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CFI Analysis of Presidential Candidates' Donor Reports

REALITY CHECK: Obama Received About the Same Percentage from Small Donors in 2008 as Bush in 2004

Obama also raised 80% more from large donors than small, outstripping all rivals and predecessors

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It turns out that Barack Obama's donors may not have been quite as different as we had thought. Throughout the election season, this organization and others have been reporting that Obama received about half of his discrete contributions in amounts of \$200 or less. The Campaign Finance Institute (CFI) noted in past releases that donations are not the same as donors, since many people give more than once. After a more thorough analysis of data from the Federal Election Commission (FEC), it has become clear that repeaters and large donors were even more important for Obama than we or other analysts had fully appreciated.

"The myth is that money from small donors dominated Barack Obama's finances," said CFI's executive director Michael J. Malbin. "The reality of Obama's fundraising was impressive, but the reality does not match the myth."

Main Small Donor Findings

To look more fully at presidential candidates' fundraising during this cycle, CFI conducted an extensive analysis of FEC records to identify repeat donors and to categorize each donor's giving according to the *cumulative amount* he or she gave over the course of a full election cycle.

Although an unusually high percentage (47%) of Obama's funds came in discrete contributions of \$200 or less (see Table 3), only 26% of his money through August 31 (and 24% of his funds through October 15, according to the most recent FEC reports) came from donors whose total contributions *aggregated* to \$200 or less. Obama's 26% compares to 25% for George W. Bush in 2004, 20% for John Kerry in 2004, 21% for John McCain in 2008, 13% for Hillary Clinton in 2008, and 38% for Howard Dean in 2004.

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Fundraising through August 31, 2004 and 2008

% from Donors who gave this amount in total

Candidate	Net Individual Contributions	\$200 or less	\$201-999	\$1000 and up
Obama	452,852,990	26%	27%	47%
McCain	204,436,971	21%	20%	59%
Kerry	215,915,455	20%	24%	56%
Bush	256,081,557	25%	13%	60%

% from Contributions of this amount

		\$200 or less	\$201-999	\$1000 and up
Obama	452,852,990	49%	18%	33%
McCain	204,436,971	32%	15%	53%
Kerry	215,915,455	37%	20%	44%
Bush	256,081,557	31%	12%	57%

Mid-Range Repeaters

After merging the donor records, combining multiple records from those who gave more than one disclosed contribution, CFI concluded that about 403,000 different people had given enough money (more than \$200) by August 31 to have their names disclosed. This increased to about 580,000 by October 15. By comparison, CFI found that about 475,000 discrete donors gave disclosed contributions to all candidates combined in 2003-2004.

Obama raised 27% of his money from people whose aggregated contributions fell in a middle range (\$201-\$999). John Kerry, who also relied on Internet fundraising after clinching the nomination, raised an almost comparable 24% from mid-range donors. McCain's mid-range supplied 20% of his total. Bush received only 13% from this group.

Many of the repeat donors who started off small ended up in the \$201-\$999 middle range. Among Obama's total pool of 403,000 disclosed donors on August 31, more than half (about 212,000) started off by giving undisclosed contributions of \$200 or less. About 93,000 of these repeaters gave in cumulative amounts of no more than \$400 for the full primary season. Another 106,000 repeaters ended up between \$401 and \$999. By comparison, Clinton and McCain each had about 100,000 donors in the entire \$201-\$999 middle range, and for them the number included both repeaters and one-time givers.

Finally, not many of Obama's 212,000 small-donor repeaters ended up in the top group. Despite colorful press stories, only about 13,000 crossed the \$1,000 threshold in their cumulative contributions.

Because of the length of Obama's battle with Clinton for the nomination, his rejection of public financing for the general election, his personal charisma and, most importantly, because of the way he organized his campaign, Obama was able to use the Internet to go back to go the same supporters over and over again for both volunteer assistance and repeat contributions. These repeaters account for the difference between the past reports that focused on small contributions and the aggregates we are able to provide now.

Small Donors

We know less about people who stayed at \$200 or below because \$201 is the trigger for FEC disclosure. Obama's staff says that more than 3 million people contributed to his campaign. We cannot verify this number independently but we consider it to be plausible. Since about \$156 million of Obama's funds as of Oct. 15 had come from donors whose contributions had not broken the \$200 disclosure threshold (see Table 1), accepting the staff's statement (and subtracting the number of disclosed donors) would mean that an estimated 2.5 million undisclosed donors gave a cumulative average of about \$62 each. This figure is consistent with the amount CFI has calculated for the typical undisclosed donor in past elections and is also consistent with survey research. Obama's innovation would not be in the amount he raised from each small donor, but in the number of such people he was able to reach. His 2.5 million small donors would be in the same general range as CFI's published estimate for the number of small donors who gave to all candidates combined in 2004 (anywhere from 2.0 to 2.8 million).

Large Donors

Finally, Obama received about 80% more money from *large* donors (cumulative contributions of at least \$1,000) than from small donors. While the large donors thus were responsible for much more of Obama's money than either his small or middle range group, he received somewhat less proportionally from large donors than did his rivals or predecessors. Forty-seven percent of Obama's money came from large donors compared to 56% for Kerry and 60% for both Bush and McCain. However, because Obama's 47% is based on a larger total, that means he also raised significantly more large-donor money in absolute terms than any of his rivals or predecessors.

Much of this money was raised the "old fashioned" way. Since only about 13,000 of those who started out small for Obama ended up crossing the \$1,000 threshold, that means the bulk of Obama's \$213 million in large-donor contributions during the primaries came from about 85,000 people who started out giving big and stayed there. Much of this large-donor money – *perhaps close to a majority* – came to the campaign through bundling methods initially perfected by Bush.

According to the Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) – which in the absence of legally mandated disclosure had to use information provided by the campaigns – 561 "bundlers" had raised a minimum of \$63 million for Obama by mid-August and 534 people had raised a minimum of \$75 million for McCain. The bundlers undoubtedly were responsible for more than these amounts because the campaigns reported the bundlers in ranges and CRP's minimum totals were based conservatively on the low end of each range. A reasonable guess might estimate the real amount at about 50% above the minimum – the mid-point for each range – yielding a total of perhaps about \$90 million for Obama as of mid-August and more than \$100 million for McCain.

At the top of the bundlers were 47 of Obama's and 65 of McCain's who were listed by the campaigns in mid-August as being responsible for at least \$500,000 each. In addition, Public Citizen lists 2,205 people as having contributed in their own names at least \$25,000 to joint fundraising committees supporting Obama and 1,846 people as having made similar contributions to joint fundraising committees supporting McCain.

Conclusion

These totals force a reality check. In McCain's case, a \$100 million figure from bundlers would represent almost all of the money he raised from large donors (\$122 million). In Obama's case, one should combine the estimated \$90 million or so he received with the help of bundlers through August with the remaining \$120 million or so from other large donors, and then compare it to the \$119 million he raised from small donors through August. The comparison should make one think twice before describing small donors as the financial engine of the Obama campaign.

None of these findings denies the importance of either Obama's appeal to repeat donors or his innovative use of online social networking tools to interweave appeals for contributions and critically important campaign volunteers. In particular, Obama did attract repeaters who have not been part of the traditional large-dollar, reception-attending fundraising crowd. The fact is that Obama's financial juggernaut broke records at *all* contribution levels. The reality does not match the myth, but the reality itself was impressive.

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NOTE: This report was written by CFI's Executive Director Michael J. Malbin. The donor research was done by CFI's System Manager, Brendan Glavin and Research Analyst Aaron Dusso, who is also a political science Ph.D. candidate at The George Washington University.

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Table 1: Individual Donors (Aggregated Contributions) to Presidential Candidates through August 31, 2008 (with Obama through Oct. 15)

Candidate	Total # Itemized Individual Donors	Total Amount of Itemized Contributions	Net Individual Contributions	Donor Contributions by Level				
				% \$200 or less	% \$201-999	% \$1000-2299	% \$2300 and up	% \$1000 and up
Dem								
Obama	403,341	301,118,063	452,852,990	26%	27%	15%	32%	47%
Clinton	170,777	167,048,346	210,901,574	16%	21%	19%	44%	63%
Edwards	33,135	31,060,174	38,638,348	15%	22%	21%	42%	63%
Richardson	18,124	18,923,915	22,675,886	13%	18%	21%	48%	69%
Dodd	8,002	12,759,682	13,463,258	5%	7%	31%	57%	88%
Biden	7,235	9,163,634	10,160,367	9%	13%	32%	46%	78%
Kucinich	3,508	1,752,314	4,385,758	54%	26%	11%	9%	20%
Gravel	589	238,674	509,928	50%	24%	15%	12%	26%
<i>Dem Subtotal</i>	<i>644,711</i>	<i>542,064,802</i>	<i>753,588,109</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>24%</i>	<i>17%</i>	<i>37%</i>	<i>54%</i>
Rep								
McCain	169,783	154,806,518	206,363,245	21%	20%	21%	38%	59%
Romney	44,795	52,972,073	63,065,340	14%	13%	25%	48%	73%
Giuliani	39,489	51,211,030	61,022,495	15%	9%	24%	52%	76%
Paul	32,234	18,372,743	34,336,193	39%	29%	20%	12%	32%
Thompson, F.	17,058	13,905,983	23,369,742	38%	18%	16%	28%	44%
Huckabee	13,728	10,449,883	15,991,901	29%	24%	21%	26%	47%
Tancredo	3,393	1,346,621	3,999,589	55%	29%	9%	7%	16%
Brownback	3,027	2,187,308	3,530,942	31%	23%	10%	22%	46%
Hunter	1,658	1,141,937	2,343,064	47%	19%	17%	17%	34%
Thompson, T.	755	899,119	967,322	7%	15%	26%	53%	79%
Gilmore	241	329,838	349,736	6%	9%	32%	51%	83%
<i>Rep Subtotal</i>	<i>326,161</i>	<i>307,623,053</i>	<i>415,339,569</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>18%</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>38%</i>	<i>60%</i>
Total 2008	970,872	849,687,855	1,168,927,678	22%	22%	19%	37%	56%

Individual Donors to Presidential Candidates through October 15, 2008

Obama	580,081	433,902,091	637,628,032	24%	28%	16%	32%	48%
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Table 2: Individual Donors (Aggregated Contributions) to Presidential Candidates through August 31, 2004

Candidate	Total # Itemized Individual Donors	Total Amount of Itemized Contributions	Net Individual Contributions	Donor Contributions by Level				
				% \$200 or less	% \$201-999	% \$1000-2299	% \$2300 and up	% \$1000 and up
Dem								
Kerry	209,894	164,134,439	215,915,455	20%	24%	50%	6%	56%
Dean	57,448	27,947,961	51,360,995	38%	30%	26%	2%	28%
Edwards	18,589	20,173,933	21,880,659	7%	14%	71%	7%	78%
<i>Dem Subtotal</i>	<i>285,931</i>	<i>212,256,333</i>	<i>289,157,109</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>24%</i>	<i>48%</i>	<i>5%</i>	<i>53%</i>
Rep								
Bush	190,640	183,235,226	256,081,557	25%	13%	59%	5%	60%
<i>Rep Subtotal</i>	<i>190,640</i>	<i>183,235,226</i>	<i>256,081,557</i>	<i>25%</i>	<i>13%</i>	<i>59%</i>	<i>5%</i>	<i>60%</i>
Total 2008	476,571	395,491,559	545,238,666	24%	19%	53%	5%	56%

Table 3: Individual Contributions (Not Aggregated) to Presidential Candidates through August 31, 2008

Candidate	Total Net Primary & General Receipts	Net Indiv. Contributions	\$200 or less as % of Total Indiv.	\$201-999 as % of Total Indiv.	\$1,000-2,299 as % Total Indiv.	\$2,300 Contribs as % of Total Indiv.	All \$1,000 & Up as % Total Indiv.
Dem							
Obama ¹	456,114,562	452,852,990	49%	18%	15%	18%	33%
Clinton	240,766,007	210,901,574	33%	15%	18%	35%	52%
Edwards	59,570,293	35,136,027	30%	15%	26%	28%	55%
Richardson	24,146,796	22,542,296	22%	15%	22%	41%	63%
Dodd	18,374,715	10,022,274	8%	9%	29%	54%	83%
Biden	13,745,698	8,317,996	16%	13%	29%	42%	71%
Kucinich	5,500,742	4,385,758	74%	12%	8%	6%	14%
Gravel	590,195	509,928	60%	18%	13%	10%	23%
<i>Dem Subtotal</i>	<i>818,809,008</i>	<i>744,668,843</i>	<i>42%</i>	<i>17%</i>	<i>17%</i>	<i>24%</i>	<i>41%</i>
Rep							
McCain ¹	219,500,542	206,363,245	32%	15%	20%	33%	53%
Romney	112,082,448	63,063,040	14%	11%	30%	44%	75%
Giuliani	65,587,575	61,022,496	15%	9%	26%	49%	76%
Paul	34,819,629	34,336,193	63%	19%	12%	7%	18%
Thompson, F.	23,866,718	23,202,420	45%	13%	16%	26%	42%
Huckabee	16,154,670	15,991,901	43%	17%	18%	22%	40%
Tancredo	8,318,460	3,999,589	81%	10%	6%	3%	9%
Brownback	4,315,812	3,530,942	54%	11%	20%	14%	34%
Hunter	3,030,689	2,343,064	56%	13%	17%	14%	31%
Thompson, T.	1,223,588	967,322	8%	17%	26%	49%	75%
Gilmore	392,794	349,736	9%	9%	34%	47%	82%
<i>Rep Subtotal</i>	<i>489,292,925</i>	<i>415,169,948</i>	<i>31%</i>	<i>14%</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>33%</i>	<i>55%</i>
Total	1,308,101,933	1,159,838,791	38%	16%	19%	28%	46%

1 McCain's and Obama's report totals include individual contributions raised through joint candidate/party fundraising committees. Not all joint fundraising dollars were assigned to the primary account, CFI has estimated the breakdown of contribution levels for the amount that was assigned to the primary account based on the total distribution.