

ANALYSIS

In a Congress Full of Millionaires, Raising Money Becomes the Job

The people's branch should represent the people.



Maya Kornberg

December 8, 2025

This was originally published by [The Hill](#) [link-1].

The longest government shutdown in history, which [ended](#) [link-2] last week, threatened food assistance for 43 million Americans, a stark reminder that the people affected are often not those in the halls of power.

How could Congress fail to see the urgency? The delay in benefits may already be a [political](#)

[liability](#) [link-3] for Republicans. But a big part of the answer goes beyond party or ideology to how they got there in the first place.

Congress is wealthier than the country it represents. In 2014, for the first time in history, the [majority](#) [link-4] of Congress were millionaires.

Members from working-class backgrounds [comprise](#) [link-5] only two percent of Congress, whereas

half are lawyers and business owners (10 percent of the overall population). At the same time, members spend much of their time interacting with other wealthier Americans, often leaving working-class citizens out of the conversation.

Our campaign finance system is one major reason working Americans are [underrepresented](#) [\[link-6\]](#) in government. Often, it prevents them from even getting on the ballot.

In 1972, Rep. Elizabeth Holtzman (D-N.Y.) [raised \\$36,000](#) [\[link-7\]](#) and won a congressional race, unseating an incumbent. The cost of running rose dramatically after the 1976 [Buckley v. Valeo](#) [\[link-8\]](#) decision, in which the Supreme Court found campaign spending limits unconstitutional.

By 1986, the average amount raised by a House candidate per campaign

cycle was [close to \\$360,000](#) [\[link-9\]](#) — over \$1 million today.

The 2010 [Citizens United v. FEC](#) [\[link-10\]](#) decision further distorted the landscape by allowing unlimited political spending outside of campaigns. One of the most consequential outcomes was the creation of super PACs that can raise unlimited sums of money for campaigns. Between 2010 and 2018, super PACs [spent](#) [\[link-11\]](#) nearly \$3 billion on elections.

In this landscape, candidates spend hours dialing for dollars and courting donors to raise money for competitive races, making it extremely challenging for people without wealthy networks to run.

“Part of fundraising is really your network,” reads a candidate’s account cited in my forthcoming book, “[Stuck: How Money, Media, and Violence Prevent Change in](#)

[Congress.](#) [\[link-12\]](#) ” They added: “if you grew up in a very well-to-do family, then your network probably consists of other very well-to-do individuals.”

Fundraising doesn’t end once candidates get elected. The cost of running for and remaining in office, in addition to living expenses like child care, can be prohibitive for many potential candidates. Van Hilleary, who ran for Congress in 1994, [went broke](#) [\[link-13\]](#) after spending \$125,000 of his own money on his campaign. He had to borrow shoes until he got his first paycheck.

Members also have to fundraise to build clout in the chamber, especially to get onto powerful committees and win leadership positions. This is known as “paying dues.”

Between 2023 and 2024, Democratic Party members [were expected](#) [\[link-14\]](#) to raise between

\$100,000 and \$30 million per year in dues to the party to move up in the chamber. This reinforces structural disadvantages in access to wealthy networks.

In an interview for my book, one congressional staffer recalled that former Ohio Rep. [Marcia Fudge](#) [\[link-15\]](#) (D) was nervous about leveraging her working-class community in Cleveland to raise the money necessary to pay her “dues.”

This system is preventing some candidates from running while driving others out of office once they’re elected. We need to fix the campaign pipeline and ensure that elected officials can reflect the communities they represent.

Running for office must be more accessible. That starts with placing limits on super PACs. Small donor public matching, in which private donations to candidates below a certain amount are matched by the government with public funds,

represents another powerful solution.

In New York City's public [matching funds program](#) [\[link-16\]](#), a \$100 donation is matched 8 to 1, translating to \$900 for a campaign. This year, I took a leave from my job to run for New York City Council and supported my campaign through small donations matched by public funds, reducing time spent dialing for dollars.

Additionally, allowing candidates to use [campaign funds for child care](#) [\[link-17\]](#), as many states now allow, is another way to alleviate the financial burden of running for office.

But campaigns are only part of the story. New members need access to power to make change once elected. Party steering committees, responsible for committee assignments and leadership decisions, must rethink

fundraising's role in driving these assignments.

More robust networking opportunities for new members with less access to wealthy networks can help incoming elected officials navigate the system.

To give low-income Americans a reason to run, salaries for members of Congress must keep up with inflation. Otherwise, only members with independent sources of wealth will be able to afford the job.

In "[exit interviews](#) [\[link-18\]](#)" with The New York Times, retiring members shared that many of their colleagues cannot afford to remain in their jobs.

The shutdown made it clearer than ever that our system is stuck in a campaign finance system that excludes most Americans from power. The people's branch must represent the people it serves.

Links

link-1: The Hill <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/5606526-campaign-finance-reform-needed/>

link-2: ended https://www.npr.org/2025/11/12/g-s1-97607/house-vote-shutdown-end%22%20/o%20%22https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2025/11/10/shutdown-day-41-live-updates-snap-travel/87104864007/%22%20/t%20%22_blank

link-3: political liability <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-approval-rating-plunged-osnap-benefits-nate-silver-11002503>

link-4: majority <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2014/01/10/261398205/majority-in-congress-are-millionaires#:~:text=toggle%20caption,House%20and%20Senate%20was%20%241%2C008%2C767.>

link-5: comprise <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/W/bo16956543.html>

link-6: underrepresented <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/W/bo16956543.html>

link-7: raised \$36,000 <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/02/nyregion/where-have-all-the-women-gone.html>

link-8: Buckley v. Valeo <https://www.fec.gov/legal-resources/court-cases/buckley-v-valeo/>

link-9: close to \$360,000 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/vitalstats_ch3_full.pdf

link-10: Citizens United v. FEC <https://www.fec.gov/legal-resources/court-cases/citizens-united-v-fec/>

link-11: spent <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/citizens-united-decade-super-pacs>

link-12: Stuck: How Money, Media, and Violence Prevent Change in Congress. <https://www.amazon.com/Stuck-Violence-Prevent-Change-Congress/dp/1421454580>

link-13: went broke <https://www.amazon.com/Freshmen-What-Happened-Republican-Revolution/dp/0813399505>

link-14: were expected <https://punchbowl.news/wp-content/uploads/Caucus-Report-December-2023.pdf?inline=1>

link-15: Marcia Fudge <https://thehill.com/people/marcia-fudge/>

link-16: matching funds program <https://www.nyccfb.info/program>

link-17: campaign funds for child care <https://www.votemamafoundation.org/aboutcfcc>

link-18: exit interviews <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/04/30/opinion/congress-resignations.html>