dropped.

Finally, they were asked to select a response to "Which of the following best describes your views on this issue?"

> Private donations for election administration should never be allowed.
>
> Private donations for election administration should be allowed as long as they are carefully regulated to ensure fairness to both major parties.
>
> Private donations for election administration should be allowed, with no regulations required.
>
> I don't know enough about this issue to say.

Results

Table 1 shows the proportions of respondents who selected each response, by experimental treatment group, for both implementations of the experiment. Data are weighted to make the samples representative of the general American adult population. The first column shows the distribution of responses for the control group, those who saw neither the pro- nor the anti-ban argument. Other columns show distributions, along with differences from the control proportion for the given response.[5]

The two waves had broadly similar distributions. In both periods, there was substantial uncertainty ("don't know" responses) about the best policy, plus considerable support both for banning and regulating private election-administration donations. Very few respondents were content to turn a blind eye to the practice.

Comparison of the responses for one-argument-only groups and the neither-argument group gives an estimate of the effect of that argument, in isolation. Comparison of each single-argument group to the both-arguments group provides a distinct estimate of the effect of that argument, when made as a rebuttal, that is, when paired with an opposing stance.

The pre-election data appear to show both arguments working. The pro-ban versus neither comparison reveals about a 10-percentage-point shift from "don't know" to ban. Comparing the both and anti-ban distributions, the effect of (adding) the pro-ban argument is about the same, a boost of 11 points (0.28–0.39), mainly at the expense of don't-know. The anti-ban argument alone had a similarly sized effect, seemingly to move about 10 percentage points from ban to regulate. From the both-versus-only-pro comparison, the addition of the

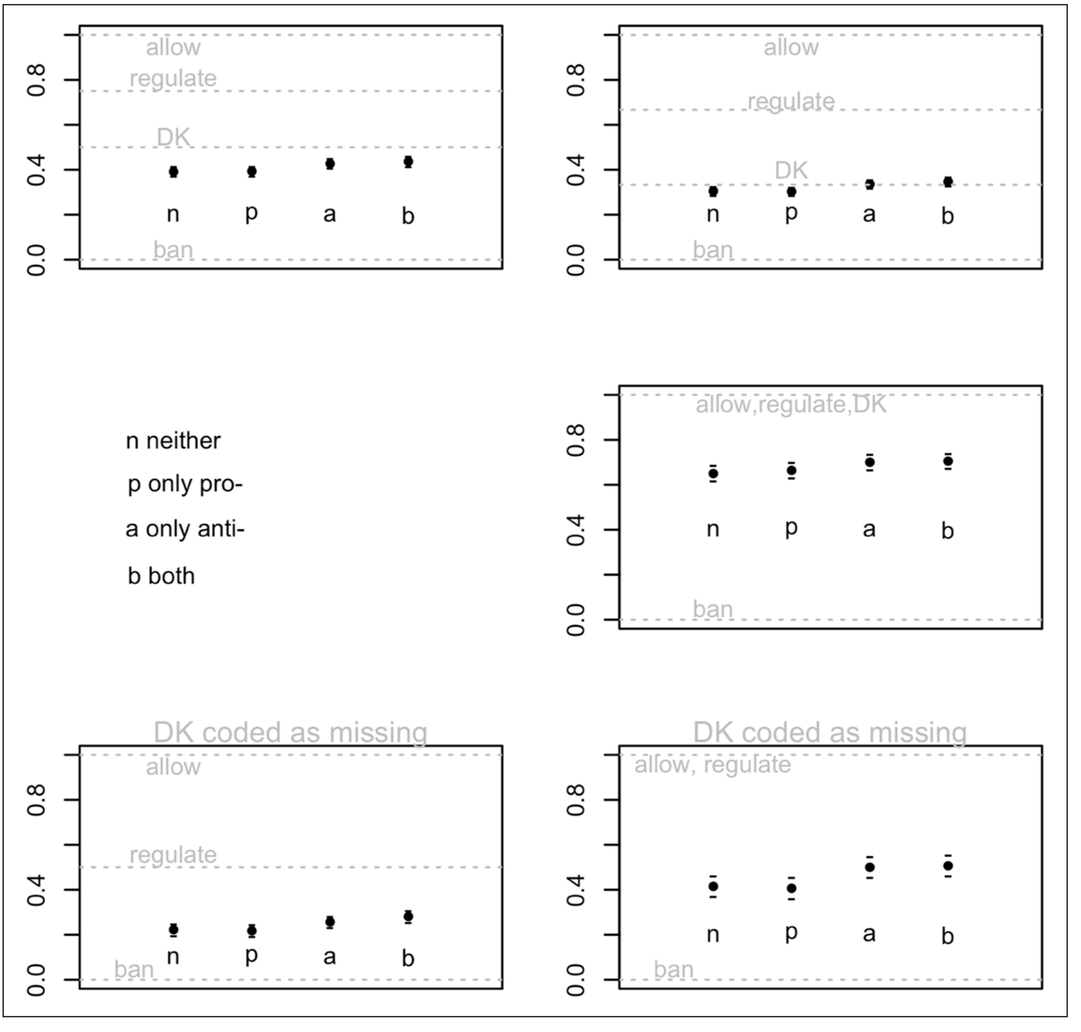

Figure 1. Mean opinions on private election-administration donations according to arguments presented, various coding schemes (pre- and post-election data pooled).

anti-ban argument shifts responses to regulate (+0.06), don't know (+0.01) and even allow (+0.02). In turn, the neither-versus-both comparison shows the anti-ban effect overpowering the pro-ban one, as don't-know responses decline, while both regulate and allow increase.

An immediate qualification, however, is that all of these effects were weaker in the post-election wave. More signs were puzzling or perverse, and the magnitudes of the expected shifts were smaller. Roughly, the anti-ban argument seemed have less than half the strength it showed in the pre-election data, and the pro-ban argument appeared not to persuade at all.

We began with no particular expectations about pre- versus post-election differences, and do not think that fall campaigns featured very much explicit discussion of the issue, which might have shifted many people's views. We are, in turn, inclined to resist post-hoc theorizing about how timing might explain these discrepancies.

A moderately strong assumption is that these responses can be understood as falling on an interval scale, indicating support for banning private donations.[6] Figure 1 shows the comparison of (weighted) means according to treatment group, each with a 95-percent confidence

Table 2. Regression Models of Private Funding Preferences.

	Pre-election	Post-election	Pooled
Constant (neither)	0.32*** (0.03)	0.44*** (0.02)	0.40*** (0.01)
Party ID (0 SR . . . 1 SD)	0.002 (0.005)	−0.04* (0.02)	−0.01*** (0.003)
State with ban	0.05** (0.02)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Both	0.03 (0.03)	0.05** (0.02)	0.04** (0.02)
Pro-ban only	−0.05 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
Anti-ban only	0.07** (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)	0.04* (0.02)
SER	0.306	0.299	0.303
N	1,013	1,999	3,012

*$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.01$.

interval, under five distinct coding schemes for the response options. For the first (top left panel), we coded the "never be allowed" option ("ban" for brevity) to 0, the ". . .allowed. . .as long. . ." ("regulate") to 0.75, the "allowed with no. . .." ("allow") to 1, and treated "don't know" as ambivalent, by coding it to 0.5. The key substantive assumptions are: not knowing which side to take is equally distant from supporting and opposing, rather than declining to take any position at all; and that allowing, under the provision that some regulation is needed (without specifying any details), is about equally different from allowing unfettered donations and being unsure about whether to permit or ban. The other panels modify these assumptions, and the bottom two discard "don't know" responses as missing rather than being intermediate between favoring a ban or favoring regulation or approval.

Qualitatively, the results are always the same, and whether we employ OLS or non-linear model to estimate coefficients and execute formal tests of equality is immaterial. Table 1 chi-squared statistics showed that, thanks to fairly large sample sizes, we are rather confident that the differences across distributions are too large to be attributed only to sampling error. The figure clarifies that the variation, after pooling waves, is rather slight.

The means for those who saw neither argument and those who saw only the pro-ban argument rarely differ much, and, in turn, we conclude that this particular argument had little effect. The means for the anti-ban argument group and the both-arguments group also differ little, and usually differ just enough from the other two for formal tests to reject exact equality. The anti-ban argument seems to have persuaded some respondents. But the magnitude of this effect, no matter how we examine the data, is small.

By way of illustration, for specific numerical estimates, Table 2 reports OLS regression models of the responses coded as interval valued under the first scheme described just above. We compare those who saw both arguments, only the pro-, and only the anti- to the neither respondents, also estimating effects for party identification (treated as an interval scale as well, with equal intervals for the seven categories, from 0 for strong Republican through 1 for strong Democrat) and for residing in a state with a ban. We do not interpret that final effect as causal, nor do we report interaction terms that permit different treatment effects in the two sets of states, as *F* tests favor the simpler model for both pre- and post- waves.[7]

Qualitatively, the conclusions are similar. The anti-ban argument has a modest impact, which persists even when paired with the pro-ban argument. From the baseline of rather high suspicion of grants and concomitant openness to bans and regulations, the pro-ban argument does not seem to move respondents. Partisan effects, meanwhile, are small, and a bit surprising. The more Democratic and less Republican respondents were, the less supportive they were of allowing these grants. This effect was statistically significant, but very small in magnitude. Supplemental Appendix shows estimates for other covariates, useful mainly to address possible small imbalances in random assignment. Older, white, and male respondents were somewhat more likely to favor bans, net of partisanship and argument-type treatment. Further investigation of such patterns would be welcome, especially to shed light on the possible elite-mass discrepancy in partisanship's role.

Conclusions

This study joins a small literature about public opinion on narrow, somewhat technical policy matters, where it might seem natural to assume that almost no one knows enough to hold views (e.g., Flavin and Shufeldt 2023; Gaines and Kuklinski 2010; Primo and Milyo 2020). Private donations to government are unusual, but the "Zuckerbucks" episode is not genuinely one-of-a-kind. Opportunities for private individuals to contribute to public service come in many shapes, from volunteer programs at national parks to periodic dollar-a-year positions (Stoddard 1918). A memorable instance of a large-scale gift of recent vintage is a $130-million-dollar donation accepted by the Department of Defense in October of 2025 to help cover salaries of members of the military during a stretch of government shutdown. That contribution—a sizeable sum, though less money than Zuckerberg and Chan funneled to election officials in 2020, and a small fraction of the total outlays on salary by the DOD every month—was initially made anonymously, but was later tied to Timothy Mellon.

The new status quo on the legality of making private donations to officials charged with organizing elections is, in itself, analytically interesting. Most complaints that led to state bans were allegations that Zuckerberg (and allies) were aiming not so much to improve the voting experience for all, but to sway outcomes, helping Democrats win. Bans or strict limitations on such funding are now in place in many states, most of which are Republican-leaning. That legislative history suggests that many found the allegations of partisan bias persuasive or, at minimum, potentially worrying. Will well-heeled donors in the near future want to facilitate voting in the mostly blue states that lack bans?

Most of the complaints of willful manipulation in 2020 centered on the marquee presidential contest. Any intervention in North Dakota, Alabama, or Idaho, however asymmetrically it might boost turnout and, in turn, alter partisan vote shares, was always exceptionally unlikely to flip presidential electors from the red to the blue column in the final tally. And unless the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact takes effect, drumming up extra votes in Illinois, Maryland, or California is equally irrelevant to presidential-election outcomes. With a few purple states still in play, however, one might expect (or, in an analytical vein, root for) an isolated repeat of election-administration philanthropy.

Considering the seven states most often labelled "swing" in 2024, all of which were ultimately won by Donald Trump, five now have bans on private election grants (Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin) and two do not (Michigan and Nevada).[8] One can compile a longer or different list of electorally competitive states, of course, from pre-election polls or returns. By the criterion of ultimately having had margins under 5% in the 2024 presidential contest, Arizona would be dropped, but New Hampshire and Minnesota, neither of which has passed a ban to date, would be added. With some, but not all, of the states that create suspense in presidential elections now out of bounds for any would-be donor, a cynic might conclude that the absence of another large tranche of election-administration money will prove that the point of such gifts really was always to tilt the field a little. We would resist that claim. Certainly, money meant to facilitate smoother elections hereafter could be highly skewed to blue states, by virtue of existing bans, without affecting the presidential result, given the mechanics of the electoral college.

It is also possible, of course, that states that are reliably Democratic in presidential voting might have some suspenseful down-ballot races, particularly given the narrow seat margins for majority-party status in the US House of late, and the importance of each (rare) close race. So, the point is not that funds meant to facilitate voting and boost turnout can somehow be verified as always-and-everywhere apolitical once they are provided to states without presidential-election suspense. But careful analysis of locales favored with grants and outcomes therein can be informative, and variance, across time, in the set of eligible locales is thus likely to be a useful constraint, analytically. We have in mind not only analysis of possible partisan tilt, but careful comparison aiming to assess the gains from better funding in regard to voters' experience. Zuckerberg himself has forsworn making any more donations of this kind, but people reverse themselves with regularity, and there are many other billionaires capable of dispensing significant sums in the same way.

Our analysis of how people felt about private gifts for election-administration in mid-to-late 2024 is necessarily time bound. We think that the large pool of undecideds probably remains. Our evidence on how persuasive are pro- and anti-ban arguments is also, of course, limited. Having tested only one prominent argument from each side of the debate, we would not presume to predict with confidence that we have seen the last bans, or that public opinion must eventually shift towards allowing donations, subject to regulation. We doubt that the book has forever closed on private contributions of this kind.

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Replication data available from the contact author by request.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. See https://www.wyoleg.gov/Legislation/2025/HB0228.
2. This was not a special election, but the regular "jungle" (first) round of the gubernatorial (and more) election in Louisiana's odd-year cycle. This amendment was the second most popular of four on that ballot, receiving majority support in all sixty-four parishes (see https://voterportal.sos.la.gov).
3. In Wisconsin, Question 1 had majority support in fifty-seven of the fifty-eight counties that had more Republican than Democratic primary voters, and in six of the fourteen counties where Democratic ballots were more numerous (see https://elections.wi.gov/sites/default/files/documents/County%20by%20County%20Report_all%20contests.pdf).
4. Wording varied very slightly between the pre-election (NORC) and post-election (YouGov) versions. See Supplemental Appendix. The YouGov surveys were part of the Cooperative Election Study, a consortium of over fifty academic teams, coordinated by scholars at Harvard, Tufts, and BYU. For details see https://tischcollege.tufts.edu/research-faculty/research-centers/cooperative-election-study.
5. Tables in the Supplemental Appendix show descriptive statistics reflecting how well balanced were the treatment groups.
6. One difficulty with the issue and perhaps with our wording is that one can support (or oppose) a ban on private election-administration funding or, antithetically, support (oppose) such funding. We tried to make the question clear, but note that there is inherently some scope for confusion whenever juxtaposing the ban on funding and the funding itself.
7. For neither the pre- nor the post- wave was any of the three interaction terms (between treatment type and ban) statistically significant. The p-values on the F were 0.17 (pre-) and 0.26 (post-), suggesting that the added explanatory power did not merit consuming additional degrees of freedom in either dataset. Supplemental Appendix explores the effects of alternative estimation. The particular choices of coding did not matter greatly.
8. Michigan, in fact, passed a constitutional amendment in 2022 (Proposal 2) that bundled

an explicit right for local governments to accept gifts with various other modification to voting policies. The only qualifications are that the gifts must be disclosed and cannot be from foreign entities.

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