

MONEY IN BELIZEAN POLITICS: BREAKING THE REGULATION DEADLOCK



**DYLAN VERNON
AND DEVON PAULINO**

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¹ 501 is the country area code for Belize.

ACRONYMS

AG	Attorney General
BELPRI	Belize Policy Research Institute
BCCI	Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry
BNN	Belize Network of NGOs
CARICOM	The Caribbean Community
CPI	Corruption Perception Index
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DFC	Development Finance Corporation
EBC	Elections and Boundaries Commission
FIU	Financial Intelligence Unit
GGU	Good Governance Unit
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
IACAC	Inter-American Convention Against Corruption
JPAC	Joint Public Accounts Committee
NTUCB	National Trade Union Congress of Belize
OAS	Organization of American States
OECS	Organization of Eastern Caribbean States
PCC	People's Constitution Commission
PoCA	Prevention of Corruption Act
PNP	People's National Party
PUP	People's United Party
PRC	Political Reform Commission
ROPA	Representation of the People Act
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SICA	Central American Integration System
SSB	Social Security Board
SPEAR	Society for the Promotion of Education and Research
TI	Transparency International
UB	University of Belize
UDP	United Democratic Party
UNCAC	United Nations Convention Against Corruption

KEY TERMS²

Campaign contributions

Any monetary donations, gifts having a monetary value and in kind donations, given by an individual or a legal entity, made with the knowledge and consent of a candidate or a political party, for funding election campaigns.

Corruption

A form of dishonesty or a criminal offense that is undertaken by a person or organization, that is entrusted in a position of authority, to acquire illicit benefits or abuse of power for one's gain.

Political clientelism (aka handout politics)

A political exchange between politicians, who provide or promise a variety of resources and favours to individuals (clients), who, in exchange, provide or promise political support.

Political clinics

In Belize, there are the year round operations at the constituency level, where constituents can visit with representatives and candidates for receiving information, sharing needs and/or engaging in clientelist bargains.

Political finance

All contributions and expenses, monetary and in kind, made to and incurred by political parties and candidates for electoral purposes. This broader term includes campaign finance.

Political party financing

Monetary and in kind contributions and expenses made to and incurred by political parties in their routine activities.

Political participation

Behaviour influencing or attempting to influence the distribution of public goods, inclusive of informal participation.

Private financing

Financial and in-kind contributions from individuals and private entities made directly to political parties and candidates for the purpose of an electoral campaign.

Public Financing

Direct or indirect funding or other support from the state to political parties and candidates towards their political financing needs.

Voter bribery

A form of electoral malpractice intended to increase the number of votes that a particular candidate or political party receives in an election by providing money or other benefits to constituents in exchange for their vote.

² See Annex 1 for full glossary and references. Definitions adapted largely from Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Handbook for the observation of campaign finance (Warsaw: OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), 2015), 68-69.

PREFACE

About BELPRI-UB

The **Belize Policy Research Institute at the University of Belize** (BELPRI-UB) is an independent public policy think tank committed to producing innovative and accessible research that provide policy stakeholders and the public with evidence-based considerations for dialogue and policy making on pressing social, environment, economic and governance policy issues in Belize.

BELPRI's Policy Research Reports

BELPRI's Policy Research Report series is at the core of its work. Each report is the product of rigorous research and analysis on selected issues of national importance. Each report contains informed policy recommendations for policy stakeholders. The views expressed in these reports are not necessarily those of BELPRI or the University of Belize.

The Authors of this Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Unregulated political financing is firewood to spreading the flames of political corruption and political clientelism, both of which threaten the quality and integrity of Belize's democracy and both of which restrain the pace of its transformation towards sustainable human development.

Belize is among a handful of states in the world without comprehensive legislation to regulate political parties and political finance. This is despite civil society advocacy for regulation and despite every political party, since the 1990s, making promises to enact campaign finance regulation if elected. Three decades later, there is growing societal acknowledgment of an undeniable nexus between the ugly sides of political finance and many of the challenges of democratic governance and national development that confront Belize. Yet the deadlock on regulating money in Belizean politics continues.

Money in Belizean Politics: Breaking the Regulation Deadlock seeks to contribute to breaking this impasse by presenting an independent and evidence-based assessment of political finance in Belize with practical policy recommendations fit for its political context. The recommendations consider international and national commitments and proposals made by all stakeholders in Belize thus far.

The Report situates money in Belizean politics within the wider conceptual framework of Belize's national development goal of good democratic governance. The Report examines the dangers that lack of regulation present for Belize's democracy and development, assesses how political finance currently works in Belize, compares how other similar nations have approached regulation, and reviews what regulatory proposals have been made in Belize so far.



The Report acknowledges that money is necessary for the practice of Belize's representative and participatory democracy. Money facilitates campaigning, political participation, the selection of representatives, interacting with constituents, and oversight of political parties in government. Yet, the Report also demonstrates that, whatever party is in government, the political directorate has shown little or no interest to tamper with the unregulated political financing system.

A core finding of the Report is that unregulated political financing is firewood to spreading the flames of political corruption and political clientelism, both of which threaten the quality and integrity of Belize's democracy and both of which restrain the pace of its transformation towards sustainable human development. Unregulated political finance is a core driver for the bribery of public officials, abuse and waste of public funds, special treatment for big donors, rampant vote-buying and impunity for wrongdoers.

Based on the research and analysis conducted, the final chapter of the Report proposes how Belize can best approach developing and implementing a bold but practical legislative approach for the regulation of political finance. Thirteen recommendations for constitutional reform, for legislative reform and for process are offered.³ A list of the 13 recommendations is presented below. (Full justifications and details are in Chapter 6).

For the Constitution:

The Report recommends that the National Assembly amends the Constitution to provide for:

- R1: Fixed Dates for all elections and fixed periods for campaign.**
- R2: The Establishment of a Political Party and Political Finance Regulation Commission.**
- R3: The Registration of Political Parties.**
- R4: The Regulation of Political Finance.**

For Legislation:

The Report recommends that the National Assembly enacts a new stand-alone Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act that make provisions and regulations for:

- R5: The establishment of the Political Party and Political Finance Regulation Commission.**
- R6: The registration of political parties.**
- R7: The requirements for regulating individual candidates.**
- R8: Bans and limits on private contributions to political parties and candidates.**
- R9: An element of public financing for political parties and candidates.**
- R10: Bans and limits spending by political parties and candidates.**
- R11: Requirements for record keeping and reporting.**
- R12: Fines, penalties and punishment for violations of the Act.**

³ The business of legal drafting of the recommendations is left for legal experts after there is political consensus on the way forward for regulating money in politics in Belize.

For Process:

The Report recommends that the National Assembly mandates an inclusive national process to prepare bills to amend the Constitution and to regulate political parties and political finance through legislation such that they are:

- R13: (a) based on public education and consultations, (b) drafted with input from political parties and social partners and (c) enacted in a phased manner to begin to be applicable for the next general election due in 2030 and for all general and local elections thereafter.**

Tempering the ugly side of political financing through the enactment and enforcement of regulations will face many formidable barriers. Chief among these barriers will be Belize's two major political parties themselves – the very actors who have the power to enact the necessary policies. As such there will be a colossal challenge for civil society and the media to generate and sustain the required public demand for the required reforms. In this regard, the Report can be a tool for increasing public awareness about the deep burdens that the lack of regulation of political parties and their financing place on all Belizean society.

Despite the challenges, urgent action to mitigate the wide-spread and systemic abuse of political financing and the problems this creates for Belizean society is essential to complement the on-going transformational process of improving livelihoods, enhancing the quality of Belize's democracy and regenerating trust in political institutions.

The Report is presented with the expectation that its considered discussions of options for regulating the worst sides of political finance will help to inform policy and laws for Belize that best suit its national context and conjuncture. The Belizean people deserve nothing less as part of the transformational process of improving their livelihoods and enhancing the quality of Belizean democracy. The Report urges that the time for regulation is now.

Note:

- **Belize's currency is fixed at 1\$ Belize dollar = \$.50 US dollar**
- **When other currencies are cited, the exchange rate is footnoted and based on rates as of June 15, 2026.**





CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Unregulated political finance has been directly linked to the bribery of public officials, waste of public funds, special policy treatment for big donors, impunity for wrongdoers and vote-buying.

MONEY is an essential element in the practice of Belize's representative democracy. It facilitates campaigning, political participation, the selection of representatives, interacting with constituents, and oversight of political parties when in government. Since independence in 1981, the amount of monies contributed, sourced and spent in Belizean politics has expanded exponentially in the total absence of regulatory oversight.

Such unregulated political finance has been directly linked to the bribery of public officials, waste of public funds, special treatment for big donors, impunity for wrongdoers and vote-buying.⁴ The core argument is that unregulated political finance contributes significantly to fuelling the growth of political corruption and political clientelism, both of which threaten the quality and integrity of Belize's democracy and restrain the pace of its transformation towards sustainable human development.

Unregulated Money in Belizean Politics

The 12 March 2025 general election was Belize's tenth since independence in 1981 that was conducted without regulation of political financing. This was not a matter of lack of enforcement. Belize is among just a handful of countries without political finance regulations. The Preliminary Report of the Electoral Observation Mission (March 2025) of the Organization of American States (OAS) repeated what was already widely known and reported on in Belize:

There are currently no regulations governing election campaign financing in Belize. There are no limits on campaign financing, no regulations prohibiting illicit, anonymous, or foreign donations, no reporting requirements or submission timelines, and no oversight mechanisms for verifying and investigating campaign disclosures and expenses.⁵

The OAS observers reiterated what some in civil society, the media and governance reform commissions have advocated for over 30 years: that laws to regulate campaign donations and spending by political parties and political candidates need to be urgently enacted and enforced. Indeed, Belize's commitments to introduce political finance regulation measures have been made at the international, regional and national levels.

⁴ See for example, Political Reform Commission, Final Report of the Political Reform Commission-Belize (Belmopan: Government of Belize, 2000).

⁵ OAS, Preliminary Report of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission for the General Elections of March 12, 2025 in Belize, OAS (Washington, D.C.: OAS, 2025), <https://www.oas.org/eomdatabase/MoeReport.aspx?Lang=en&Id=472&MissionId=562..>

Belize is a signatory to several international and regional agreements that include commitments related to political finance. Through Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 and, especially, 16.5, Belize has committed to substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms.⁶ Through both the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) and the Inter-American Convention Against Corruption (IACAC), Belize has committed to designing and implementing transparent political financing and regulatory systems.

At the level of national development planning, Belize's Medium Term Development Strategy, 2022 – 2026, (MTDS) includes a pillar titled 'No Corruption and Good Governance' under which the government committed, as a national priority, to "demonstrate that it is serious about stopping the corruption with significant policy reforms and concrete actions in line with Belize's treaty obligations."⁷ The MTDS further stated that, by 2026, the government will:

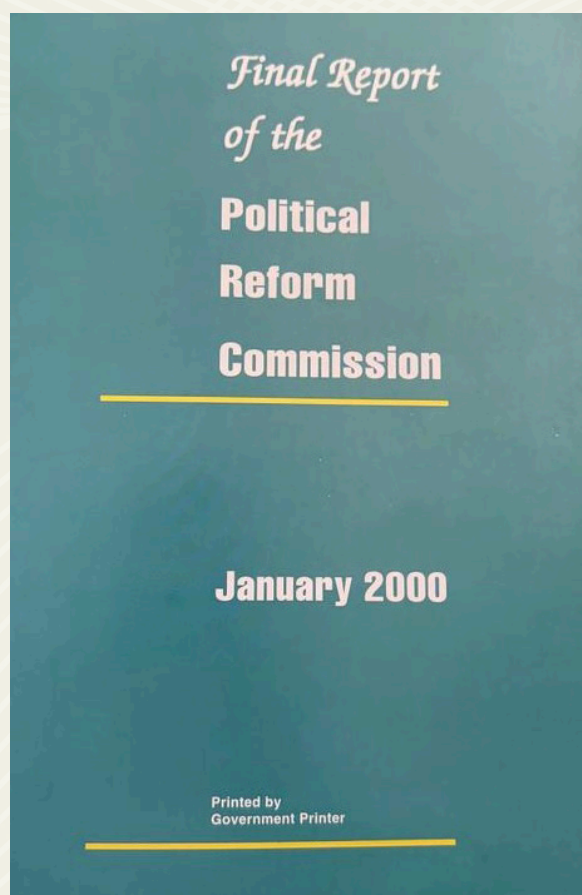
Introduce a Campaign Finance Reform to regulate the timing of elections and campaigning, register political parties, provide public resources, include transparency in mobilization of private funds, and prevent vote buying, which will lead to an updated electoral laws and systems.⁸

Broken Promises

Public advocacy for political finance regulation can be traced back to the political reform campaign led by civil society organisations (CSOs) in the mid-1990s, when political parties began to be publicly pressured on the issue. In 2000, campaign finance regulation was a key recommendation of the Political Reform Commission (PRC) – Belize's first constitutional reform commission. Since that time, interest on the issue from both political parties and CSOs has been sporadic. In almost every case since independence, short-term interest on regulating political finance has been driven by the 'scandal of the day'.

Both of Belize's major political parties, the People's United Party (PUP) and the United Democratic Party (UDP), have made numerous manifesto promises to regulate political financing since 1998. Every single such partisan promise has fallen by the wayside. Most recently, calls for regulating political parties and campaign financing penetrated the national political debate in the campaign for the general elections of 2020 and 2025. During this period, draft bills from civil society were circulated and, for a short time, discussed.

Between 2022 and 2025, Belize saw its second constitutional reform process, the People's Constitution Commission (PCC). The Report of the PCC was completed in May 2025 but has not yet been publicly released by the government.⁹ In May 2025, the National Assembly amended the PCC Act (2022) to extend the parliamentary tabling of the PCC Report from 60 days to twelve months – or in May 2026. Up to mid-July 2026, the tabling of the PCC Report has not transpired. However, copies of the PCC Report have circulated, and it does contain recommendations related to regulating campaign financing.



⁶ https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16#targets_and_indicators

⁷ Government of Belize, "#PlanBelize Medium Term Development Strategy, 2022 – 2026," (Belmopan, Belize: Ministry of Economic Transformation, 2023), 62–63.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ At the time of publication of this Money in Belizean Politics Report, the government was still conducting a review of the PCC Report's recommendations. As such, the legally required tabling of the PCC Report is delayed.

That aside, the issue of regulating political finance went cold yet again after the 2025 national election. It is yet to be seen whether there will be any sustained and effective regulatory action on political finance in 2026 as stated in the MTDS. This three-decade background of regulatory failure across the administrations of both major political parties implies that a different approach is required.

This Report

Money in Belizean Politics explores Belize's failure to regulate political parties and political finance and how best to break this regulation deadlock. It argues that policy and legislative action on political finance are urgently needed to help arrest the significant negative effects of lack of regulation.

More specifically, the Report seeks to answer the following research questions:

1

In the framework of the pursuit of substantive democracy, what problems are caused or worsened by unregulated political finance in Belize?

2

What approaches for regulating political finance have been used by other similar states?

3

What proposals have been made for the regulation of political finance in Belize?

4

What is the most realistic and innovative approach for political finance regulation in Belize's unique political, societal and cultural context?

The Report's analysis and findings are based on qualitative and comparative research and on targeted consultations to verify information. A comprehensive literature review was conducted with the goal of exploring key concepts in political finance, identifying international best practice on regulation and the challenges of implementation. The research team also reviewed relevant international, regional and national quantitative studies to inform its comparative analysis.

For the comparative analysis, the countries of focus are the twelve independent countries in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) that are also members of the Commonwealth of Nations. These are Belize, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Barbados, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, St. Kitts and Nevis, Grenada, Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, and the Bahamas.¹⁰ Hereafter, the term 'Caribbean' will refer to these countries unless otherwise noted.

In addition to these twelve Caribbean states, comparative analysis is also conducted for a sample of three Latin American states, namely México, Costa Rica and Colombia. The research team explored lessons and best practices from these fifteen states in five key areas: registration of political parties, regulations on political finance contributions, approaches to public financing, regulations on political finance spending, and oversight and sanctions.

Although academic research on the four research questions is scant in Belize, the research team examined available research papers, relevant public reports, newspaper articles, media stories, as well as some relevant quantitative data (polling) on the issue of political finance. Importantly, the team identified and assessed all the substantive proposals made for regulating money in politics in Belize since the mid-1990s.

Also, the research team had direct access to existing data and information base from key informant interviews and other original research conducted on political clientelism and party politics in Belize by one of the research team members.¹¹ The Report was peer-viewed.

Report Contents

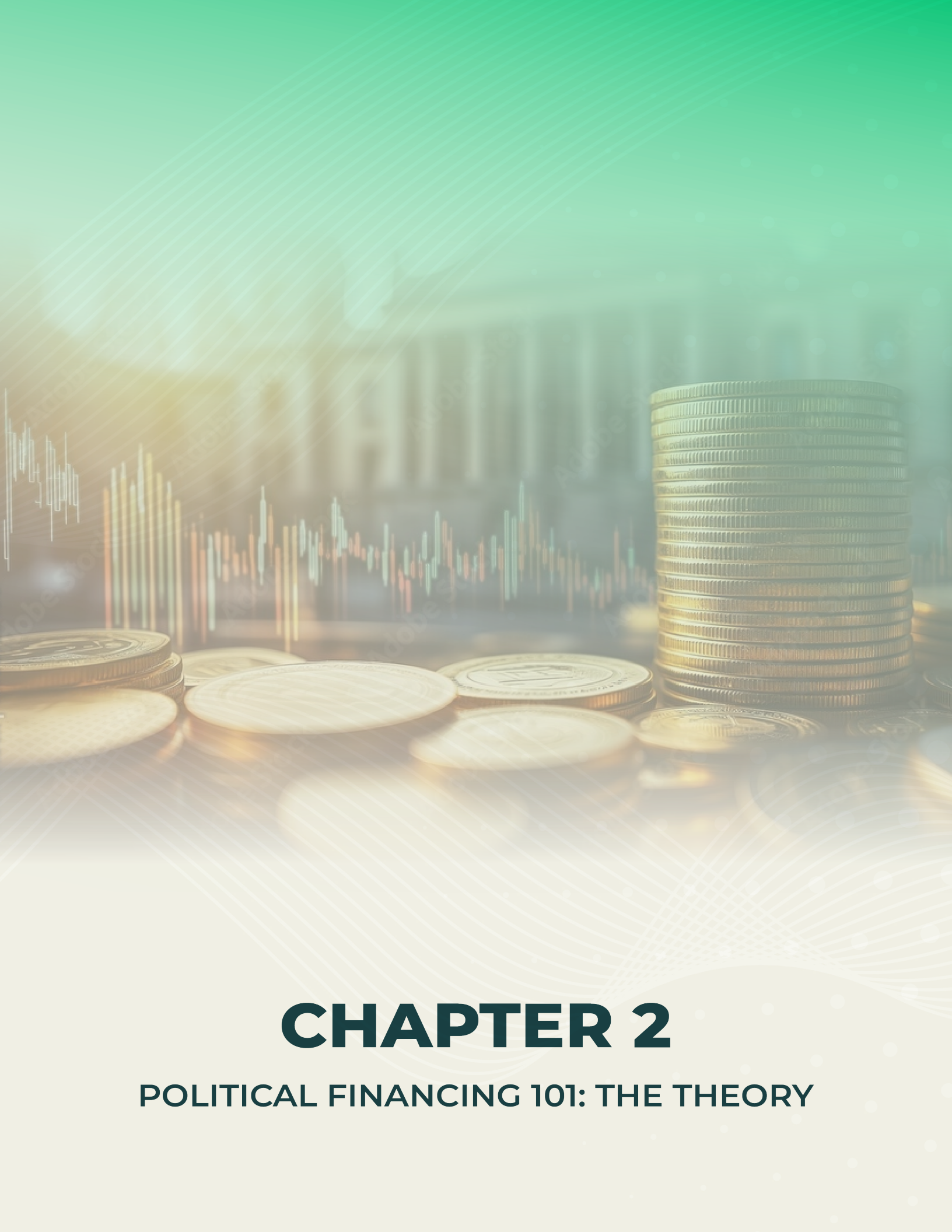
After this introductory Chapter of the Report, **Chapter 2** summarizes key terms and concepts related to political finance and its regulation. **Chapter 3** explores the status of political finance in Belize in the context of an unregulated national framework. **Chapter 4** discusses comparative insights and lessons on regulating political finance from the fifteen selected states in the Caribbean and Latin America.

Chapter 5 presents summary of the proposals that have emanated from groups in Belize from 1996 to 2020 and suggests the key considerations for Belize's approach to regulation. In **Chapter 6**, the research team presents thirteen constitutional, legislative and process recommendations for regulating political parties and political finance in the societal context of Belize.



¹⁰ These twelve states were all colonies of the United Kingdom and share similar political histories and systems. They are often referred to as the 'Commonwealth Caribbean'.

¹¹ This original research was conducted by Dylan Vernon, for his 2022 book on political clientelism and democracy in Belize. A portion of the information collected was not fully analyzed due to the parameters of that research project.



CHAPTER 2

POLITICAL FINANCING 101: THE THEORY

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In an ideal world, money should allow for participation in political activities on fair and equal terms. But the world is not ideal...some states do much better than others.

THIS chapter presents the conceptual framework used to examine why regulating political finance is critical for Belize. After clarifying the key concepts of democracy and political financing, it explores the potential positive and negative relationships between them. These relationships have been widely studied across many states, and the relevant literature is diverse, broad and deep. The chapter also summarizes the approaches that are most used globally to regulate political financing.

On Democracy

A central premise of *Money in Belizean Politics* is that unregulated political financing negatively affects Belize's quality and practice of Belize's democracy – so it is critical to establish our approach to the concept of democracy. We assume that democracy includes but transcends formal democracy – defined as the existence of a set of political institutions and basic civil liberties that facilitate the selection of leaders, who make governance decisions with the input of citizens. Formal democracy is essential for Belizean democracy, but it is not sufficient.

Once basic freedoms and rights are established and once procedures for the selection of leaders are institutionalised, what is democracy for? Huber et al. persuasively argue that the overall goal of democracy can be construed as 'social democracy' characterised by "increasing equality in social and economic outcomes" and "high levels of participation without systematic differences across social categories."¹²

David Hinds, a Caribbean political scientist, puts it well: "The presence of formal democratic institutions and practices are indispensable to democratisation" but they must "involve substantive elements such as the broad participation of the masses of people in decision making and an absence of group dominance" and "be rooted in the quest for equality and social justice."¹³



¹² Evelyne Huber, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and John D. Stephens, "The Paradoxes of Contemporary Democracy: Formal, Participatory, and Social Dimensions," *Comparative Politics* 29, no. 3 (1997): 324, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/422124>.

¹³ David Hinds, "Beyond Formal Democracy: The Discourse on Democracy and Governance in the Anglophone Caribbean," *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 46, no. 3 (2008): 404, <http://www.informaworld.com/10.1080/14662040802176558>.

In summary, effective democracy should lead to more equal and just societies. Accepting that each state's political context is unique, this broader approach to democracy is adopted as a core analytical concept for exploring unregulated political finance for Belize.

On Political Finance

We use the term **political finance** to refer to all contributions, public resources and all expenses, monetary and in-kind, made to and incurred by political parties and candidates to influence political, and especially electoral outcomes.¹⁴ The term is not limited just to periods of election campaigns.

Before election campaigns roll around and after they conclude, political parties and politicians engage in seeking and spending money for routine party operations, for responding to constituents' needs and for advancing party positions. In short, political finance means all money in politics, legal or illegal.

We use the term **campaign finance** to refer specifically to those political finance contributions and expenditures made during electoral campaigns of parties and candidates. Because election campaign activities are more concentrated, more visible and, often, more expensive, they receive the most attention in the literature and in the media.

In short, political finance is an essential element in the practice of democracy in all states: it can facilitate political participation, the selection of representatives, interacting with constituents, electoral campaigning, information sharing and the oversight of political parties. In an ideal world, money should allow for participation in political activities on fair and equal terms. But the world is not ideal, so this goal is also aspirational. Some states perform better than others.



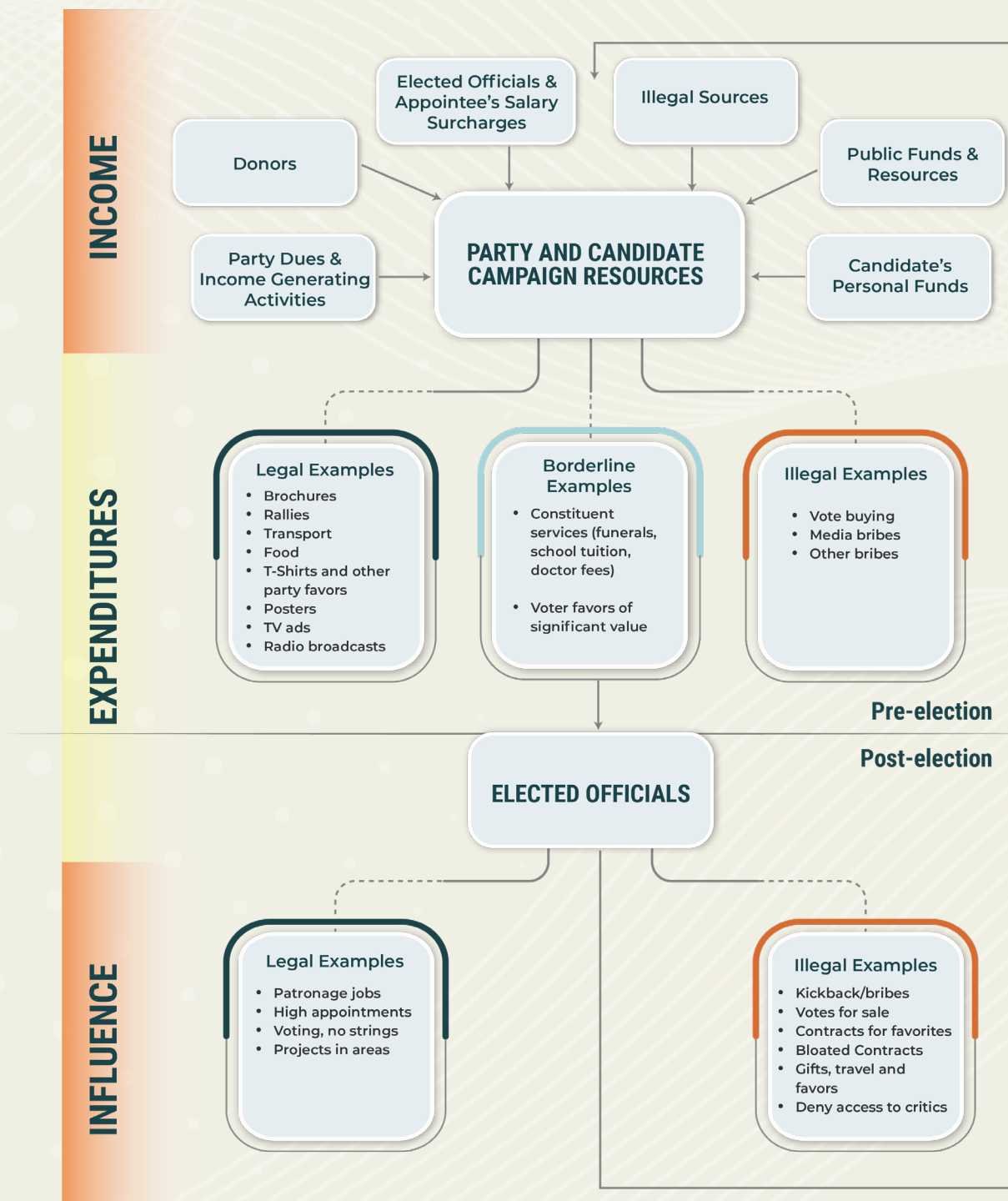
¹⁴ This definition is adapted from Gene Ward et al., *Money in Politics Handbook: a Guide to Increasing Transparency in Emerging Democracies*, Technical publication series, (Washington, DC: Office of Democracy and Governance, U.S. Agency for International Development, 2003), 9.

On Political Influence

A key assumption made in this Report is that money can potentially influence politics – both positively and negatively, both legally and illegally. To illustrate the various ways this can conceptually happen, we present, in Figure 1, a graphical overview of the possible interactions of contributions, spending and influence in political finance.¹⁵

Figure 1

How Money Can Influence Politics



¹⁵ Ibid, 10 and from Vernon (2022), 20.

The figure illustrates what the literature generally shows: the risks of unregulated political finance include spurious or illegal financing, buying influence and conflicts of interest, inequity in electoral processes and participation, weakening of parties and party systems, and loss of confidence in political institutions.¹⁶ No country has escaped the inequity and unfairness in political participation nor avoided the corruption that can come with unbridled political financing. Too often, it is fuel for the backsliding of democracy. International IDEA makes the central political argument well:

*As money gains influence in politics in both young and old democracies alike...it is one of the main factors influencing both policymaking and election outcomes. Media reports are full of scandals about corrupt politicians, abuse of state funds, the nefarious influence of drug money in politics, and questionable alliances between wealthy donors and politicians, all of which undermine the equality of political competition.*¹⁷

On Implications for Political Participation

Political participation is defined herein as behavior that influences or that seeks to influence the distribution of public goods and services.¹⁸ In addition to voting and running for office, it can also include a wide range of activities such as attending meetings of parliamentary committees, joining a civil society group, supporting an advocacy campaign and civil protest. Yet running for office and voting in national and local elections are critical to selecting political leaders and to influencing public policy for significant periods of time.

Generally, those political parties and candidates with more access to financing have huge competitive advantages over those who have little or none. Smaller political parties and independent candidates tend to have less than dominant and traditional political parties. Also, political candidates from historically disadvantaged or newly vulnerable groups; for example, women, youth, rural communities, indigenous peoples, and the LGBTQ+ community can be especially susceptible to marginalization from political decision-making due to inequity in financing.

In short, marginalization by access to political finance translates into fewer seats and posts in legislative and executive bodies that make far-reaching policy decisions on approaches, laws, resource allocation, oversight and enforcement on public issues. Apart from stifling participatory democracy, lack of equity in political participation can lead to further economic and social marginalization of those disadvantaged by poor access to political finance.

On Political Corruption

The literature on political finance is extremely consistent in confirming a very direct relationship between unregulated political financing and corruption. The Report adopts the broad definition of **corruption** used by Transparency International: "A form of dishonesty or a criminal offense that is undertaken by a person or an organization that is entrusted in a position of authority to acquire illicit benefits or abuse power for one's gain."¹⁹ This definition includes public corruption but also captures corruption by non-state actors in the private sector and civil society.

Numerous country and comparative studies have linked the abuse of money in politics to societal problems of corruption, such as bribery, kickbacks, facilitating contracts for family and friends, bloated contracts, patronage and vote buying and selling. The societal and governance problems that such

¹⁶ For useful summaries of risks of unregulated political finance see Kevin Casas-Zamora and Daniel Zovatto, *The cost of democracy: Campaign finance regulation in Latin America* (Latin American Initiative, Foreign Policy at Brookings, 2015), and S Bryan and D Baer, eds., *Money in Politics: A Study of Party Financing Practices in 22 countries* (Washington: National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2005).

¹⁷ International-IDEA, "Money in Politics," in Policy Brief (Stockholm: International-IDEA, 2015), 1-2. <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/money-in-politics-EN.pdf>.

¹⁸ Booth and Seligson, 6.

¹⁹ <https://www.transparency.org/en/about>.

corruption can cause for sustainable human development are well documented. The list compiled by a 2026 Report on anti-corruption legislative gaps in Belize summarizes these negative effects of unbridled corruption well.²⁰ Corruption:

- ***Undermines public trust***
- ***Reduces confidence in institutions***
- ***Distorts public decision-making***
- ***Increases costs to government***
- ***Weakens economic competitiveness***
- ***Diverts resources away from development priorities***

In short, as necessary as money in politics is for democratic expression there are political parties, politicians, donors and citizens in every society who will abuse or seek to abuse its influence. Money is at the root of almost every political evil. This is especially so in national contexts characterised by poverty, increasing wealth inequality and weak or non-existent regulatory frameworks.

On the Registration of Political Parties

In most states, political parties that field party candidates are required to register and fulfil basic criteria to be able to participate in official elections. (Independent candidates generally do not need to register as part of a political party to be able to participate in elections). Often an electoral commission is responsible for overseeing the party registration process, but a separate body can also do this.

The legal requirements for political party registration vary from state to state, and may include some or all the following:

-  ***A party constitution***
-  ***A party name and emblem***
-  ***Democratic processes for selection of leaders***
-  ***Regular financial statements that are made public.***
-  ***Criteria for promoting participation of women***
-  ***Adherence to relevant legislation (for example, political finance legislation)***
-  ***Liability protection***
-  ***Benefits of registration, such as public financing and/or media time***

The need for the legal registration of political parties is still a disputed subject. On the side of non-registration is the argument that “the essence of electoral competition in a free society is that it should involve individuals and organisations that are voluntary and independent of unnecessary control by public authorities.”²¹ As such, political parties should be left to their own devices and internal processes.

On the other hand, there are strong views that, as political organisations that can run governments, should be required to formally register to compete. Registration can provide more transparency, as well as basic standardisation.

²⁰ Global Finance Integrity, Anti-Corruption Legislative Gap Analysis: An Assessment of Belize's Legal and Institutional Framework, Global Finance Integrity and Belize Policy Research Institute (Belize City, Belize: Global Finance Integrity, 2026).

²¹ International IDEA, 2015, 1.

Regarding political finance, the concept is that the legal registration of political parties should conceptually facilitate the application and monitoring of political finance regulations, as legal entities must abide by applicable laws or face sanctions. However, not all states, require the legal registration of political parties. The United Kingdom did not do so until 2020 as part of an electoral reform process. Belize, as most states in the Caribbean, currently does not require political party registration.

On Options for Regulation and Compliance

If states are genuinely interested in improving the quality of democracy and people's livelihoods, lessons from across the globe illustrate that there must be more efforts to reign in the ugly underbelly of political financing. Political parties and politicians seldom voluntarily self-regulate, or if some do, others do not. Therefore, levelling the political playing field and demanding transparency from political actors are the key goals of regulation of money in politics. So, how do states do this?

Understanding that political contexts differ widely, there is general agreement on three core factors that must determine how money affects a state's performance on fairness and equity in political participation. These are:

1. ***The existence of strong political finance regulations.***
2. ***The effectiveness of regulatory enforcement framework.***
3. ***The practical relevance of the regulations and frameworks to particular national contexts.***

While these hold for all forms of political finance, international experience illustrates that the campaign financing component presents the most thorny and colossal challenge. As International IDEA contends:

*There is an urgent need to better regulate the origin and destination of funds, and to do so in a transparent manner. Well-designed political finance regulations that are enforceable and anchored in their country's context play a vital role in any efforts to ensure that money is a positive force in politics.*²²

There are several global data bases and studies on state-level regulations of political finance. One of the most comprehensive is the Political Finance Database of International IDEA, last updated in 2023, which includes regulatory data on 181 states based on 58 questions in four broad categories:²³

1. ***Bans and Limits on Private Income (Contributions),***
2. ***Public Funding,***
3. ***Regulations on Spending,***
4. ***Reporting, Oversight and Sanctions.***

Almost all the 181 states surveyed have some degree of these political finance regulation, even if buried in election oversight laws. However, some states have no dedicated policy or legislation at all.²⁴

Since the most recent wave of democratization around the world (post-1960s), the menu of options for attempting to regulate political finance is long, detailed and, sometimes, idealistic. The 58 questions from the International IDEA Political Finance Database each deal with further sub-categories of regulation and of enforcement.

Which approach and set of tools a state adapts is based on a variety of criteria, mostly related to societal context, including a state's political history, system and culture, length of time since democratization and level of development.²⁵ Yet it is important to outline and define the broad options and tools available for regulating political finance. In this regard, Table 1 summarizes the broad regulatory or reform choices available to countries based on an adaptation of the four categories used by the International IDEA Political Finance Database with one addition relevant to Belize: the registration of political parties.

²² https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/question?question_id=9194&database_theme=302

²³ International IDEA, "Political Finance Reforms: How to respond to today's policy challenges," (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2020).

²⁴ <https://aceproject.org/main/english/pc/pcc.htm>.

²⁵ https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/question?question_id=9194&database_theme=302

TABLE 1**Core Options for Regulating Political Finance**

APPROACH	SUMMARY
Registration of Political Parties	Policies or legislation that require political parties to officially apply for registration and where registration is necessary for participation in elections. Regulations for registered parties include reporting on finances and leadership. Benefits of registration and sanctions for non-compliance are usually detailed.
Bans and Limits on Private Contributions (Money, goods, property or services)	Regulations that restrict who is allowed to contribute to political parties or candidates and the amount that a donor can contribute with or without disclosure. These regulations are designed to prevent undesirable actors from unduly influencing the political sphere.
Regulations on Spending by Political Parties, Candidates and Third parties	Rules on the amount and type of expenditure political parties, candidates and others can make. These rules seek to curb undesirable spending, to decrease the advantage of those with access to significant resources, and to reduce overall spending on election campaigns.
Public Funding and Public Support	The provision of direct and indirect public funding to political parties and candidates. Such measures can counteract the negative influence of private money in politics, help to strengthen the capacity of smaller political parties and help level the electoral playing field.
Reporting, Disclosure, Oversight and Sanctions	The legal requirements for financial reporting, oversight of political finance regulations and available sanctions. Without effective disclosure and monitoring, transparency cannot be achieved, and it is unlikely that political actors will respect rules such as contribution bans and spending limits.

Sources: https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/question?question_id=9194&database_theme=302

On Options for Setting Limitations

For states developing or reforming political finance regulations, one of the more challenging and complicated decisions is what limits to set on contributions and/or on spending, if any at all. There is a wide range of approaches across states that span from the arbitrary to the extremely formulaic. The approach that a state selects or adapts depends on a variety of contextual variables, including political systems, political culture and level of development.

On limitations on contributions from donors, the Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) Project comparative study summarizes that these “may be calculated by a variety of formulae. They may be in the form of a sum of money; they may be calculated as a percentage of the donor’s income or assets; or they may be related to a yardstick such as the statutory minimum wage or to the average wage. Such yardsticks are useful in countries with high rates of inflation.”²⁶

Because contributions can come from individuals, companies or non-state actors and may be domestic or foreign, there can be limits on some or all these sources. Then there can be limitations on how much can be donated to political parties, to candidates or to third parties (for example, a union that campaigns for a political party). Also, if the donations are to parties, there can be different limits depending on whether the funds are to be used for campaigning or non-campaign needs (basic party operations).

On the spending side of the political finance equation, the limitations options are also many. Expenditure limitations can be placed on political parties, on candidates and on third parties. A common approach on establishing spending limitations for political parties and candidates is to establish a baseline determined by the spending experience from recent elections and then to adjust that limit to inflation. Some states, such as the United Kingdom, establish a fixed upper spending limit per constituency adjusted for the number of voters.

Other limitation choices that states may choose are whether every contribution and every expenditure must be disclosed, if disclosure is only for certain types of donors or if disclosure is triggered after a specified contribution value. There is also the choice on whether a limitation on contribution or spending is applicable all year round or just during specified campaign periods. In short, limitations on political finance can get complex very quickly.

On Evasion Challenges

While the primary objectives of political finance regulation are to increase transparency and accountability, to mitigate corruption and promote fair and broad political participation, compliance is a universal challenge. The literature indicates that evasion challenges can plague almost every state that has political finance regulation. Political parties and politicians who see politics as a profession can find creative ways around regulations, however comprehensive. The search for such potential loopholes can begin even when regulations are being drafted or reformed. The plugging of loopholes through additional reforms can lead to reform fatigue.

Apart from loopholes, the problem of effective enforcement is also a common cause of evasion. As the ACE Project quotes, “Enforcement demands a strong authority endowed with sufficient legal powers to supervise, verify, investigate and if necessary, institute legal proceedings. Anything less is a formula for failure.”²⁷ Effective enforcement also requires the punishment of evasion and of violations of existing regulations. Impunity or the normalization of non-compliance can lead to lack of trust in the entire political finance regulation framework.

These and other challenges that face the implementation of political finance regulation are not shared to generate despondency. On the contrary, acknowledging them helps to inform the drafting of regulations and the construction of regulatory frameworks. The most important universal lesson from the experience of attempts to regulate political finance is that the problems created by unbridled money in politics demand that the attempts be made and improved over time.

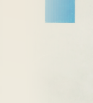
²⁶ ACE Project. <https://aceproject.org/main/english/pc/pcc.htm>

²⁷ ACE Project quote of Khayyam Paltiel, *Party Candidate and Election Finance*, 1976.

imagine
the possibilities...



UDP 2008



2008
AGENDA



 **Election '98** 

THE
UNITED DEMOCRATIC
PARTY
MANIFESTO

ANNEX - I
"THE RECORD"
(1979 - 1998)

**BUILDING
ON SUCCESS**

PUP MANIFESTO
1993 / 1998

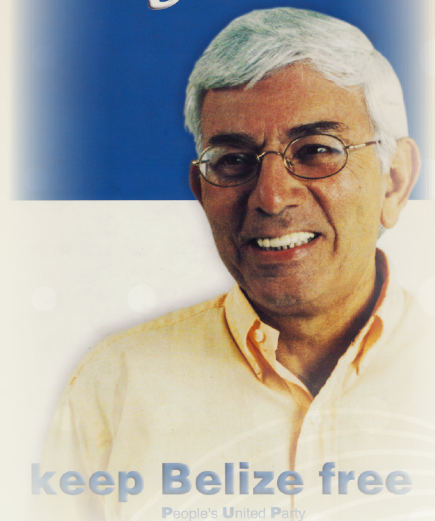


**SET BELIZE
FREE**



Manifesto of the People's United Party 1998-2003

go **BELIZE**
go **PUP**



CHAPTER 3

POLITICAL FINANCING 501:
MONEY IN BELIZEAN POLITICS

POLITICAL FINANCING 501: MONEY IN BELIZEAN POLITICS

Apart from banning voter bribery in Belize, there are no bans or limits on donations, no regulations on spending, no allowance for public funding, no requirements for disclosures, no registration of political parties and, therefore, no special mechanisms for oversight and sanctions.

THIS chapter focuses on political financing in the context of Belize's young democracy. After summarizing the relevant features of Belize's parliamentary democracy and institutions, it discusses the growth of money in Belizean politics since independence in 1981, outlines the lack of regulation, and explores key implications for Belizean society.

A Mixed Record on Democracy

Belize compares well globally in measures of formal democracy. Since its independence in 1981, there have been ten general elections with seven peaceful changes of government and average voter turnout of just over 75%. Basic civil liberties exist, rule of law is generally respected, civil society and the media operate mostly freely, and political and constitutional reform commissions have been established. Box 1 outlines the key features of Belize's political system.

BOX 1

Belize's Political System in Brief

- *The Westminster parliamentary model was gradually 'transplanted' in Belize by the British in the two decades leading to independence in 1981.*
- *Its features and operations are laid out in a written Constitution—which is largely similar to those of most other Commonwealth Caribbean states.*
- *Three branches of government with an assumption of separation of powers.*
- *King Charles III as titular Head of State represented by a Governor-General.*
- *Bi-cameral National Assembly made up of House of Representatives of 31 elected members and a Senate of 13 appointed members.*
- *Executive led by very powerful prime minister and cabinet of ministers who come from the party with the majority in the House of Representatives.*
- *A Leader of the Opposition, who represents those not in the majority party in the House.*
- *The Opposition party is virtually powerless under the system.*
- *Elections take place at least every five years with first-past-the-post system with the 31 constituencies, having an average of 6763 constituents each (January 2026).*
- *A two-party system, in practice, with parties that have very similar ideologies.*

A review of studies and reform commission reports on democratic governance in Belize²⁸, indicate that a short list of concerns about democracy in Belize would include:

- ☞ ***Excessive centralization of powers in the prime minister, the cabinet.***
- ☞ ***A mostly rubber-stamp legislature.***
- ☞ ***Lack of effective oversight and checks on the executive by the legislature.***
- ☞ ***A 'winners take all' electoral system and marginalization of alternative voices.***
- ☞ ***High levels of political corruption (elected and public officials).***
- ☞ ***Deeply entrenched political clientelism and patronage.***
- ☞ ***Lack of trust in politicians and political institutions.***
- ☞ ***Some instances of human rights violations.***
- ☞ ***Still having the British monarch as Head of State.***
- ☞ ***Limited social and economic rights.***
- ☞ ***Lack of regulation of political parties and of campaign financing.***

Some of these concerns may explain why the 2023 AmericasBarometer poll of Belize found that "Though most Belizeans support democracy (57%) in 2023, this percentage represents a continued decline since 2012 and marks a record low in the AmericasBarometer series in the country."²⁹ According to the poll, 'satisfaction with democracy' in Belize also reached record lows in 2023 at 42% since the polling of Belize began in 2004.

Although Belize's political and electoral system allows for multi-party participation, in practice it has been a two-party dominant system since independence. Since 1973, the two major parties are the People's United Party (PUP) and the United Democratic Party (UDP). Alternative parties to the PUP and the UDP have been limited in number and life span and have not, to date, enjoyed notable electoral successes.

Over time, the two major parties have evolved to be very similar in their centrist ideologies and in positions on almost every major policy issue. Both have national reach, and support from all ethnic groups. Since independence, they have split winning the ten general elections equally between them: five for the PUP and five for the UDP. Additionally, the two main parties, have similar levels of popularity when taken on average over these ten elections. Table 2 illustrates this electoral parity.

²⁸See for example, Political Reform Commission Report, 2000 and Vernon, 2022.

²⁹AmericasBarometer, "The Pulse of Democracy in Belize," (Nashville, TN: LAPOP, 2023), 10. <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/belize/AB-BLZ2023-Pulse-of-Democracy-20241217.pdf>.

Table 2
Belize General Elections Results
1984 – 2025

ELECTION YEAR	WINNING PARTY	VOTE SHARE (%)	SEAT SHARE	TURNOUT (%)
1984	UDP	53.3/43.3	21-7	74.9
1989	PUP	50.0/48.2	15-13	72.6
1993	UDP	48.7/51.2	16-13	71.6
1998	PUP	59.3/39.1	26-3	90.1
2003	PUP	52.7/45.2	22-7	79.3
2008	UDP	56.3/40.1	25-6	75.3
2012	UDP	50.4/47.5	17-14	74.0
2015	UDP	50.0/47.3	19-12	72.7
2020	PUP	58.8/38.3	26-5	81.9
2025	PUP	66.5/28.9	26-5	64.9

Source: Elections and Boundaries Department, Belize. <https://elections.gov.bz>

Importantly, both the PUP and UDP have developed extensive clientelist operations at the national and constituency levels. Apart from traditional campaign expenses, a significant proportion of the demand for political financing comes from these year-round clientelist operations. The two main political parties have operated over these ten general elections and numerous local government elections with no legal requirements to register nor to account for their political financing.

A Ban Only on Voter Bribery

Indeed, the data on Belize from the International IDEA Political Finance Database show that, of the 58 categories of political finance regulation assessed, Belize has no regulatory regime on 57 of them. The sole exception is the legal ban on voter bribery.³⁰

Sections 32 - 36 of the Belize Representation of the People Act (ROPA) makes voter bribery illegal while allowing gifts with a monetary value under \$20.³¹ If convicted, politicians and voters alike can face fines of up to \$500, imprisonment of up to one year and bans from running for office or voting.

However, this illegal activity is rampant in Belize and practiced increasingly in the open. Every report by international election observation missions to Belize since 1998 and every political reform process have identified allegations of vote buying and vote selling, especially around election periods. While the practice is widespread, there have only been a handful of cases tried, and no party, politician nor voter has ever been successfully prosecuted in Belize under the anti-voter bribery regulations in the ROPA.³²

³⁰ International IDEA, "Political Finance Database", (Stockholm, International IDEA, 2023). https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/question-country?question_id=9224&country=23&database_theme=302

³¹ Government of Belize, Representation of the People's Act, ed. Government of Belize, 2000 ed., Chapter 9, (Belmopan: Government of Belize, 2000), Section 32-36.

³² Vernon, 2022, 38-40 and 184.

Political Financing without Regulation

Belize then fails on 57 categories of the 58 of political finance regulation in the Political Finance Database because it has no dedicated political finance policy nor legislation. Apart from banning voter bribery, there are no bans or limits on donations, no regulations on spending, no allowance for public funding, no requirements for disclosures, no registration of political parties and no mechanisms for oversight and sanctions. This is despite the reality that, since independence, political financing has grown exponentially.

In the absence of disclosure regulations, official data on the sources and amounts of political finance in Belize do not exist. As for most countries, the sources, can be broken down into three broad categories: (a) personal funds of politicians, (b) private donations and (c) public resources. There are strong indications that the use of personal funding has decreased significantly since independence.³³ This has transpired at the same time the quantum of private donations made and public funds used have both rapidly expanded. Indeed, the conventional perception among citizens is that politicians gain personal wealth from politics in the Belize – not lose money.

Opinion polling on political financing is extremely sparse in Belize, but one 2008 poll of voting age adults showed that most perceive that private sources dominate. Some 33.3 per cent believed that political parties get money to finance their campaigns from 'big business', compared to 24.5 per cent who said 'the government budget', 18.1 per cent who said 'illegal sources', and 12.1 per cent who said 'special interest groups'.³⁴

Unbridled Private Funding

Even as private funding is believed to make up the largest portion of political financing in Belize, there is no way to know the financial value of private donations nor the trends over time. However, it is generally accepted that a few very wealthy individuals and businesses and hundreds of smaller donors, national and foreign, now provide the bulk of the funds for political operations and influence.

These private sources are both national and foreign and, as the SPEAR poll indicated, some believe that a portion comes from individual or groups involved illegal activities, such as drug trafficking, smuggling in goods and tax evasion.

One can only make limited estimates on the monetary value of private or public resources expended for political activities in Belize, based on rough approximations of (a) the average cost of an election campaign per constituency and (b) the average cost of operating political operations per constituency, i.e., political clinics. A small number of articles and studies have extrapolated such political costs based on insights from politicians and citizens themselves.

An interview-based study by Griner and Zovatto estimated that in 2005, the average cost of a traditional constituency campaign in Belize increased from \$50,000 at independence to over \$900,000 in some constituencies.³⁵

Before the 2008 general election, then Leader of the Opposition, Dean Barrow was asked about campaign funds donated to the UDP (as a party). He stated:

*We have not received any donation over \$200,000. But I will concede that we are receiving more donations than we have ever had. In other words, everybody is coming with their widow's mite. Everybody is coming with their 20,000, and their 40,000, and their 50,000, and their 5,000, and it's adding up. And while we are not talking about \$5 million or \$4 million, I think that we're going to be talking in the end about \$3 million.*³⁶

³³ In the Vernon (2022) study, most politicians informed that use of personal funds for political financing has decreased significantly since the 1990s.

³⁴ Society for the Promotion of Education and Research, SPEAR Pre-Election Poll 2008 (Belize: Society for the Promotion of Education and Research, 2008), 10.

³⁵ Stephen Griner and Daniel Zovatto, eds., *From Grassroots to The Airwaves: Paying for Political Parties and Campaigns in the Caribbean*, OAS Inter-American Forum on Political Parties (Washington, DC: Organisation of American States, 2005), 13.

³⁶ Election Fever: Amandala Interviews Opposition Leader Dean Barrow, Amandala, 25 January 2008, Belize City, Belize. <https://amandala.com.bz/news/election-fever-amandala-interviews-opposition-leader-dean-barrow/>

In his 2022 study of political clientelism in Belize, Vernon noted that by 2008, a few politicians were reporting that their constituency campaigns were costing as much as \$1,000,000.³⁷ He also noted that:

When asked what a politician actually expends per vote they received in the course of an average constituency campaign, responses from active politicians ranged from \$200-\$400. These estimates would amount to some \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 per constituency if an average of 2,500 registered voters or around half of the average total in a constituency, at the time, is employed.³⁸

By the elections of 2020 and 2025, it is likely that the costs of even more constituency campaigns were above this range. Even at \$500,000 per constituency per campaign, and if we assume that both major parties contest each of the 31 constituencies, the Vernon numbers would mean that at least \$31,000,000 (\$500,000 x 31 x 2) would be spent on campaigns nationally in an election year.

Although a portion of political financing is used by politicians for campaigning (for example, advertising and operational costs such as paying campaign workers), Vernon found that the costs of handouts to constituents by politicians is the largest proportion of political expenditure. These costs are incurred year-round whether there it is an election or not.

Using conservative estimates provided by politicians for a non-election year, Vernon suggested that the cost per constituency per year was at least \$180,000 in 2013. Assuming that both major political parties have political clinics operational in all constituencies, the total annual expenditures would have been at least \$11,160,000 per year (31 constituencies x 2 x \$180,000) in a non-election year. During an election year, the expenditure is a much larger number.

Based on Vernon's rough estimates, a total of over \$75 million could be expended in political financing in Belize over a five-year election cycle: \$31,000,000 in an election year and \$44,640,000 in the four non-election years.

The Paradox of Public Funding

In Belize, there are no political finance laws or policies that allow for the direct public financing of campaigns of political parties or politicians. No portion of the national budget is reserved for disbursement specifically for supporting political party activities or for supporting election campaigns for political parties or political candidates.

This lack of official public support in Belize extends to media access and to the use of public spaces. After divesting of state-owned radio in 1998, the state does not own any media and there are no laws that provide for equal access to privately-owned media to political parties and candidates. As such access to the media in Belize is solely 'pay to play'.

³⁷Vernon, 2022, 83-89

³⁸ Ibid, 84.

Importantly, however, the Belize case illustrates that parties in power and elected politicians have and can access state resources to influence or to attempt to influence electoral outcomes. The broad forms through which this can unfold can be broken into two: constituency-targeted public funds provided by the state and other public resources and public services.

- 1 **Constituency-targeted public funds** includes the various types of budgeted public monies that individual politicians can either allocate directly at the constituency level, or monies over which they can exercise indirect power to influence allocation. The current 'official' mechanisms include:

a) *Constituency Support:*

This category of public funding has been in existence from the pre-independence period, and was formally called the 'constituency vote'. These are funds provided annually to each elected representative to, ostensibly, support the basic operations of a constituency office to allow for interaction with constituents. However, these funds quickly became the anchor money for 'assisting' constituents directly.

The total annual amount allocated to this category of funding has increased significantly over time. In 1991, it was \$1.11 million.³⁹ In 2011, it was \$1.57 million. In 2026, it is \$2.57 million⁴⁰ – or an average of \$82,838 per constituency per year – paid directly to 31 elected representatives on a monthly basis. This fund is managed by the Office of the Prime Minister.

b) *Constituency Development Funds:*

While there has been sporadic and one-off disbursements of public funds to elected representatives over time for specific community projects, it was not until October 2021 that government institutionalised the practice and made it a fixture of the national budget.⁴¹ In short, elected representatives are given extensive control over the use of funds allocated to their constituencies based, roughly, on the number of constituencies per electoral division.

The concept is that the funds should be used for community development projects at the constituency level. In the 2026/2027 budget, \$6.2 million⁴² was allocated to this Fund, or an average of \$196,774.2 per constituency per year or \$16,397.85 per month. Concerns about discrepancies in distribution and in accountability have been raised by several civil society groups and the media.

c) *Seasonal Assistance Funds:*

These are provided by governing parties, on occasions, to elected representatives to allow for the provisions of gifts and handouts, for example, around Christmas, Easter and the beginning of the school year. These tend to be special and unpredictable announcements, and are more common before and during election campaign periods. Depending on the whims of the government in power, some of these funds may be provided to unelected party candidates.⁴³

³⁹Vernon, 2022, 145 - 148.

⁴⁰Estimates of Revenues and Expenditures, 2026 – 2027, 70.

⁴¹How is \$6 million in Constituency Funds Distributed?, C5 News, 6 January 2026, Belize City, Belize. <https://www.greaterbelize.com/how-is-6-million-in-constituency-funds-allocated/>

⁴²Estimates of Revenues and Expenditures, 2026 – 2027, 70.

⁴³Vernon, 2022, 86-87.

An example of seasonal political funds is the programme dubbed 'Christmas Cheer' where both major political parties seek to gain favour with the electorate through the provision of free turkeys, hams and other Christmas goodies. Between 2013 and 2019 the UDP governments funded some \$9 million on their Christmas Cheers, almost all of it coming from the Petrocaribe loan programme (public funds) provided by Venezuela. In 2024 the PUP government expended \$2 million in Christmas Cheers from public funds, divided among elected representatives.⁴⁴

- 2 Other public resources and services** include the discretionary use or abuse of public material resources or public services as partisan campaign inducements. In practice, a party in power, well-placed ministers and political operators often seek to manipulate public resources and services in government ministries and statutory bodies towards individual constituents and/or to support constituency campaigns. Over the past decade, some of these efforts at manipulation have been formalised to varying extents, but often they are less-structured and more nebulous.

The catch is that the distribution (who gets what) is generally determined by elected representatives. Key examples of the more formal targeting and allocation of other public material resources or public services include:

a) Food Assistance:

Over time, there have been various food support programmes to assist needy citizens. In 2026, the programme is called Grocery and Food Assistance, and is allocated \$3.5 million in the annual budget.⁴⁵

b) Educational Resources:

The education budget is by far the largest portion of the national budget in Belize (over 20 per cent) and has the largest pot of resources available for individual grants. For example, \$13 million is allocated for education grants in the 2026 budget.⁴⁶

c) Land:

State-owned land has for long been one of the most valuable assets with which politicians seek to assist constituents and wield political influence. Over the past seven years, 'land clinics', often personally hosted by the Minister of Natural Resources and ministry staff, have been visiting constituencies to receive land applications and help sort out delays and conflicts.

Other public resources and services include housing, gravel, land fill, construction materials, immigration services and duty exemptions.

Additionally, the resources of certain statutory bodies, which are all majority controlled by the government in power, can be directed to benefit the constituents of particular ministers. Even the emergency funds that come after natural disasters, such as hurricanes, are not immune from this practice. For example, after Hurricane Lisa hit Belize in November 2022, the then government announced that public funds for immediate relief would be distributed directly through constituency representatives.⁴⁷

⁴⁴<https://timecome.info/free-turkey-and-ham-is-it-but-a-scam/>

⁴⁵Estimates of Revenues and Expenditures, 2026 – 2027.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷'What's Behind Government's Relief Plan', C7 News, 4 November 2021, Belize City, Belize. <https://www.7newsbelize.com/sstory.php?nid=64002>.

In short, public funds, formal or informal, direct or indirect, are already used as political finance in Belize. Once politicians call the shots of 'who gets what' it is currently near impossible to mitigate partisan or transactional motivations. When in opposition, both major political parties accuse the party in power of abusing public funds and other resources for partisan campaigning purposes.⁴⁸ A representative example of this is the following statement made in 2015 by former PUP Leader of the Opposition, Francis Fonseca, on the alleged abuse by the then UDP government of public funds for campaigning:

I think it's a dangerous road we are traveling...there seems to be no line between the public treasury and the United Democratic Party treasury. Election campaigns are run with public funds completely. On Election Day people are getting letters for scholarships, people are get land papers. So, people will say that's been happening for a long time and that may be fair but... the scale and level and depth of it is unprecedented, in my view, and I think we all have to take a collective pause and say is this the direction we want to go? As I said, it has to be a bipartisan approach to these matters.⁴⁹

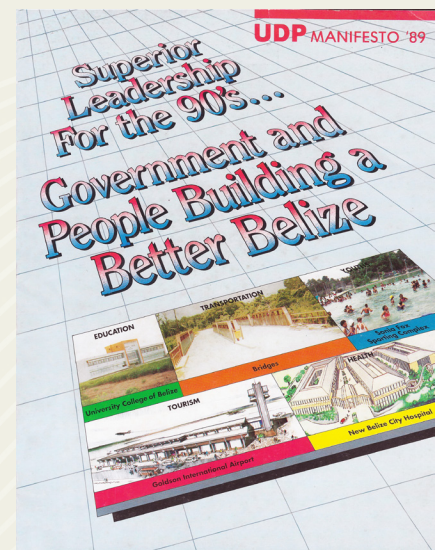
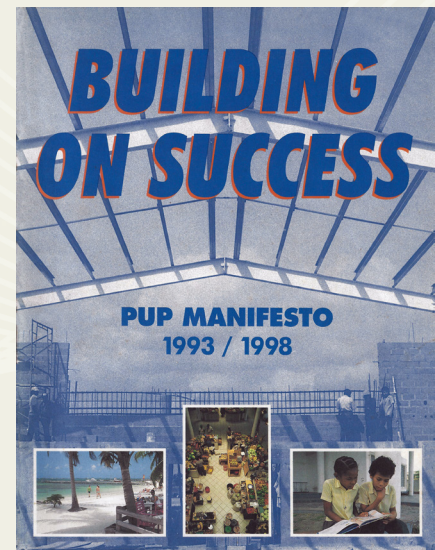
When in opposition, the UDP has made similar accusations. However, neither major political party has acted to address the issue through policy and legislation.

Proposals and Broken Promises

As noted, the absence of dedicated political finance regulation in Belize is not for lack of proposals and promises. Sustained advocacy on political finance regulation can be traced back to the civil society political reform campaign led by Society for the Promotion of Education and Research (SPEAR) between 1994 and 2000.⁵⁰ Campaign finance regulation was a central pillar of SPEAR's reform proposals and was a key recommendation of the PRC in 2000.

Since 2000, advocacy and proposals for campaign finance regulation have been largely sporadic and not sustained. Calls for regulation sprung up around several scandals in the lead up to the 2008 general election but tapered off thereafter for more than a decade. It was not until the lead up to the 2020 general election that the issue got more national attention again. Of note is that two draft bills from civil society were proposed in 2020.⁵¹ The issue was addressed during the PCC constitutional review process, and the PCC made recommendations on regulating campaign finance in its 2025 Report.⁵²

Starting with the 1998 election, both of Belize's major political parties, the PUP and the UDP made manifesto promises to take actions related to regulating political financing. Every single such political party promise has been broken. The trend has been that the opposition party has more detailed proposals on regulating campaign financing, and at times, the governing party makes no mention of the issue at all. Such promises from the two main political parties are generally bolder and more comprehensive before a 'change election' (where the victory of the opposition party leads to a super majority). Table 3 presents a summary of manifesto commitments made by both major political parties before the seven general elections from 1998 to 2025.



⁴⁸See for example, 'PUP, UDP Agree to Discuss Campaign Finance Reform', Amandala, 9 January 2015 <https://amandala.com.bz/news/pup-udp-agree-discuss-campaign-financing-reform/>.

⁴⁹'PUP Urges Campaign Finance Reform', C5 News, 6 January 2015, Belize City, Belize. <https://archive.channel5belize.com/archives/108100>.

⁵⁰Dylan Vernon, "Spear on Target?," in Spitting in the Wind: Lessons in Empowerment for the Caribbean, ed. Suzanne Francis-Brown (Kingston, Jamaica: Commonwealth Foundation and Ian Randle Publishers, 2000).

⁵¹These are assessed in Chapter 5.

⁵²At the time of writing of this Report, the Final Report of the People's Constitution Commission (PCC) was not yet officially released.

Table 3

Election Manifesto Commitments on Political Finance by Belize's Two Major Parties: 1998 - 2025

YEAR & PARTY	COMMITMENT
1998 – PUP Set Belize Free Strike 3	To enact Campaign Finance Legislation to ensure disclosure of financial contributions to political parties and candidates and to limit campaign expenditure.
1998 – UDP Election '98': The United Democratic Party Manifesto (with Annexes 1 and 2)	To enact campaign financing legislation which would ensure transparency and the non-abuse of the funding of the political parties.
2003 – PUP Go Belize, Go PUP	No mention of campaign financing.
2003 – UDP Let's Get it Right	To create a committee with social partners to set and monitor standards for political campaigns to limit the influence of money in deciding the outcome of elections.
2008 – PUP	To a constitutional commission process that would include campaign finance regulation
2008 – UDP Imagine the Possibilities	To passing a law to regulate campaign financing.
2012 – PUP Deliverance for Belize	No mention of campaign financing.
2012 – UDP Always for the People	No mention of campaign financing.
2015 – PUP Power to the People	No mention of campaign financing.
2015 – UDP The Best Is Yet to Come:	No mention of campaign financing.
2020 – PUP Plan Belize	To introduce campaign financing legislation, register political parties and introduce an independent Elections & Boundaries Commission.
2020 – UDP Your Future Matters	Campaign finance reform legislation will be developed and implemented. Fixed dates for general elections.
2025 – PUP Plan Belize 2.0	To the same commitments on campaign finance legislation made in the 2020 Plan Belize
2025 – UDP You Deserve Better	No mention of campaign financing.

Sources: Party manifestos of both major political parties since 1998.

As Table 3 shows both main political parties adopted strong positions on the question of campaign finance for the first time in 1998. The PUP promised that “Campaign financing legislation will be enacted to ensure disclosure of financial contributions to political parties and candidates and to limit campaign expenditure.”⁵³ The UDP called for a process of political reform that would include: “...Campaign Financing Legislation which would ensure transparency and the non-abuse of the funding of the political parties.”⁵⁴ The strong positions taken by both parties were directly influenced by the sustained civil society advocacy before the election.

In 2003, the then opposition UDP promised to create a process to “set up and monitor standards for political campaigns to limit the influence of money deciding the outcome of elections.”⁵⁵ The governing PUP said nothing on the issue in its 2003 manifesto. Before the change election of 2008, both parties promised actions to regulate campaign financing.

After a lull between 2009 and 2019, the issues of regulating political parties and campaign financing entered the national political debate in the lead up to the general election of 2020 and were again prominent in party manifestos – including that of the PUP, which won that election.⁵⁶ In its comprehensive set of commitments on good governance, the PUP PlanBelize Manifesto boldly promised to develop and implement campaign finance regulations, including a pledge to have fixed dates for elections.

In May 2021, during union-led protests over post-covid economic belt-tightening, the issue was included in a list of union demands. The PUP government recommitted to act on its campaign finance regulation manifesto promise. Prime Minister John Briceño, in response to this demand stated in a national address:

*Government supports the unions' request for the enactment of a campaign finance law. This is in line with this administration's Plan Belize Manifesto to return principle and probity to public life. The Government is now in receipt of draft campaign finance reform legislation from both the business community and the Unions and has tasked the Attorney General's Ministry to review the draft legislation and to develop a draft Campaign Finance Regulation Bill by the end of August 2021.*⁵⁷

In a media interview in January 2025 before the March 2025 general election, Prime Minister John Briceño was asked about the delay in his government's promises to enact campaign finance regulation. He responded:

*I think...it's a must. Like I tell everybody, I wish we could have that because then it will ease the burden on me in trying to raise millions of dollars for a campaign, it ends up being quite expensive. It is in effect 31 campaigns because each constituency has their own campaign. So, we want to [introduce] finance legislation...And the time has come to be able to do that and it's something that we need to tackle early at the start of our [next] government.*⁵⁸

No campaign finance regulation bill was presented to the House before the term of office that ended in March 2025. After the 2025 national election, the issue went largely silent once again, keeping with the ‘no action’ trend of the past 30 years. To date, there has been no proposal or Bill from government during the term of office that began in March 2025.

⁵³Set Belize Free – Manifesto of the People's United Party: 1998 – 2003, 13.

⁵⁴Elections '98', UDP Manifesto, 1998, Annex II.

⁵⁵Let's Get this Right, UDP Manifesto, 2003, 28.

⁵⁶See for example, https://archive.channel5belize.com/archives/198649#google_vignette.

⁵⁷Belize Press Office, “National Address by Prime Minister John Briceño, May 12, 2021,” (Belmopan, Belize: Government of Belize, 2021).

⁵⁸PM Says Campaign Finance Laws Unlikely Under Current Administration, Love FM, 25 January 2025, Belize City, Belize. https://lovefm.com/pm-says-campaign-finance-laws-unlikely-under-current-administration/#google_vignette

Driven by Scandals of the Day

Since 1998, public discussion and advocacy on regulating political finance were driven largely by the ‘scandals of the day’ – where a huge story of political corruption breaks out of the cloak of secrecy into the public domain. However, such scandals are best seen as triggers of collected public frustration about political corruption and the impunity of perpetrators.

In 1998, the substantive proposals for campaign finance regulation by both the PUP and UDP were the direct result of widespread expressions of frustration with public corruption, that had built up since independence in 1981. The examples are many, and they occurred under both PUP and UDP governments. They include (a) scandals around the sale of passports through the economic citizenship programmes (began in 1985, ended in 2002), (b) the illegal naturalisation and registration of immigrants (1993)⁵⁹, and various land abuse scandals in the 1990s.⁶⁰ A common thread running through all these corruption scandals was the rapid expansion of political clientelism, including voter bribery.

The manifesto promises in the 2003 and 2008 were driven by multiple scandals and allegations of corruption that transpired during the two-term PUP government of 1998 to 2008. Likely the most significant example of these is the loan-for-favours scandal that surrounded the Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and the Social Security Board (SSB) and that came to light in 2004.⁶¹ This scandal triggered significant public protest, led to two official public investigations, and caused internal PUP strife. In 2008, it was a scandal relating to the ‘Venezuela money’ that saw millions of grant funds being abused by the PUP government just before the election.⁶²

Table 3 also illustrates that the manifestos of both the PUP and UDP in 2012 and 2015 did not make promises on regulating money in politics.⁶³ This presents interesting questions of why? It was a period during which the PUP Opposition was weak. What is known is that organised civil society was in one of its least active phases of advocacy during this period and that public demand for such reforms was negligible and, so, easy to ignore. It also suggests a concerning level of societal acceptance and normalization of the levels of corruption and clientelism in Belize’s practice of democracy.

There is no doubt about the scandal that sparked the renewed public and partisan interest in regulating money in politics in 2020 and that explains the strong manifesto commitments of the UDP and especially the PUP before the 2020 election. This was the Saldivar-Dermen scandal that broke in early 2020 under the then UDP government and deserves some attention for the clear glimpse it gives into the murky and secretive game of money in politics.

The Saldivar – Dermen Scandal

More than most political scandals that have broken since independence, this one may best illustrate how politicians, at great reputational risk, target wealthy, and sometimes shady, private donors for political finance. It also confirms that one of the core motivations for seeking contributions is to meet the continuous demands of clientelist operations at the constituency level.

John Saldivar is a former senior minister in a previous UDP government of Belize and Lev Dermen is a former businessman of US citizenship who was exploring investments in Belize. In brief, Saldivar’s long-fought victory to become the party leader of the UDP in February 2020 lasted only 72 hours. In those few hours, evidence was obtained that confirmed rumours that Saldivar (in 2014) had received large sums of money in several tranches from a US businessman who was in trouble with the law in the US. Saldivar

⁵⁹NGO Consortium, Report on the Granting of Belizean Nationality and Implications for Voter Registration (Belize City: NGO Consortium, 1993).

⁶⁰See for example, Office of the Auditor General, Special Report on the Issuance of National Land Leases And Titles by the Ministry Of Natural Resources and the Environment: September 2007 to February 2008 (Belmopan: Government of Belize, 2009).

⁶¹David Price, Herbert Lord, and Merlene-Baily Martinez, Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Development Finance Corporation (Belize City: Government of Belize, 2008).

⁶²Office of the Auditor General, Special Report on the 2007 Venezuelan Grant Programme (Belmopan: Government of Belize, 2009).

⁶³While the PUP manifesto of 2015 made no mention of the issue, then Party Leader Francis Fonseca did make calls for regulation. See for example, <https://archive.channel5belize.com/archives/108100>.

was fired from cabinet, not for any proof of bribery, but for lying to cabinet that he had received funds from this businessman. Saldivar then narrowly lost his bid to regain the party leadership which he had also been forced to relinquish.⁶⁴

In subsequent statements, Saldivar, who continues to deny all allegations of quid pro quo, contended that the funds were just campaign contributions to assist his constituents. To the extent this is true, those four words 'to assist his constituents' confirm the direct links between political finance and to the aspect of political influence that is political clientelism.⁶⁵

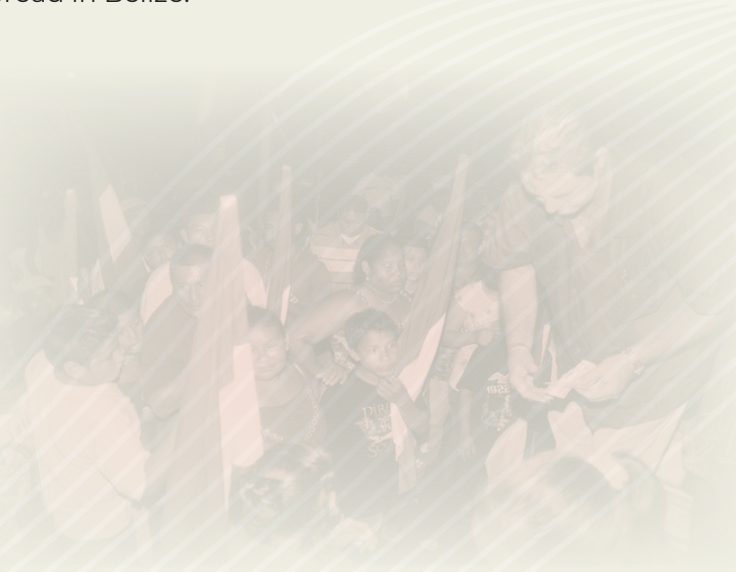
In the absence of regulation of political finance, it is impossible to know if the monies received by Saldivar from Dermen were indeed campaign contributions. If the monies were indeed for campaigning (assisting constituents), Saldivar is right in saying that he did nothing illegal as nothing required him to disclose donations received and in alleging that every politician does the same thing. Yet, the episode also clearly illustrates how easy it is for politicians in Belize to excuse all contributions and other income they receive as campaign contributions – even when such funds can be bribes, payoffs and/or illicit finance.

In November 2020, John Saldivar was publicly designated as a person involved in “significant corruption” by the US State Department. The State Department alleged that “Saldivar accepted bribes for the improper acquisition of Belizean immigration documents and interfered in public processes for his personal benefit during his tenure as a government official.”⁶⁶ Saldivar's US visa, and the visas of his immediate family, were revoked. Apart from the actions taken by his party in 2020 to remove him from cabinet and apart from his gradual loss of constituency support, there has been no court action taken by national authorities in Belize on this case.

Elections for Sale?

Electoral democracy is premised on the principle of free elections in which eligible citizens select their political parties and political representatives in fair political contests without financial inducement. Since at least the 1998 election, the allegations of the buying of elections at the party level, local government level and the constituency level in Belize have become commonplace. These allegations are invariably that one party or politician or another has induced voters using financial, in-kind resources or services bribery. Even as no allegation has yet been proven in the courts, there is strong consensus among political observers that vote-buying and selling are widespread in Belize.

In his 2022 study, Vernon estimated that all politicians of the two major parties and at least one-third of the electorate engages in some form of political clientelism, including vote-buying, vote-selling and patronage.⁶⁷ No election has transpired since 1998 without accusations and counteraccusations of vote-buying. Of note is that in the aftermath of the 2012 election, the then Opposition PUP never formally accepted the results – accusing the governing UDP of buying the election through voter bribery.



⁶⁴See, for example, 'Washakie fraud defendant paid thousands of dollars to man next in line to lead Belize, Utah's Jacob Kingston testifies'. (2020: February 10). Salt Lake Tribune. Salt Lake City, UT; and 'Kingston Testifies Saldivar Texted About and Collected 50K USD'. (2020: February 11). 7 News.

⁶⁵'Saldivar Says He Only Got Campaign Contributions from Lev Dermen', C5 News, 17 September 2021, Belize City, Belize. <https://archive.channel-5belize.com/archives/224138>

⁶⁶<https://2021-2025.state.gov/designation-of-former-belizean-minister-john-birchman-saldivar-for-involvement-in-significant-corruption/>

⁶⁷Vernon, 2022: 58-64.

We will never know how many elections at the constituency level, and by extension how many general elections in Belize have been decided by the comparative advantage by one party or candidate to induce voter choices with money or with resources or services of value. Yet, given Belize's small population and given that elections at the constituency level can be won by a few hundred or even just dozens of votes, it is highly probable that constituency elections have turned on the illicit financing of voter-bribery.

The Participation Problem

In Belize, the two main political parties, large business owners and big donors, almost all male, dominate the higher echelons of the national political space, especially where electoral politics is concerned. Conversely, small political parties, independent candidates, women, and poorer and more vulnerable Belizeans have a participation deficit, especially in high-level political decision-making. There is little doubt that access to political financing is also a contributing factor to this phenomenon for Belize.

The political financing dominance by Belize's two main political parties is a key reason why alternative parties or independent politicians have failed so comprehensively to dent the electoral dominance of the PUP and UDP. Candidates of smaller parties and independents who choose to participate, have been unable to compete with the financing machinery of these 'big two' parties.

For example, independent and alternative-party candidates together polled only 2.8 per cent and 2.2 per cent of the vote in the 2008 and 2012 general elections, respectively.⁶⁸ In the most recent elections of 2020 and 2025, the figures were 1.54 per cent and 2.24 per cent respectively. The Party Leader of the People's National Party (PNP), one of the alternative parties, reflected on some of the challenges such parties face in competing against the big two:

*I did not expect that there would have been such demand for handouts. The PNP had resolved not to play that game but actually to try to fight it, to change it. But I was amazed at the actual extent of it. Clearly the culture of handouts was long entrenched by the blue [PUP] and the red [UDP]. The message was "if you got nothing for me, write me off."*⁶⁹

Not surprisingly, the PNP and other small alternative parties have been strong advocates for campaign finance regulation.

The high costs of political financing also have a disincentive and often determining effect on who become candidates of the two major political parties. In Vernon's 2022 book, one politician put it plainly: "Poor people cannot run for elections now. It's too expensive because of the handout game...unless you have a 'padrino' who owns you. It keeps out a lot of good people who want to run, and it makes contesting elections less egalitarian."⁷⁰

Additionally, the high costs of political financing is a key disincentive for women to participate in electoral politics. In the 2008 and 2012 elections Belize had no women elected to parliament, placing it near the very bottom for this indicator of women's representation not only in all of the Commonwealth Caribbean but also worldwide.⁷¹ Between 1981 and 2012 women have made up only 5.6 per cent of all candidates seeking to become area representatives and only 2.9 per cent of all elected representatives.⁷² In 2015, of the 31 representatives in the House only two were women. In 2020 it was four and in 2025 it was three.

⁶⁸ M. Palacio (2011: 176) and Elections and Boundaries Department Elections and Boundaries Department, "General Elections, 2012," (Belize City: Elections and Boundaries Department, 2012). <http://www.elections.gov.bz/modules/wfdownloads/viewcat.php?cid=14.1-6>.

⁶⁹ Interview with Wil Maheia, Leader of the People's National Party (PNP) in Vernon (2002).

⁷⁰ Interview with Juan Vildo Marin in Vernon (2022).

⁷¹ Roberts & Ibitoye John Roberts and Ibukunoluwa Ibitoye, Th Big Divide: the Ten Year Report of Small Island Developing States and the Millennium Development Goals (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2012), 33.

⁷² Debra Lewis, A Situational Analysis of Gender and Politics in Belize (Belize City: National Women's Commission and the United Nations Development Programme, 2012), 52.

The following assessment made in 2012 by Debra Lewis is still pertinent today”

It [money in politics] also makes it even more difficult to compete . . . women have fewer financial resources, less access to political donations, and less access to the powerful (and sometimes corrupt) networks that fuel political campaigns. Furthermore, there is some evidence that women have a greater distaste for feeding the system of handouts and patronage, while men more often see it as just part of the reality of political life.⁷³

Links to Corruption

The growth of public corruption in Belize is well-established. Belize’s ranking fell from 46 in 2003 to 109 in 2008 on the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), placing Belize in the category of states with ‘rampant corruption’ on Transparency International’s (TI) scale. Due to lack of information required by TI, Belize was not included in the CPI for the years inclusive of 2009 to 2024 – a sixteen-year period. In the 2026 TI Report, Belize returned to the CPI with data collected for 2025.⁷⁴ For this most recent year, Belize ranked at 104 of 182 states, showing little difference from 2008, indicating that corruption is still a significant problem. This spread and persistence of political corruption have occurred in the same post-1990 period of the expansion of the costs of political finance in Belize.

A spate of national reports and studies has pinpointed political corruption as one of the most challenging governance and development issues facing Belize, and it has been a priority campaign issue in almost every election since independence. In a 2006 SPEAR poll, corruption was ranked as the national issue of highest concern, and even ahead of poverty.

A 2010 AmericasBarometer survey found that only 36 percent of Belizeans believed that the government confronts corruption.⁷⁵ The same survey suggested that this high level of concern about a poor record of fighting corruption helps to explain why 58 per cent of Belizeans said they would support a more ‘authoritarian’ government—more than any of all the 23 regional countries surveyed.

A more recent AmericasBarometer survey on Belize (2024) found that three in five (64%) Belizeans think more than half of all politicians are corrupt.⁷⁶ Over three in four (78%) believe corruption is widespread among public officials. The survey also found that Belizeans who perceive corruption among all politicians are less supportive of and satisfied with democracy.

In relation to political clientelism, Vernon found that the competition for the money and resources needed for handout politics in Belize is directly related to the crisis of corruption. Such exchanges between politicians and citizens, when they involve public goods, are private gains for both politicians and clients. Politicians gain votes to access or keep political power, and clients gain a wide variety of individualised benefits such as jobs, land or social assistance.

Although there have been hundreds of informal allegations of political corruption in Belize, there have only been a handful of corruption-related court cases and no politician or voter has ever been fined or imprisoned as a result.

Who Benefits? Who Doesn’t?

The overlaps between political financing and public corruption are simultaneously straightforward and murky. They feed each other. The overlap is directly related to where the money, the resources and the services that politicians need to campaign and to engage in clientelism come from. Broadly speaking, there are two inter-related considerations here.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴<https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/belize>

⁷⁵Bell Brandon Bell, “When Do High Levels of Corruption Justify a Military Coup?,” AmericasBarometer Insights 2012 no. 79 (2012). <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/insights/IO879en.pdf>:1-2.

⁷⁶AmericasBarometer (2024: 14).

Firstly, when private donations are used for campaigning and clientelist inducements, there are inevitably opportunities for private gains for the politicians and for their donors – who get ‘returns on their investment’ through such means as favourable legislation, tax write offs, fee waivers, bloated contracts and passports. In the process, needed state resources and public revenues are lost. The long-term aggregate corruption impact of hundreds of donors getting special favours from government is likely incalculable.

Box 2, titled ‘The Ashcroft Effect’⁷⁷, illustrates some of the links between political finance and political influence in Belize in the case of one of Belize’s largest contributors of political finance.

BOX 2

The Ashcroft Effect⁷⁸

Few in Belize would disagree with the statement that, “The influence on the political parties and governments of Belize by the British billionaire Lord Michael Ashcroft, former Deputy Chairman of the British Conservative Party, has been inordinate.”

⁷⁹Ashcroft’s donations to both the PUP and UDP and some of their candidates since the late 1980s have brought him policy influence. For example, the draft of the International Business Companies Act, which exempted Ashcroft’s companies from various taxes for 30 years, was prepared by Ashcroft’s lawyers in 1990. Ashcroft’s companies have likely influenced the development of several other pieces of legislation including the Off-shore Banking Act and the Telecommunications Act.

After negotiating a lucrative deal with the government in 1992 to purchase a majority share in the then Belize Telecommunication Limited (BTL), Ashcroft was also able to secure additional tax benefits, such as the controversial tax accommodation agreement granted by the PUP government of 2003-2008. This guaranteed Ashcroft’s telecommunication company 15 per cent minimum profits before business taxes were triggered.⁸⁰ Of note is that Ashcroft was appointed to Belize’s representative to the United Nations for a period after the PUP’s major election victory in 1998.

It was largely such extensive influence on Belize’s policy decisions procured by Ashcroft that led Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas to conclude that, “No single person has been more assiduous in fighting for the fiscal concessions that have contributed to the failures of the growth model as well as leading to an oligopolistic banking system.”⁸¹

Ashcroft campaign donations in Belize have transpired in the context of Belize’s unregulated political finance framework. However, Ashcroft has shown that he does make campaign contributions in countries that require public disclosures. For example, in 2004, he made a US\$1 million donation to the Liberal Party in Australia, where disclosure by political parties is mandatory.⁸²

⁷⁸Adapted with permission of the author from Political Clientelism and Democracy in Belize, pg. 152.

⁷⁹Gibson and Palacio, Belizean Strategic Culture, 20.

⁸⁰“Lord Ashcroft of Belize facing eviction as country turns on him,” The Observer, November 1, 2009.

⁸¹Victor Bulmer-Thomas and Barbara Bulmer-Thomas, The Economic History of Belize: From 17th Century to Post-Independence (Benque Viejo Del Carmen: Cubola, 2012), 66.

⁸²“Ashcroft Donates US\$1 Million to Australian Party”, C5 News, 31 January 2006, Belize City, Belize. <https://archive.channel5belize.com/archives/9960>.

Of course, the term ‘Ashcroft Effect’ does not refer to only to the political financing impact of Lord Ashcroft and to other big donors.. It was coined by Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas to refer to percentage of GDP that is lost to Belizeans due to under taxation and to profits being sent abroad. For example, the Bulmer-Thomases found that in 2005 public revenue was nearly 30 per cent (\$140,000,000) below what could have been expected and that this was double the entire education budget in that year.⁸³ They also calculated that Gross National Income (GNI) (which adjusts GNP to include income received and paid abroad) decreased as a ratio of GDP between 1981 and 2010 to 10 per cent — meaning that over 10 per cent of GDP did not accrue to Belizeans.

Secondly, incumbent politicians find creative, and often illegal ways, to tap into public resources and services for use in campaigns and for clientelist transactions – sometimes passing some to their constituents and keeping some for themselves and their inner circles. This is one of the primary reasons that political finance regulation is not naturally attractive to most politicians.

Lack of regulation contributes to accountability and transparency challenges that are endemic to political financing in Belize. Politicians, donors and constituents who do benefit are all incentivised to keep the transactions secret, to avoid paper trails and to ensure that the money pipelines remain open. Where some accountability systems and procedures do exist – such as voter bribery laws, audit requirements and integrity commissions – they are often either weak or not effectively applied.⁸⁴ It is unlikely that most politicians support the shining of any light on such transactions and/or making them publicly available. It has also been argued that unregulated political finance plays a significant role in promoting the acceptance of corruption among the wider public. This is certainly the case with political handouts and some aspects of bribery. In a context of high poverty and inequality and unlevel playing fields, some citizens do get assisted and/or get what they want more quickly. As such, the clear links to corruption are sometimes justified as ‘getting help’ and often ignored.

Yet voters are generally aware that a dirty game is being played and have decreasing genuine respect for their politician patrons. Many know or believe that their politicians are corrupt and enriching themselves, and they use this as an excuse for playing the game themselves.⁸⁵

The core concern is that when more public funds and services do go through the politicians, the public institutions that exist for these purposes and that have built in accountability procedures and merit-based approaches are side tracked and further weakened – and even more of public resource distribution become politicised.

A Deficit of Trust

Public trust in political leadership and in political institutions is essential for a healthy democracy. It is well-proven that weak levels of political trust generally have a direct relationship to decreasing interest in political engagement, including participation in elections, and to disillusionment about democracy.

Studies and polls on trust in public institutions in Belize are rare. However, it is one of the variables that is followed by the AmericasBarometers poll. The 2023 poll found that there is significant lack of public trust (below 50%) in all seven public institutions included, except for the Belize Defence Force (BDF), which is trusted by 62% of those polled and the High Court, which is trusted by 50%.⁸⁶ See Figure 2.

The poll showed that Belizeans have the least amount of trust in political parties, with only 24% expressing confidence. This complements the poll’s finding that political parties are the most corrupt institution in Belize. The (Office of) the Prime Minister was trusted by only 32%, local government by 47%, and the National Assembly by 48%. The 50% trust rate for the Supreme (now High) Court confirms with other findings that the judiciary is more trusted than the executive and legislative branches of government.

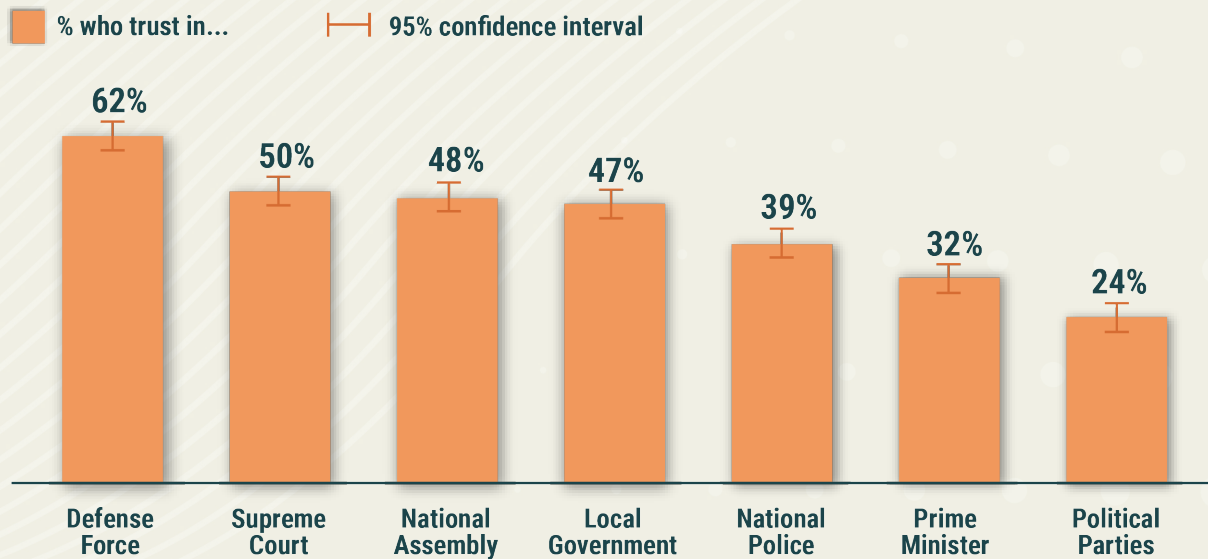
⁸³Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer Thomas (2012: 144-145).

⁸⁴See Integrity, Anti-Corruption Legislative Gap Analysis: An Assessment of Belize’s Legal and Institutional Framework.

⁸⁵See Vernon, 2022, 155 -158.

⁸⁶AmericasBarometer (2024: 4-9).

Figure 2
Level of Trust in Institutions in Belize
2023



Source: AmericasBarometer Belize, 2024.

That 2023 poll also found that most Belizeans have doubts about the integrity of the electoral system. In response to the question on trust in elections, only 42% said they did in 2023, a 10% drop from the first poll in 2012. Importantly, most Belizeans expressed doubts that their votes are counted correctly and that ballots are secret. It is likely that the decades of broken promises on regulating political parties and political finance have added to the trust deficit in Belize.

No political leader in Belize has publicly acknowledged the conventional street wisdom on what is the largest hurdle to regulation. With all its warts, the electoral and other benefits of the ‘no regulation status quo’ seems to be preferred over designing a system that makes everything open, public and accountable. They seem to ‘like it so’.

A Deficit of Political Will

The on-going failure of Belize's governments and leaders to act on partisan promises to introduce any level of political finance regulation begs the question why. Statements made by leaders of the two main political parties indicate that they do understand the negative effects that lack of regulation has for Belizean society and democracy. However, the Belize's leaders from both the UDP and the PUP seem to agree on one excuse: effective regulation in Belize is just too difficult. A brief look at how Belize's current and past prime ministers and party leaders respond to interview questions on campaign finance regulation is telling.

In 2002, when the UDP was in Opposition, then party leader Dean Barrow (prime minister from 2008 to 2020) stated to a local TV station:

The idea of [regulating] campaign financing is like the poor; it will be with us always. And I say that because I don't think it will ever come close to be implemented. And I hope I'm not preaching a council of despair, but I don't see how in a small society really, you're going to be able to develop the monetary infrastructure that can supervise any system that you devise to limit campaign contributions.⁸⁷

Later in 2008, just before the UDP won a landslide election, former prime minister Dean Barrow, was similarly defeatist in an interview with a local newspaper. This was even when his own party's manifesto promised regulation.

I still am to figure out how we can make those laws effective. What's going to stop the big boys from giving the money under the table, how on earth could they ever be caught? But that's just to signal that there'll be loads of practical difficulties in trying to make campaign reform laws effective.⁸⁸

Current prime minister, John Briceño has expressed similar dire sentiments as his predecessor. In that interview in January 2025, just before the general election, Briceño was asked about the failure of the PUP to enact regulation. He responded:

Again, it has to be something that can be workable within the Belizean context because in some countries you have these thick pieces of legislation and it still does not work. Again, the United States is a perfect example whereby...Each candidate for the presidency spent about a billion dollars each. Imagine a billion dollars. So, we have to make sure that is something that is doable within the Belizean context.⁸⁹

In a talk show appearance, Prime Minister Briceño repeated similar realpolitik arguments when asked about the status of regulation in May 2026:

Listen the United States [is] supposed to be the bastion of democracy. Obviously, that's now questionable. They had a primary...yesterday in Texas.. They spent over \$150 million and they have campaign legislation. The presidential elections, each one of them spent about a billion dollars each and they have campaign legislation. Is it working? Obviously not...it's not working. Why have something that's not working? It's not working. Now we have to find something that can work for Belize...⁹⁰

We assume that these pessimistic views of Belize's political leaders are deeply held within the wider leadership of the two main political parties. The position or perception that effective enacting political finance regulation in Belize is too difficult or not feasible represents a major hurdle to action. It is hard to identify another national issue that attracts this level of defeatism before any regulation is even attempted.

No political leader in Belize has publicly acknowledged the conventional street wisdom on what is the largest hurdle to regulation. With all its warts, the electoral and other benefits of the 'no regulation status quo' seems to be preferred over designing a system that makes everything open, public and accountable. They seem to 'like it so'.

⁸⁷Money and Politics in Belize: An Inside Story, C5 News, 27 August 2022, Belize City, Belize. <https://archive.channel5belize.com/archives/16624>

⁸⁸Election Fever: Amandala Interviews Opposition Leader Dean Barrow, Amandala, 25 January 2008, Belize City, Belize. <https://amandala.com.bz/news/election-fever-amandala-interviews-opposition-leader-dean-barrow/>

⁸⁹PM Says Campaign Finance Laws Unlikely Under Current Administration, Love FM, 25 January 2025, Belize City, Belize. https://lovefm.com/pm-says-campaign-finance-laws-unlikely-under-current-administration/#google_vignette

⁹⁰PM Discusses National Issues, Open Your Eye, GBM, 27 May 2026, Belize City, Belize. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvhXRcklpY0&t=1820s>.



CHAPTER 4

CARIBBEAN AND LATIN AMERICAN INSIGHTS

CARIBBEAN AND LATIN AMERICAN INSIGHTS

A defining characteristic of political finance in the Caribbean is legislative fragmentation. Rather than dedicated campaign finance laws, most states rely on scattered constitutional provisions or outdated electoral laws. This...often leaves significant regulatory gaps that hinder transparency and diminishes public trust...

WE now explore the experiences in regulating political finance from jurisdictions in the Americas, where Belize resides geographically. We focus first on the eleven other independent countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), which share similar political history and institutional contexts with Belize. To benefit from a broader regional Americas perspective, three Latin American countries are also selected to explore a wider range of regulatory approaches and outcomes in presidential system of governance: Costa Rica in Central America, México in North America and Colombia in South America.

The comparative discussion is structured around the five core mechanisms identified for regulating the influence of money in politics: (1) bans and limits on contributions; (2) public funding; (3) regulation of spending; (4) reporting, oversight, and sanctions, encompassing transparency and enforcement mechanisms; and (5) the registration/regulation of political parties.

I: THE CARIBBEAN

The Caribbean's record on regulating political finance is highly fragmented: only four Caribbean nations have updated aspects of their archaic election legislations to include campaign finance provisions, and even these address only minimal aspects. With one country (Trinidad and Tobago) currently considering draft legislation, the vast majority (seven others, including Belize) either operate under outdated electoral acts or lack any framework whatsoever. Table 4 provides an overview of the legislative landscape in all 12 independent states of the Commonwealth Caribbean, including Belize, indicating the status of regulating political finance in each state.



Table 4:

Caribbean States by Extent of Political Finance Legislation

STATE	DEDICATED OR SOME SUBSTANTIVE LEGISLATION
Antigua and Barbuda	Yes
The Bahamas	No
Barbados	Some
Belize	No
Dominica	No
Grenada	No
Guyana	Some
Jamaica	Yes
St. Lucia	No
St. Vincent and the Grenadines	No
St. Kitts and Nevis	No
Trinidad and Tobago	Some

Caribbean States with Dedicated or Some Substantive Legislation**Antigua and Barbuda**

Antigua and Barbuda, one of the three countries in the region with some legislation to address political finance, also serves as a critical example of the limited progress in the Caribbean. Antigua and Barbuda's regulations regarding elections are primarily found in the Representation of the People Act 1975⁹¹; however, significant transparency mechanisms regarding campaign finance have been introduced via The Representation of People (Amendment) Act 2001.⁹²

While Antigua and Barbuda stands out in the Caribbean context for its proactive efforts to amend national legislation to incorporate some aspects of formal political finance regulations, significant challenges persist. There is a notable lack of stringent oversight and enforcement, partly due to the electoral commission's limited resources and expertise in financial auditing. The legal framework also exhibits gaps, failing to address aspects like online campaigning and discrepancies between disclosure thresholds for candidates and parties.⁹³ Critically, there are no specific regulations for sanctions against non-compliance, nor are foreign contributions explicitly addressed, leaving a significant loophole for undue influence. Table 5 summarizes the extent of Antigua and Barbuda's political finance regulation.

⁹¹Representation of the People Act, 1975 Antigua and Barbuda, <https://aceproject.org/ero-en/regions/americas/AG/antigua-and-barbuda-the-representation-of-the/view> (accessed November 03,2025)

⁹²Representation of the People (Amendment) Act 2001, Antigua and Barbuda, <https://laws.gov.ag/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/a2001-17.pdf> (accessed November 03,2025)

⁹³Robert A. Emmanuel, "ABEC Chair wants 'complete overhaul' of election financing laws," (2023). <https://antiguaobserver.com/campaign-finance-laws-need-reform-says-abecs-ian-hughes/>; Robert A. Emmanuel, "Campaign finance laws need reform says ABEC's Ian Hughes," (2023).



Table 5
Antigua and Barbuda

Bans & Limits on Private Contributions	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Registered Political Parties
Names and addresses of donors required for contributions exceeding \$25,000 XCD. ⁹⁴ Allows anonymous donations not exceeding \$5,000 XCD. Parties are required to maintain account books for all contributions.	No direct public funding. Parties and individual candidates receive free or subsidized access to media outlets during the campaign period.	Vote-buying is prohibited. Campaign funds cannot be used to reimburse any election-related expense that is forbidden by law.	The Electoral Commission audits financial statements, investigates violations and imposes penalties for noncompliance. Parties must report income for election campaigns. Sanctions include election outcomes being invalidated and five-year bans from political participation.	Yes

Jamaica

Jamaica is one of the states in the Caribbean with relatively comprehensive campaign finance legislation and accompanying regulations, notably the Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 2016⁹⁵, and the Election Campaign Financing Regulations, 2017. This framework seeks to address key areas such as disclosure, state funding, monitoring, enforcement, permissible sources of funding, and expenditure limits.

Jamaica has established a National Election Campaign Fund and sets expenditure limits for campaigns, marking a significant step towards greater financial accountability in its electoral process. Unlike many of its Caribbean counterparts, Jamaica has enshrined provisions for direct public funding to registered political parties. Spending regulations in Jamaica focus on both the prevention of electoral corruption and the maintenance of a level playing field. Table 6 summarizes the extent of Jamaica's political finance regulation.

⁹⁴ On June 15, 2026: \$1 XCD (Eastern Caribbean Dollar) = US\$.37.

⁹⁵ The Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 2016, and the Election Campaign Financing Regulations, 2017, Jamaica, <https://www.ecj.com.jm/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Election-Campaign-Financing-Legislation-Regulations-Revised-July-2017.pdf> (accessed November 03, 2025)



Table 6
Jamaica

Bans & Limits on Private Contributions	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Registering Political Parties
Bans foreign donations. Bans donations from designated entities. Caps on contributions including in-kind. Parties must have campaign bank accounts.	Direct state funding to parties that adhere to regulations, including submission of annual audits. Election expenses reimbursed for all candidates who adhere to regulations.	Bans on spending for bribery of voters Legal expenditure caps for parties & candidates during elections cycle. Other anti-corruption regulations.	Mandatory regular financial disclosure to the Electoral Commission. Disclosure made public after elections State funding can be suspended. False reporting punishable by a fine of up to one million JMD, and/or imprisonment for up to twelve months.	Yes

Despite the existence of legal frameworks designed to safeguard electoral integrity, concerns about enforcement persist in Jamaica. For example, following the 2025 general election, the People's National Party publicly raised allegations of vote buying, voter suppression, and procedural irregularities suggesting that, in practice, protections against electoral malpractice are not consistently upheld.⁹⁶ These post-election complaints underscore broader critiques in the literature that statutory provisions alone are insufficient without credible enforcement, institutional capacity, and timely adjudication mechanisms to deter and address violations effectively.

The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

While Trinidad and Tobago does not yet have an approved campaign finance law, a 2017 draft bill "Representation of the People (Amendment) (No.2) Act, 2020"⁹⁷ indicates a strong push towards greater accountability. Until that Bill is enacted, the current regulatory environment depends on a patchwork of provisions found in other legislation. This legal framework focuses primarily on the financial conduct of individual candidates rather than political parties as corporate entities. Table 7 summarizes the extent of Trinidad and Tobago's political finance regulation.

⁹⁶Jamaica Observer, "PNP concerned over reports of vote buying and voter suppression in General Election," 2025, <https://www.jamaicaobserver.com/2025/09/06/pnp-concerned-reports-vote-buying-voter-suppression-general-election/>.

⁹⁷"Draft Bill" Representation of the People (Amendment) (No.2) Act, 2020., Trinidad and Tobago, <https://www.ttparliament.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/b2020ho79.pdf> (accessed November 03, 2025).

**Table 7****Trinidad and Tobago**

Bans & Limits on Private Contributions ⁹⁸	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Registering Political Parties
De facto ban on anonymous donations to candidates because of required reporting on donors Amount that a candidate can spend on own campaign is limited to \$5000 TTD ⁹⁹ Amount exceeding this must be managed by official election agent.	No direct public funding.	Caps on spending for candidates based on type of election: \$50,000 TTD for general elections and \$25,000 TTD for local elections No spending caps on parties Only the candidate or authorized agent may incur election expenses Ban on spending for voter bribery	Only candidate reporting required. Public access to reporting High Court handles violations. A fine of \$15,000 TTD or six months in prison possible for violations.	No. The 2020 Bill would require parties to register

The proposed 2020 legislation seeks to establish mandatory registration for political parties, enhance financial monitoring, introduce restrictions on funding sources, mandate public disclosure, and establish state funding. It also proposes clear prohibitions on anonymous and overseas donations and outlines restrictions on offering inducements for political favours. If approved, this Bill would significantly strengthen Trinidad and Tobago's regulatory framework, though its prolonged pending status highlights potential partisan hurdles.

The chairman of Trinidad and Tobago's Election and Boundaries Commission has advocated for the need for better campaign finance regulation.¹⁰⁰ Ramkerrysingh highlights the increasing financial demands of political campaigns and the inherent dangers of relying on unregulated private funding. He emphasizes that transparency, through mandatory disclosure of donations, is paramount for voters to understand potential influences on parties and politicians. He also advocates for clear expenditure limits and an independent enforcement mechanism to create a level playing field and maintain public trust in the democratic process.

⁹⁸The Representation of the People Act 1967 CHAPTER 2:01, Trinidad and Tobago, <https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/105225/TTO105225.pdf> (accessed November 03, 2025).

⁹⁹Of as June 15, 2026: \$1TT = US\$15.

¹⁰⁰Mark Ramkerrysingh, "The need for campaign financing vs society's need for transparency" (2018).

The Co-operative Republic of Guyana

The Co-operative Republic of Guyana operates a mixed political system with elements of both presidential and parliamentary models. It also has proportional representation as part of its electoral model. While limited, Guyana's approach to regulating political finance is more substantive than most other states in the Caribbean. The existing Representation of the People Act¹⁰¹ in Guyana has an expenditure ceiling for individual candidates, but it does not regulate party spending, creating a significant loophole and reinforcing the need for broader transparency. Table 8 summarizes the extent of Guyana's political finance regulation.



Table 8

The Co-operative Republic of Guyana

Bans & Limits on Private Contributions	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Registering Political Parties
Cap of \$25,000 GYD ¹⁰² on personal contributions by candidates to their own campaigns	No direct or indirect public funding. No free media access	Formulaic cap for spending by parties: a party may spend no more than \$50,000 GYD multiplied by the number of candidates on their party's list. Cap for candidates of expenditure over \$25,000 GYD. Ban on spending for voter-bribery.	Political parties must report on their election campaign finances. Candidate financial reporting required after election results announced. Reports are made public. Sanctions for non-compliance include fines, imprisonment and bans for seeking elective office.	No

Guyana experienced growing calls for modernized campaign finance laws ahead of its 2025 elections¹⁰³. Concerns were particularly high regarding the potential for corporate and illicit funds to influence the political landscape.

¹⁰¹Representation of the People Act 1964, Guyana, <https://mola.gov.gy/laws/Volume%201%20Cap.%201.01%20-%203.041696984645.pdf> (accessed November 03, 2025)

¹⁰²As of June 15, 2026: \$1GYD = US\$.0048.

¹⁰³Guyana Standard, "Hughes calls for modern campaign financing laws ahead of 2025 elections," (2024).

As official observers of the September 2025 general elections, The Carter Centre's preliminary statement explicitly called for the reform of Guyana's campaign finance system, identifying it as a key factor undermining a level playing field for all political actors. Crucially, while its observers on the ground reported a peaceful election day with no significant procedural irregularities at the polls, the Centre's overarching conclusion underscores that these systemic flaws, particularly the unregulated flow of campaign money, pose a fundamental threat to the democratic process, necessitating comprehensive constitutional and legal reform.¹⁰⁴

Barbados

In Barbados (now a republic), despite an existing electoral act with some minimal provisions for election spending, there is no dedicated campaign finance legislation. Table 9 summarizes the extent of Barbados's political finance regulation.



Table 9
Barbados

Bans & Limits on Private Contributions	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Registering Political Parties
Anonymous donations to candidates prohibited. ¹⁰⁵ Election agents must submit returns detailing all funds received.	Free state media access for candidates. ¹⁰⁶ Tax exemptions on some private donations.	Spending cap by candidates per elector calculated at \$10 BBD ¹⁰⁷ for every registered elector in a constituency. Prohibits spending for voter-bribery. ¹⁰⁸ Candidates' personal expenditures limited to \$50 BBD for election-expenses. Expenditure beyond this must be by an official election agent.	Candidates must report their finances, which are made public. Supervisor of Elections investigates returns. Failure to cooperate with an investigation can lead to fines or imprisonment. Any candidate found personally guilty of a corrupt practice will have their election automatically declared void by an Election Court.	No

¹⁰⁴The Carter Center, "Guyana General Election Preliminary Statement, September 2025," (2025). <https://www.cartercenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/guyana-preliminary-statement-090325.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵Representation of the People Act, 1971 (amended 2007), Barbados, <https://www.barbadoslawcourts.gov.bb/assets/content/pdfs/statutes/RepresentationofthePeopleCAP012.pdf> (accessed November 03,2025)

¹⁰⁶Representation of the People (General Elections) (Allocation of Broadcasting Time) Regulations, 1990, Barbados, <https://www.ebc.gov.bb/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/1Representation-of-the-People-General-Elections-Allocation-of-Broadcasting-Time.pdf> (accessed November 03,2025)

¹⁰⁷As of June 15, 2026: \$1BBD = US\$.50.

¹⁰⁸Election Offences and Controversies, 1969 (amended 1989), Barbados, <https://www.barbadoslawcourts.gov.bb/assets/content/pdfs/statutes/ElectionOffencesandControversiesCAP003.pdf> (accessed November 03,2025)

¹⁰⁹Barbados Today, "Renewed call for campaign finance reform," (2024)..

The limited level of political finance regulation in Barbados has led to urgent calls for reform, with advocates pointing to potential corruption and undue influence by large donors.¹⁰⁹ Civil society groups emphasize the need for comprehensive legislation covering party registration, full disclosure of donations, spending limits, and independent oversight mechanisms.¹¹⁰

Caribbean Countries with No or Minimal Regulations

The Bahamas

The Commonwealth of the Bahamas is a prime example of a small Caribbean state where there is no key legislation governing campaign finance. Table 10 summarizes the extent of Bahamas’s political finance regulation.



Table 10
The Bahamas

Bans & Limits on Private Contributions	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions ¹¹¹	Registration of Political Parties
No regulation of contributions.	No direct or indirect public funding. No equal media time	Regulations for spending for voter bribery. No spending ceilings.	No reporting requirements. Sanctions via Election Court or criminal justice system for voter bribery and corruption. Penalty of nine months' imprisonment and a seven-year disqualification from voting and holding any public office on conviction. ¹¹²	No

The absence of political finance regulations has fuelled persistent calls for reform from the media and civil society such as the Organization for Responsible Governance, citing concerns over lack of transparency, electoral inequality, and corruption.¹¹³ The prevailing sentiment suggests a lack of political priority for such reforms, contributing to public distrust in the electoral process and the influence of undisclosed funds.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰Graham Belle, "CAMPAIGN FINANCING PROTECTING OUR DEMOCRACY," (2024)..
¹¹¹Constitution of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, 1973: <https://www.bahamas.gov.bs/the-constitution-of-the-bahamas> (accessed November 03,2025)
¹¹²Penal Code, 1927: The Bahamas, <https://laws.bahamas.gov.bs/cms/images/LEGISLATION/PRINCIPAL/1873/1873-0015/1873-0015.pdf>(accessed November 03,2025)
¹¹³The Nassau Guardian, "The urgent need for campaign finance reform in The Bahamas," (2024).
¹¹⁴Youri Kemp, "ORG: Campaign finance reform is crucial for Bahamians," (2024). https://www.thenassauguardian.com/business/org-campaign-finance-reform-is-crucial-for-bahamians/article_405401de-707a-11ef-bf23-cf3536edaac7.html..

The Independent States of the Eastern Caribbean

The Republic of Dominica,¹¹⁵ Grenada,¹¹⁶ St. Vincent and the Grenadines,¹¹⁷ St. Kitts and Nevis,¹¹⁸ and St. Lucia all lack political finance regulation.¹¹⁹ Belize is therefore most similar to these states in the region. Table 11 summarizes the lack of regulation status in these five eastern Caribbean states. Generally, there are concerns about unchecked money influencing elections in all these five states, but these have not translated into legislative action.



Table 11
Eastern Caribbean States

Bans & Limits on Private Contributions	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Registering Political Parties
No limits or disclosure laws. Public officers are prohibited from soliciting funds for any political candidate or party.	No public funding. No free media access. Financing of election campaigns is entirely dependent on private resources and voluntary contributions.	Spending on voter bribery prohibited. ¹²⁰ No spending ceilings.	No reporting. Sanctions for voter bribery are handled via the criminal justice system. These include fines, prison time and disqualification from elections.	No

The Sun newspaper in Dominica has expressed concern over the apathy of civil society and opposition parties towards the issue of regulating political finance.¹²¹ International bodies, such as the OAS, have repeatedly called for the regulation of political campaign financing in Grenada.¹²² A significant concern is the heavy reliance on unknown external donors, with reports indicating that a large percentage of election campaigning funds in the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), including Grenada, originate from undisclosed sources, highlighting a severe lack of transparency and potential foreign influence.¹²³

¹¹⁵The Representation of the People Act of 1993, Grenada, <https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/104866/GRD104865.pdf> (accessed November 03, 2025)

¹¹⁶The Public Service Act, Act 27 of 1991, Dominica, <https://www.dominica.gov.dm/laws/1991/act27-1991.pdf> (accessed November 03, 2025)

¹¹⁷The Representation of the People Act 1982 (Amended 2009) St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

¹¹⁸The National Assembly Elections Act 1952 (Revised 2017), St. Kitts and Nevis, https://lawcommission.gov.kn/wp-content/documents/Act17TOC/Ch-02_01-National-Assembly-Elections-Act.pdf (accessed November 03, 2025)

¹¹⁹Cecilia Babb, Political Party and Campaign Finance in Dominica, Unit for the Promotion of Democracy (OAS, 2005)..

¹²⁰The House of Assembly (Elections) Act, No. 14, 1951 (as amended), 1990, Dominica, <https://pdba.georgetown.edu/Electoral/Dominica/elecact.html> (accessed November 03, 2025)

¹²¹The Sun, "Let's, at least, talk about political campaign financing regulations," (2013)..

¹²²Now Grenada, "OAS Mission: Regulate political campaign financing," (2018).

¹²³Now Grenada, "80% of elections campaigning funds in OECS from unknown donors," (2025)..

In its 2025 post-election report, the CARICOM Election Observation Mission highlighted critical deficiencies in St. Vincent and the Grenadines' electoral framework, centring on the absence of campaign finance legislation. Stakeholders explicitly called for laws mandating financial disclosure from political parties, directly questioning the opaque funding sources behind the major parties' "elaborate campaigns" and alleging the misuse of state resources to influence voters.¹²⁴ These findings underscore how the lack of a dedicated regulatory regime fosters a non-transparent political finance environment, which observers link to broader concerns about electoral integrity and public trust.

The case of St. Kitts and Nevis also serves as an archetype of the systemic problem of legislative fragmentation in Caribbean political finance. The jurisdiction operates under a regime defined by complete private funding, an absolute absence of regulation, with no limits on donations or expenditures and no prohibitions on anonymous or foreign contributions, and a total lack of transparency, as parties are not required to disclose or audit their finances.¹²⁵

The legal framework in St. Lucia, as embodied in the Elections Act 2008¹²⁶, provides a traditional approach to political integrity by focusing on conduct-based prohibitions rather than modern disclosure mandates. Both major political parties in St. Lucia have acknowledged the need for regulation, recognizing the imbalance created by unregulated money in politics.¹²⁷ Critiques consistently highlight the pervasive influence of money, corruption, the absence of public funding, and the urgent need for spending caps and independent audits to level the electoral playing field.¹²⁸

A 2025 OAS Election Observation Mission confirmed that St. Lucia's political finance system remains entirely unregulated, as noted in three previous election cycles.¹²⁹ The Mission emphasizes that establishing such regulation is a critical democratic imperative, not just a technicality, as it is essential for creating a level playing field for candidates and enabling transparent, informed voter choice. The Mission identified a new opportunity for reform: the 2024 Parliamentary Constitutional Review Committee. This body is mandated to review past recommendations, including the adoption of a dedicated Campaign Finance Act, creating a potential pathway for St. Lucia to finally implement reforms that promote equity, transparency, and accountability in line with international standards.

Overall, the regulatory vacuum in these five states facilitates unconstrained and opaque private spending, directly undermines electoral integrity, fosters an unlevel playing field, and erodes public trust. Like Belize, they exemplify the critical need for comprehensive political finance reform in the Caribbean to safeguard democratic principles and ensure genuine political equity.

¹²⁴One News SVG, "CARICOM Observers Note Concerns on Voter List, Campaign Financing in SVG Polls," (2025). <https://onenewsstvincent.com/2025/11/30/caricom-observers-note-concerns-on-voter-list-campaign-financing-in-svg-polls/>

¹²⁵OAS, "Electoral Observation Report, General Election, St. Kitts and Nevis 2015," (2015). <https://scm.oas.org/pdfs/2015/CP35128TREPORT.pdf>.

¹²⁶The Elections Act 2008, St. Lucia, <https://www.sluelectoral.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Saint-Lucia-House-of-Assembly-Elections-Act-1979-Revised-Edition-showing-the-law-as-at-31-December-2008.pdf> (accessed November 03, 2025).

¹²⁷Julita Peter, "Election campaign discretion needed," (2017).

¹²⁸The Voice, "Time to Deal with Campaign Financing," (2021). <https://thevoiceslu.com/2021/09/time-to-deal-with-campaign-financing/>.

¹²⁹OAS, "Report OAS Electoral Observation Mission 2025 General Election in St. Lucia," (2025). https://www.oas.org/fpdb/press/STLUCIA_EOM_General_Elections_First_Report_FINAL.pdf.

II: POLITICAL FINANCE IN LATIN AMERICA

In contrast to the Caribbean, Latin American countries generally exhibit an established history of political finance regulation...However, [they] face persistent issues with enforcement and illicit financing.

In contrast to the Caribbean, Latin American countries generally exhibit an established history of political finance regulation, with a proliferation of laws aimed at increasing transparency and fairness. However, even with advanced frameworks, the region's states face persistent issues with enforcement and illicit financing. This is the case with the three states selected to get a flavour of Latin American legislation and practice to regulate political finance: Costa Rica, México, and Colombia. Like other Latin America states, all three have a presidential political system model.

Costa Rica

Costa Rica, a Central American country like Belize, is often lauded for its relatively comprehensive campaign finance legislation¹³⁰. Its framework (Código electoral, Ley no. 8765 de 02 de septiembre de 2009) emphasizes transparency, mandatory public disclosure for private funding, and significant state funding for political parties. The laws detail allowable expenses, rules for private funding, and explicitly prohibit foreign and anonymous contributions. The system in Costa Rica also aims for individual accountability with penalties for non-compliance. The regulatory framework is designed to prevent the distortion of competition and to ensure that financial resources do not become a tool for coercion. Table 12 summarizes the extent of Costa Rica's political finance regulations.



¹³⁰Código electoral, Ley no. 8765 de 02 de septiembre de 2009, Costa Rica. <https://www.tse.go.cr/pdf/normativa/codigoelectoral.pdf> (accessed November 03, 2025).



Table 12
Costa Rica

Bans & Limits on Private Contributions	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Registering Political Parties
Ban on corporate donations. Bans on foreign donations. Ban on anonymous donations. All citizen contributions to candidates and parties must be via the parties' treasurers.	Direct state funding of parties. 0.19% of GDP used to fund election expenses for parties that have 4% of the popular vote or one elected MPs. ¹³¹ Funds are also available for party organisation training. Proof of gender parity is required for the use of funds. ¹³² Public employees prohibited from conducting political work during office hours. Strict partisan participation bans on high-ranking officials like the president, ministers, and magistrates.	Identifies justifiable expenses for public funds by parties and candidates. Strong rules against use of political finance for personal gain or illegal activities. Strong bans on spending for vote-buying.	Transparency and accountability by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal. Parties must maintain accounting records. Parties must make financial reports quarterly. These are monthly during election periods. Full donor disclosure required of exact amounts donated. Severe criminal & financial penalties. Public funding can be suspended for violations.	Yes

Despite this robust legal structure, Costa Rica is not immune to challenges. Recent allegations against high-ranking officials, including the president, concerning illegal campaign finance indicate that even stringent laws can be undermined by illicit financial activities and complex enforcement challenges.¹³³ This highlights the critical importance of effective oversight and investigation.

¹³¹Constitución Política, 1949, Costa Rica. <https://www.tse.go.cr/pdf/normativa/constitucion.pdf>, (accessed November 03, 2025).

¹³²Reglamento Sobre el Financiamiento de los Partidos Políticos Decreto N.º 17-2009 y sus reformas, Costa Rica. <https://www.tse.go.cr/pdf/normativa/financiamientodelospartidospoliticos.pdf> (accessed November 03, 2025).

¹³³The Associated Press, "Costa Rican prosecutors accuse president, other high-ranking officials of illegal campaign finance," 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/costa-rica-chaves-campaign-finance-cb1b693c421a6ca9f2a3d9d2533bdoe5>; Tico Times, "Costa Rica's Top Court Bans President Chaves from 2026 Election Campaign," 2025, <https://ticotimes.net/2025/06/27/costa-ricas-top-court-bans-president-chaves-from-2026-election-campaign#:~:text=By%20Tico%20Times,Photo%20by%20Ezequiel%20BECERRA%20%2F%20AFP>.

México

México possesses a remarkably robust campaign finance framework characterized by a strong emphasis on transparency and public financing as the primary source of political party funds.¹³⁴ This framework is built on the principle that public funding must strictly prevail over private sources to ensure political independence. The Mexican electoral authority, Instituto Nacional Electoral (INE) exercises significant oversight, detailing prohibitions on various types of donors (e.g., religious organizations, foreign entities, anonymous sources), strict rules for private funding, and rigorous reporting requirements. Table 13 summarizes the extent of México's political finance regulations.



Table 13
México

Bans & Limits on Private Contributions	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Registering Political Parties
Bans on foreign, religious, anonymous, corporate donations.¹³⁵ Strict caps on individual donations. All cash donations must be processed through dedicated bank accounts. There are restrictions on candidates and political parties taking loans in relation to election campaigns.	Significant direct public funding. Registered parties receive direct funding for their ordinary activities and campaigns based on previous electoral performance. Free media access and equal access to public spaces. A percentage of public funds must be reserved for promoting women's leadership. Governments prohibited from promoting individual candidates. The use of social programs to coerce voters is prohibited.	Strict spending ceilings. Vote-buying criminalized. Absolute ban on the private purchase of radio and television advertising by any individual or legal entity.	Real-time auditing system. Parties and candidates must submit quarterly and annual reports, as well as specific reports for every election campaign. Reports are made public. Penalties range from formal public warnings and heavy financial fines to the total loss of a party's legal status.	Yes

¹³⁴Ley General de Partidos Políticos, 2014 México, https://www.te.gob.mx/sites/default/files/page/2015/08/03_fede_lgpp_decreto_230514_pdf_11935.pdf (accessed November 03, 2025).

¹³⁵General Law on Electoral Institutions and Procedures, 2020, México, https://www.te.gob.mx/sites/default/files/page/2015/08/gen_law_elect_inst_proced_mod_pdf_87463.pdf (accessed November 03, 2025)



The INE actively enforces the comprehensive regulations, as evidenced by its past actions, such as imposing fines on parties for campaign irregularities. For example, the INE levied fines exceeding US\$37,000 against independent presidential candidate Jaime Rodriguez, “El Bronco,” for “irregular financing.”¹³⁶ This proactive enforcement reflects a commitment to maintaining a level playing field, although continuous vigilance is required to adapt to new forms of financing and avoid circumvention.

Colombia

Colombia not only has detailed campaign finance legislation,¹³⁷ but this legislation is also rooted in constitutional provisions.¹³⁸ The legislation outlines funding sources, the significant role of state financing (including advances for parties), and limits on both private and total campaign expenses. The law also establishes administrative and reporting requirements and prohibits contributions from certain entities, such as foreign governments or illegal sources. The objective is to strictly control private financing to prevent undue influence and corruption. Transparency and accountability are overseen and by the Concejo Nacional Electoral (CNE). The CNE acts as an autonomous oversight body with the power to audit records, investigate misconduct, and freeze state disbursements. Table 14 summarizes the extent of Colombia’s political finance regulations.

¹³⁶Fox News, “Mexican presidential candidate fined for campaign violations,” 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/mexican-presidential-candidate-fined-for-campaign-violations..>

¹³⁷<https://www.alcaldiabogota.gov.co/sisjur/normas/Norma1.jsp?i=43332>

¹³⁸The Constitution of Colombia, 1991, Colombia https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Colombia_2015 (accessed November 03, 2025)



Table 14
Colombia

Bans & Limits on Private Contributions	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Registering Political Parties
Bans on foreign donations, anonymous donations and on donations from government contractors. Individual donations are capped at 10% of the total spending limit for non-presidential races. Presidential campaigns capped at 20% of total spending. Individual donations limited to 2% of total spending.	The state is the primary funder of individual and party campaigns. Funding can be advanced or spending can be reimbursed. Sitting President cannot use public resources for campaigning and public officials cannot use their authority to favour specific candidates.¹³⁹ Public funding is tied to social equity: 5% is distributed based on the number of women elected, and 15% must be spent on training women, youth, and ethnic minorities. Free broadcast airtime, mandatory televised debates, and equitable visibility on state-owned media. Indirect support includes tax-exempt status for campaign donations.¹⁴⁰	CNE sets specific total spending limits for candidates and parties six months prior to any election.¹⁴¹ Vote-buying criminalized with tough sanctions.¹⁴² Media advertising is regulated to prevent wealthy candidates from dominating the public sphere through excessive commercial presence.	Mandatory annual & post-election disclosure reporting to CNE. Reports are published. Separate campaign bank accounts required. Audits can be ordered by CNE. Severe sanctions for violations (loss of office and/or imprisonment. Individuals or companies that fund more than 2.5% of a campaign, are prohibited from contracting with government for the duration of the elected term.¹⁴³ Parties linked to candidates convicted of serious crimes, such as drug trafficking, are disqualified and must return state funds.	Yes

¹³⁹Ley de 2005, Colombia, <https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma.php?i=18232> (accessed November 03,2025)
Decreto Ley 624 de 1989

¹⁴⁰Colombia, <https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma.php?i=6533> (accessed November 03,2025)

¹⁴¹Ley 130 de 1994, Colombia, <https://www.funcionpublica.gov.co/eva/gestornormativo/norma.php?i=4814> (accessed November 03,2025)

¹⁴²Penal Code Law 599 (as amended by Law 1864 of 2017), Colombia, <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/legislation/details/18423> (accessed November 03,2025)

¹⁴³LEY 80 DE 1993, Colombia, <https://ppp.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/Ley-80-de-1993.pdf> (accessed November 03,2025)

In Colombia, the sanctions for financial mismanagement are severe and emphasize personal accountability. Exceeding campaign spending limits results in the loss of office, executed via constitutional or administrative court rulings (Law 1475, Art. 26). Additionally, the Penal Code (Arts. 396A–C) imposes four to eight years of imprisonment for campaign managers and candidates who accept prohibited funds, exceed caps, or fail to report donor information. These criminal provisions extend to the donors themselves, ensuring that any individual who facilitates illegal electoral financing faces significant fines and disqualification from public office.

Despite these regulations, challenges with campaign finance compliance persist in Colombia. The on-going investigation into President Gustavo Petro for allegedly exceeding spending limits in his 2022 campaign underscores the continuous struggle with compliance and enforcement, even at the highest levels of government.¹⁴⁴

III COMPARATIVE HIGHLIGHTS

Overall, the comparative analysis reveals that, while most Caribbean states exemplify “legislative fragmentation” with minimal, outdated, or non-existent rules, the cases of Jamaica and, to a lesser extent, Antigua and Barbuda and Barbados, demonstrate a deliberate effort to shift towards the integrated regulatory models long established in most of Latin America.

These three Caribbean pioneers are moving beyond mere anti-corruption statutes to build legislative frameworks that feature bans on problematic donations, innovative public funding, binding spending limits, and independent oversight with real sanctions. Their progress, however limited, provides a crucial blueprint for the region, showing that comprehensive reform is not only possible but is gradually being actively implemented to safeguard democratic equity and transparency.

Key Lessons and Insights

On Bans and Limits on Private Contributions

Regulatory approaches in the Caribbean states with some regulation are less extensive versions of the comprehensive bans seen in Costa Rica, México, and Colombia, which strictly prohibit foreign, anonymous, and corporate funding to prevent external influence.

Rather than dedicated campaign finance laws, many Caribbean states rely on scattered provisions within their constitutions or on outdated electoral legislation. This lack of a cohesive framework often leaves significant regulatory gaps that hinder transparency and diminishes trust in public institutions.

A significant regulatory gap exists across most Caribbean states concerning the sources of political financing. Like, Belize, The Bahamas, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, there are virtually no legal restrictions on private contributions for political campaigns. There are no bans on anonymous, corporate, or foreign donations, and no limits on contribution amounts, leading to opaque and potentially unaccountable fundraising.

However, a few jurisdictions show signs of reform. Trinidad and Tobago de facto bans anonymous donations to candidates by mandating detailed reporting, and Jamaica has established the region’s most advanced regime, with explicit prohibitions on donations from foreign governments and designated entities, along with strict financial ceilings for all contributions.

¹⁴⁴Barron's, "Colombia's President Accused Of Campaign Financing Breach," 2024, <https://www.barrons.com/news/colombia-s-president-accused-of-campaign-financing-breach-6b0b9c30>.

On Public Funding

The availability and structure of public funding is another key differentiator. A common feature in the Caribbean is the absence of direct state subsidies. Guyana, Grenada, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines provide no public funding for campaigns or party operations. However, some nations demonstrate innovative uses of indirect support. Antigua and Barbuda and Barbados mandate free or subsidized access to state media, while Barbados also provides structural subsidies like tax deductions for party subscriptions.

On paper, Jamaica stands out as the regional leader, having enshrined direct annual state funding and reimbursement of election expenses, contingent on rigorous transparency. This shift to include state funding aligns directly with the Latin American regulatory model, where Costa Rica, México, and Colombia all feature significant public financing as the primary or significant source of party funds, aimed at reducing dependency on private interests and promoting fairness.

On Regulations of Spending

Regulation of campaign expenditure is universally weak in the Caribbean, primarily limited to legacy anti-bribery provisions that criminalize vote-buying. The Bahamas, Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, and St. Kitts and Nevis have no legal ceilings on total campaign spending, allowing for potentially unlimited financial influence.

A few countries have begun to implement controls: Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados impose specific monetary caps on candidate spending, and Guyana uses a formulaic cap for parties. Jamaica is again at the forefront, with explicit legal limits on expenditure for both parties and candidates. This move towards controlling the amount spent, rather than just the conduct of spending, is a hallmark of the more mature systems in Costa Rica, México, and Colombia, where independent electoral authorities set and enforce strict spending ceilings for all contestants.

On Reporting, Oversight, and Sanctions

Transparency and enforcement mechanisms represent the most critical area of divergence between the Caribbean and Latin America. In much of the Caribbean, oversight is virtually non-existent. Countries like The Bahamas, Dominica, Grenada, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines have no requirements for parties to report their finances, and oversight is left to the general court system.

Antigua and Barbuda, Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados have introduced candidate reporting, but their electoral commissions lack strong audit mandates or resources. Jamaica has established the region's most comprehensive system: mandatory regular and public disclosure of finances, dedicated campaign bank accounts, and an empowered Electoral Commission with the authority to suspend state funding for non-compliance. This framework of proactive, independent oversight and meaningful sanctions directly parallels the powerful roles played by bodies like the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) in Costa Rica, the National Electoral Institute (INE) in México, and the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE) in Colombia.

Widespread Challenges***Lack of Transparency and Illicit Financing***

The problem of opaque funding, particularly anonymous and foreign donations, is a critical challenge. This directly facilitates illicit financing and corruption, as evidenced by the concerns in Grenada, Guyana, and the recent allegations in Costa Rica and Colombia. The "hidden hands" behind political funding remain a significant threat to democratic integrity and public trust.

Outdated Legislation and Implementation Gaps

Many countries, particularly in the Caribbean, operate with outdated electoral acts that do not adequately address modern campaign finance complexities. Even where laws exist, they are often not comprehensive and have loopholes.

Weak Enforcement and Oversight:

This is the most pervasive issue. Even in countries with seemingly robust laws the actual enforcement, auditing, and prosecution of violations are often insufficient. This is frequently attributed to a lack of resources, political will, or technical expertise within oversight bodies.

Lack of Political Will for Reform

This challenge is explicitly noted in some jurisdictions and implicitly across many other where comprehensive reforms have been called for but not enacted. Entrenched political interests often resist changes that might limit their access to funding or power.

Evolving Campaign Landscape:

The rise of digital campaigning and the use of social media for political outreach presents a new frontier for regulation that most existing laws are ill-equipped to handle. This gap makes it difficult to monitor spending, identify funding sources, and ensure fairness in the digital realm.

Regulation of political finance faces persistent issues with scope, enforcement, transparency, and illicit finance. Furthermore, there are ongoing debates on balancing regulation and participation amidst evolving challenges like digital campaigning. Thus, while some progress has been made, widespread inconsistencies, enforcement gaps, and evolving challenges necessitate stronger, more tailored reforms and oversight for electoral fairness in both regions.

While the critical importance of campaign finance regulation is increasingly acknowledged across the Caribbean, including Belize, current practices present a mixed landscape. Even as most Latin American countries have enacted comprehensive legislation, all struggle with effective enforcement and the persistence of illicit financing. Conversely, many Caribbean nations significantly lag, lacking fundamental frameworks and encountering substantial resistance to comprehensive regulation.

Lessons for Belize

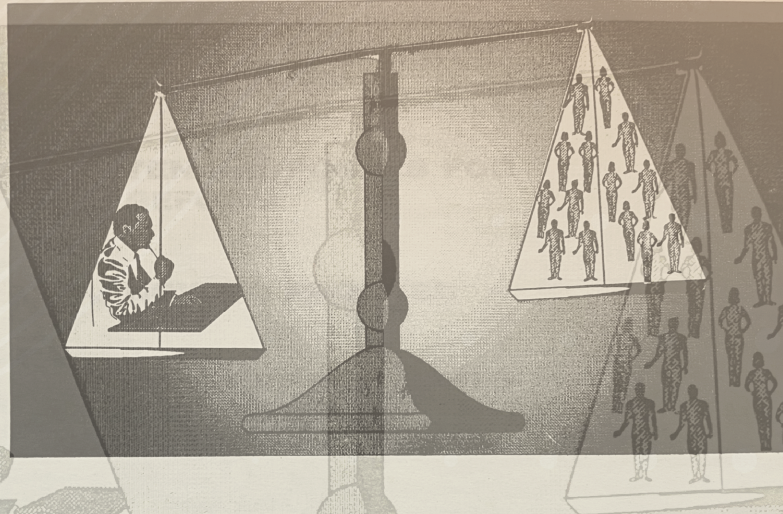
Overall, the literature and state experiences on the regulation of political finance in the Caribbean and Latin America reflect a shared recognition of its central role in safeguarding democratic integrity. At the same time, it highlights persistent challenges in the design, implementation, and enforcement of regulatory frameworks governing public and private funding, spending limits, and disclosure requirements. As a result, regulatory outcomes across the region remain uneven and, in many cases, inconsistent.

The comparative review also underscores several crucial areas for future research to address these challenges. These include deeper empirical studies on the impact of enforcement deficiencies on electoral outcomes and corruption, detailed case studies on digital campaign finance and its implications for transparency, and comparative analyses of the role of civil society advocacy in driving reforms. Further research is also needed into the political will and specific barriers that hinder the adoption and implementation of campaign finance laws, as well as exploring cross-regional learning to adapt best practices from Latin America to the distinct Caribbean context.

Belize can derive critical lessons from advanced Latin American models and pioneering Caribbean nations to design robust, enforceable campaign finance legislation. The most significant lesson is that a successful framework must function as an integrated system, where rules on income, spending, and public funding are mutually reinforced by strong, independent oversight and meaningful sanctions. A piecemeal approach will inevitably be undermined by weaknesses elsewhere.

Ultimately, achieving genuine electoral fairness and strengthening democratic legitimacy throughout Latin America and the Caribbean require a sustained and vigorous pursuit of comprehensive, transparent, and enforceable campaign finance regulations that can adapt to the evolving nature of political campaigns.

DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS



TEN PROPOSALS for POLITICAL REFORM

Society for the Promotion of Education And Research

Second Printing

April 1996 • • Belize City, Belize

CHAPTER 5

PROPOSALS FROM BELIZEAN CIVIL SOCIETY

PROPOSALS FROM BELIZEAN CIVIL SOCIETY

While money is essential for a robust electoral democracy in Belize, a strong degree of equity of access is essential for more fair and equal participation in elections and in other political activities.

THIS chapter turns to the central question of the Report: what regulatory framework for political financing is the best fit for Belize's national context? We assume that small size, gender, ethnicity, geography and political culture are key contextual variables that must be considered to help determine the regulatory and enforcement approaches best suited for Belize. We begin by documenting and assessing the national efforts and lessons of past attempts to initiate the regulation of political finance in Belize. We then move to proposing a realistic approach for Belize to move to political finance regulation based on consideration of all the analysis conducted in the Report.

Existing Proposals on Regulating Political Finance in Belize

As noted, most of the demand and concrete proposals for regulating money in politics in Belize have come from organized Belizean civil society, individual Belizeans and from constitutional reform commissions. The Research Team has ascertained that several proposals for campaign finance regulation and for the registration of political parties have been drafted and shared with cabinets since 2003.¹⁴⁵ At least one internal draft bill was also discussed during the PUP government of 2003–2008. However, no government has publicly shared proposals or a draft bill for regulating campaign financing.

The more substantive of the civil society initiatives are itemized below, followed by Table 15, which summarizes the key proposals shared.

1. ***The Society for the Promotion of Education and Research (SPEAR):***
SPEAR, one of Belize's most active CSOs of the 1990s, led Belize's first sustained campaign for political reform between 1994 and 1998. The process of public consultations resulted in concrete proposals including for legislation to regulate the financing of political campaigns.¹⁴⁶
2. ***The Political Reform Commission (PRC):***
The PRC, Belize's first constitution review commission, was established by the PUP government in 1999 based on the advocacy of the civil society political reform campaign. The PRC Report of 2000 recommended that campaign finance regulation be developed as a matter of urgent priority for implementation.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵This statement is based on interviews conducted with key political players. Their request anonymity is being respected.

¹⁴⁶Society for the Promotion of Education and Research, *Democracy in Crisis: Ten Proposals for Reform* (Belize City: Society for the Promotion of Education and Research, 1996).

¹⁴⁷Political Reform Commission, *Final Report of the Political Reform Commission-Belize*.

3. *The Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) Draft Bill, later adopted by the National Trade Union Congress of Belize (NTUCB):*

The BCCI has advocated for campaign finance regulation for over a decade. In 2020, (after the Dermen-Saldivar scandal and before the November general elections in that year) the BCCI produced and shared detailed proposals on regulating political finance in a document called '(Baseline Draft) The Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill'.¹⁴⁸ In 2021, the NTUCB joined with the BCCI to present these proposals to the government. The BCCI continues to champion its proposals and re-introduced them to the public in 2023 and in 2026.

4. *The Darrell Bradley Draft Bill:*

Before the general election of 2020, then Senator Darrell Bradley, a member of the UDP, shared a self-penned Bill titled 'Political Parties (Registration and Financial Reporting) Act'.¹⁴⁹ It also came on the heels of the Dermen - Saldivar affair and was discussed in some of the media.¹⁵⁰ After the November general election in 2020, the new PUP government stated that it did an internal assessment of both the BCCI and the Bradley draft bills.

5. *Belize Network of NGOS (BNN):*

The BNN has long advocated for good governance reforms. Just before the general election in 2020, it signed a 'Joint Declaration with the Social Partners of Belize (the BCCI and the NTUCB) for Reform to Strengthen the Democratic Governance of Belize'.¹⁵¹ The Declaration called for effective laws for campaign finance regulation and for registration of political parties.

6. *The People's Constitution Commission (PCC)*

The Report of the PCC was presented to government on 16 May 2025 but has not yet been publicly shared. A copy of the Report was accessed informally and the proposals on regulating political finance and political parties are included in this review.



¹⁴⁸Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry, "The Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill (Baseline Draft)," (Belize City, Belize, 2020). <https://www.policytracker.bz/campaign-finance-reform/>.

¹⁴⁹Darrell Bradley, "Political Parties (Registration and Financial Reporting) Act' (Draft)," (Belize City, Belize, 2020).

¹⁵⁰See for example, <https://archive.channel5belize.com/archives/198977>.

¹⁵¹BCCI and NTUCB, Joint Declaration with the Social Partners of Belize for Reform to Strengthen the Democratic Governance of Belize, BCCI and the NTUCB, Belize City, 2020.

Table 15
Existing Proposals for
Regulating Political Finance in Belize

PROPOSED BY	Bans & Limits on Private Donations	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Political Party Registration
SPEAR 1996 and 2006 Ten Proposals for Political Reform (1996) and various other publications	(a) Disclosure of contributions received by parties and candidates and of who contributed (b) Ceilings on contributions	(a) Public subsidies for parties and candidates (b) Equal and free access to the media for parties during campaigns	(a) Annual spending limits for parties and candidates	Yes	Yes
Political Reform Commission 2000 Final Report of Political Reform Commission The PRC called for a national process to develop campaign finance legislation.	Recommended further study	No	(a) Limit the amount that can be spent by parties and candidates (b) Limit the period of campaigns so that there is limited spending	Recommended further study	Not recommended unless parties begin to receive public funding

PROPOSED BY	Bans & Limits on Private Donations	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Political Party Registration
BCCI 2020 Draft – The Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill	(a) Establish a National Election Campaign Fund (NECF) to accept donations by private entities and individuals (b) Monies in NECF is divided equally among the divisions and given to candidates after the election campaign (c) Candidates are entitled to receive NECF funds in proportion to their vote totals (d) Political parties and candidates are also allowed to receive private donations but not from certain entities and persons. (e) The total amount of a single donation to a candidate cannot exceed 10% of the \$250,000 expenditure allowed per candidate (f) The total amount of a single contribution to a political party cannot exceed 5% of the \$4 million of the expenditure allowed per party	No	(a) Campaign spending limited to \$250,000 per candidate per campaign period (b) Campaign spending limited to \$4 million per party per campaign period	(a) The Election and Boundaries Commission (EBC) to provide oversight to implement and monitor compliance (b) The EBC is responsible to manage the NECF. (c) There are set financial reporting periods for candidates and parties (d) Names of contributors and the value are required in reports, as well as total demotions received (e) The EBC shall list all donations over \$15,000 to parties or candidates (f) There are some sanctions for violating the regulations. These include fines of up to \$15,000, the return of irregular donations and public apologies.	Yes

PROPOSED BY	Bans & Limits on Private Donations	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Political Party Registration
Darrell Bradley 2020 Draft Political Parties (Registration and Financial Reporting) Act	(a) Parties shall establish one or more campaign finance accounts to lodge all contributions received by either parties or candidates. (b) Parties and candidates must keep records of contributions amounts and the contributor (c) Parties and candidates must keep records of all disbursements amounts and the recipients (d) No candidate shall receive more than \$5,000 from any one source in any month. (e) No party shall receive more than \$100,000 from one source in any month (f) No foreign national can make donations (g) The Belize diaspora can make donations (h) All donations must be direct. No person shall contribute in the name of another person (i) Donations to any one candidate cannot be more than \$5,000 per month. (j) Donations to any one party cannot be more than \$100,000 per month.	(a) No public funds shall be used for election campaigns (b) No public resources shall be used in election campaigns (c) No person who enters a public contract with a public entity or statutory body can donate to a party or candidate	(a) No party shall spend more than \$2 million in any one campaign period (b) No candidate shall spend more than \$75,000 in any one campaign period (c) Campaign periods are 120 days prior to nomination day to ten days after the election date (d) No candidate or person shall convert a campaign donation for personal use (e) No donations can be used to influence how a person votes by giving money, anything of value or any promises thereof	(a) Administered by the Chief Elections Officer (CEO) on behalf of the EBC (b) The CEO to publish an audited public report on campaign finance contributions six months after an election, including the total monetary amount collected and disbursed by parties and candidates (c) Persons who seek to contest elections outside of a registered party can be sanctioned. (d) Failure to place private contributions in Campaign Finance Accounts can lead to a \$5,000 fine or three years in prison or both. (e) Failure to keep records of contributions and expenses can lead to a \$2,000 fine, three years in prison or both (f) Buying or receiving payment for votes shall be liable to a fine of \$10,000 or prison sentences of up to five years, or to both.	(a) All political parties must register with the CEO (b) The names, emblems colours, the names of officers, the registered addresses and constitutions or by-laws must be provided by parties (c) Any changes in any of this information must be sent to the CEO (d) Parties must keep financial records and make available to the CEO monthly and annually

PROPOSED BY	Bans & Limits on Private Donations	Public Funding	Regulation of Spending	Reporting, Oversight & Sanctions	Political Party Registration
BNN 2020	Calls for comprehensive legislation based on public consultations. No specific proposals were made	Calls for comprehensive legislation based on public consultations. No specific proposals were made	Calls for comprehensive legislation based on public consultations. No specific proposals were made	Calls for comprehensive legislation based on public consultations. No specific proposals were made	Calls for political parties to be registered
PCC Report 2025 Not yet released	a) Calls for amendments of the Constitution to have fixed dates for general elections (which better allows for fixed campaign periods) b) Envisions regulation and disclosure of private campaign funding.	a) Envisions public funding but does not detail the approach b) Calls for the fair use of the media for political parties.	No proposals	a) Calls for amendments of the Constitution to establish an Institute of Electoral Affairs (IEA) that would replace the Elections and Boundaries Commission b) The IEA would also have duties that include oversight of the disclosure of private and public campaign funding, and (administration of the fair use of media and radio for political parties	Calls for political parties to be registered and monitored

Assessing the Proposals

These proposals on regulating political finance in Belize, drafted between 1996 and 2025, vary significantly in level of detail and treatment of the issue. In this regard, it is best to focus commentary on the two more substantive proposals, namely the BCCI Bill and the Bradley Bill, both prepared just before the 2020 general election. As Table 15 illustrates, these both address, to varying extents, the five options for regulation identified in Table 1 in Chapter 2 of the Report, including political party registration.

1. ***Preparation of the Proposals***

It is not clear, in every case, what process of research and/or consultations led to these two sets of proposals. However, neither of the proposals was the result of a process of extensive public consultations. We do know that the BCCI Bill was the result of some comparative research as well as internal consultations with BCCI members. It was subsequently shared with social partners and is available on the BCCI website. The Bradley Bill was the result of an individual effort, based on comparative legal research. Both were presented in the wake of the Derman-Saldivar affair of 2020.

2. ***Legal Approach***

Neither of the proposals calls for constitutional reform. The BCCI Bill takes the legislative approach of introducing campaign finance regulation and registration of political parties through making amendments to the existing ROPA. The Bradley Bill is presented as a stand-alone Act for campaign finance regulation and the registration of political parties. However, the Bradley Bill does identify the EBC as the oversight and implementing body for that Bill.

3. ***Registration of Political Parties***

Both proposals call for the registration of political parties and treat such registration as linked directly to regulating political finance. However, we have seen that political finance regulation is not the only reason to register political parties. There are other compelling reasons including those that apply to business companies and non-profit organizations that seek to operate in Belize. (See Chapter 2).

4. ***On Regulating Private Contributions***

In terms of contributions, both bills placed the legal onus to record and to disclose contributions only on political parties and candidates. Neither includes a requirement for private donors to disclose contributions made to candidates or parties, even as they propose ceilings on the value of contributions.

For the BCCI Bill, the ceiling on single contributions to parties cannot exceed 5% of the \$4 million that parties can spend per campaign period, and for candidates, it cannot exceed 10% of the \$250,000 that candidates can spend. For the Bradley Bill, no party can receive more than \$100,000 per month and no candidate can receive more than \$5,000 per month.

The Bradley Bill seeks to address the issue of indirect receipt of private contributions (monies that could be later passed on to parties or candidates) by the recipient. It would prohibit use of campaign contributions for personal use by candidates and party officials. However, it is not clear how this is to be monitored.

5. ***Prohibited Contributions***

Both proposals deal with the issue of prohibited contributions in some manner. Various, the proposals include provisions to (a) disallow or provide limits on donations from persons and/or companies who have contracts with government, and (b) prohibit foreign nationals and companies from giving

donations, although none make mention of foreign governments. Restrictions on donations from illegal sources are not addressed in any of the proposals.

6. On Public Funding and Support

Only the Bradley Bill includes a call for a public funding element for political financing for parties or candidates. It proposes a monthly limit of public funding but does not specify how much. Also, none call for the media to be required to provide some free and/or equal media time to parties and candidates. However, the BCCI Bill does call for the establishment of a National Election Campaign Fund to receive private donations that would be administered by a public entity, the EBC, and disbursed to constituency candidates.

7. On the Use of Public Resources

Only the Bradley Bill addresses the critical issue of the abuse of public resources for political financing. It strictly prohibits both public funding and the use of any public resources or services for campaign purposes. As such, it provides a useful basis to begin to address the re-directing, abuse and waste of public resources for partisan advantage. While commendable as an objective, the Bradley Bill is limited on how to prevent and monitor such abuse.

8. On Spending Regulations

The two proposals also address political finance regulations related to limitations on spending by parties and candidates. For example, the BCCI Bill recommends a ceiling of \$4 million per political party per campaign, and \$250,000 per candidate per campaign. The Bradley Bill recommends a ceiling of \$2 million per party and \$75,000 per candidate. No justifications for deriving these figures are provided. Both require that parties and candidates keep financial records of spending and submit these to the EBC. The reporting periods vary in the two proposals, as are the definitions of a campaign period.

9. On Voter Bribery

The Bradley Bill is the only one to address the abuse of political financing for voter bribery. It states that no funds, from any source can be used to bribe voters with the intent of influencing votes. Even as the issue of the bribery of voters is already prohibited in Sections 23-36 of the ROPA, the Bradley Bill recommends higher penalties upon conviction to mitigate this wide-spread practice: a fine of \$10,000 or imprisonment for up to five years.

10. On Penalties

Both draft Bills make some recommendations on penalties for various offences. These include penalties and fines for not registering a political party, for not keeping



separate campaign accounts and of contributions, for not reporting contributions, for not reporting spending, for bribery of voters, and for seeking to participate in an election outside of a registered party (made in the Bradley Bill). There are obvious concerns about the latter in that it would effectively prohibit independent candidates from participating in elections. Across the two draft bills penalties range from \$1,000 to \$15,000 and from two to five years of imprisonment upon conviction.

11. *On Administrative Responsibility*

A critical question for political finance regulation is which entity is to administer the registration of political parties and to monitor adherence to campaign finance legislation. Both the BCCI Bill and the Bradley Bill propose that the current Elections and Boundaries Commission, supported by the Election and Boundaries Department and its Chief Elections Officer, oversee the added responsibilities of both registration of parties and regulating campaign finance. We will argue that this approach is problematic.

12. *On Applicability*

Both proposals imply that the campaign finance regulation and the registration of political parties be applicable to all parties and all candidates competing in general and municipal elections. Even as the proposals provide suggestions for defining candidates and political parties as distinct, the actual details of regulation indicate some overlapping treatment of both, leading to confusion of what regulations apply to individuals vs. only to parties.

Considerations for Approaching Regulation in Belize

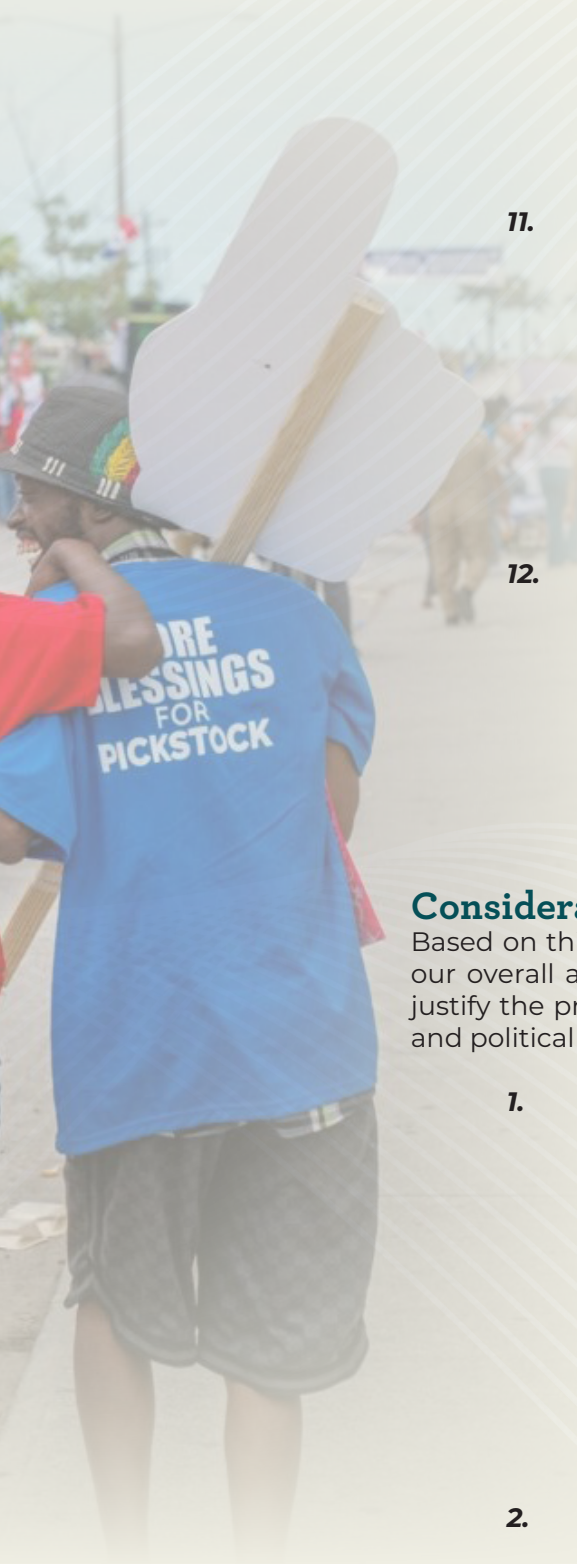
Based on this assessment of the various proposals for regulation in Belize and on our overall analysis of the research conducted in this Report, we now share and justify the principal considerations that are implied for regulating political parties and political finance in Belize's societal context.

1. *Must be Rooted in Clear Goals:*

The central goals of regulating political finance for Belize must be crystal clear. As in any process of political reform, the goals are to improve people's livelihoods and increase transparency and accountability in the practice of democracy. Achieving these goals require regulating money in politics in ways that bring more transparency, that bring more fairness and equity to political participation for all, that mitigate corruption and clientelism, that decrease waste of public resources, that punish violations and that help to restore public trust in political parties.

2. *Be Pragmatic but Bold*

The approach to regulating political finance must consider Belize's unique political and economic context without using this as an excuse for inaction. By creatively synthesizing the lessons from its own political history and



those from other nations, Belize can build a fit-for-purpose, resilient and evolving regime for regulating money in politics. Belize should aim to construct a system modelled on the ambition of the Latin American archetype but informed by the pragmatic Caribbean approach of progressive implementation. In this regard, the regulations may best be phased in over a medium period time frame.

3. *Based on focused education and consultation:*

In recent history of advocacy for political finance legislation, there have been limited but relevant consultations with Belizeans. The public consultations have been conducted almost exclusively by civil society organisations and by constitutional reform commissions. The consensus from these past consultations is that most Belizeans want some manner of regulation on political finance. Yet the national process to develop and enact Belize's first political finance legislation must include an element of focused public education and consultations. Consultations do not need to start from scratch but can build on what has been done before in terms of key issues and proposals. Done right, the consultation process will contribute to building a political compact on what approach to regulating political finance is best for Belize.

4. *A multiparty approach*

More than most matters, that of regulation of political parties and political finance is a truly national issue. The implementation and survival of any regulation will enjoy most chances of success and continuity if the two major parties and selected smaller parties support the main elements of regulation policy and legislation. As such, a multiparty approach to drafting the regulations is essential.

5. *A central role for civil society*

Civil society organizations in Belize have played a significant role in advocating for the regulation of political parties and political finance and in offering considered proposals. As independent organizations, CSOs should be effectively included in the development of draft legislation for regulation. Belize's recent political history also shows that CSOs can play a critical and official oversight as non-partisan entities in the Senate.

6. *Provide for constitutional backing*

For political party registration and political finance regulation in Belize to have the best chance of success, it should optimally provide for constitutional backing for regulating political finance and political parties, for fixed election dates and for limited campaign periods. Enshrining these principles and standards in the supreme law of Belize (a) mitigates against legislative backsliding (the Constitution is harder to amend than ordinary legislation), (b) makes the lack of the enactment of the legislation unconstitutional, (c) mitigates against manipulation by parties in power, (d) provides the judiciary with constitutional clarity for judgements on cases related to regulating political finance and political parties.

7. *Separate legislation for regulation of political parties and political finance*

It is our considered assessment that integrating registration of political parties and political finance regulation in the current ROPA conflates legally distinct issues and can lead to unnecessary confusion and complications. The ROPA details how Belize will hold free and fair elections, already giving the EBC and EBD heavy responsibilities of state. A stand-alone Act will bring singular clarity and focus to the unique challenges of regulating parties and money in politics and provide a better chance to achieving the goals of enhancing fairness and

equity in political participation for all, mitigating corruption and clientelism, decreasing waste of public resources, punishing violations and helping to restore public trust in the political process. In this regard, the Bradley approach is preferred to the BCCI approach of amending the ROPA.

8. *Regulate private contributions:*

Belize's political finance regulation framework should include limits on contributions from Belizean companies and individuals, with inflation adjustments to ensure long-term effectiveness. Disclosures should not be for every donation; only for those that pass a certain threshold. The experience of other states imply that it is best to ban all indirect, anonymous and foreign contributions. There should also be bans on contributions from any company or individual that has a contract with the government. Lack of compliance should carry stiff penalties, and digital platforms should be used for (i) monitoring contributions, and (ii) reporting and disclosures. The BCCI and Bradley proposals on limitations on contributions provide a sound basis for debate.

9. *Regulate spending by political parties and candidates*

In addition to limiting campaign periods, regulations for campaign spending and for political clientelism spending by parties and candidates will be critical tools in controlling the quantum of money needed in Belizean politics. Less demand for political finance can lead to fewer of the problems that lobbying and sourcing of financing generate. The BCCI and Bradley proposals on limitations on spending provide a sound basis for debate. Consideration should be given to establishing a maximum spending threshold per candidate per constituency.

10. *Include an element of public funding in political finance legislation*

We have established that while money is essential for a robust electoral democracy in Belize, a strong degree of equity of access is essential for more fair and equal participation in elections and in other political activities. To reduce influence of private wealth in politics, as well as to counterbalance the restrictions to be placed on private contributions, a transparent system of public funding for political parties should be a part of the Belize approach. However, this can only be done in concert with action to halt the current use and abuse public funds for political influence. (See #11 below).



11. *Prohibition on the allocation of public resources to and by politicians*

We have also established that a core problem with political financing in Belize is the abuse of public funds and services for partisan political and electoral influence. There is a clear need for stronger firewalls between the people's money and political parties and politicians. The approach we recommend is a total ban on the allocation of public resources directly to and by politicians with the exceptions of (a) the constituency fund to operate an office in each constituency for elected representatives, and (b) public funds allowed at #10 above.

12. *Strengthen regulations and increase penalties for vote buying and selling*

The current sections in the ROPA on voter bribery and treating should be moved from the ROPA and form part of new legislation on regulating political parties and political finance. At the same time, the measures to identify, prosecute and punish vote buying and selling must be strengthened. The proposals made by Bradely in this regard should be considered.

13. *Robust and independent oversight of regulation*

Complementary to our recommendation for stand-alone legislation that is separate from the ROPA, we also call for the establishment of a separate oversight and enforcement mechanism from the EBC. This should best be in the form of a new independent, depoliticized, and well-resourced commission with the legal authority and technical capacity to register political parties and oversee political financing in real-time. Not only does the EBC already have heavy electoral responsibilities, some of which are not being executed fully, but that in its current form, it will not have the independence required for regulating political finance.¹⁵²

Based on these considerations on an approach for Belize we now turn to presenting our substantive recommendations for regulating political parties and political finance.



¹⁵²By the Constitution, the five members of the ECB are political party representatives and the party in power has the majority.



CHAPTER 6

BREAKING THE REGULATION DEADLOCK

BREAKING THE REGULATION DEADLOCK

Tempering the ugly side of political financing in Belize is a difficult and long-term venture. But Belize must begin... to urgently enact constitutional, legislative and regulatory reform measures to mitigate the wide-spread systemic abuse of political financing and its nexus with corruption.

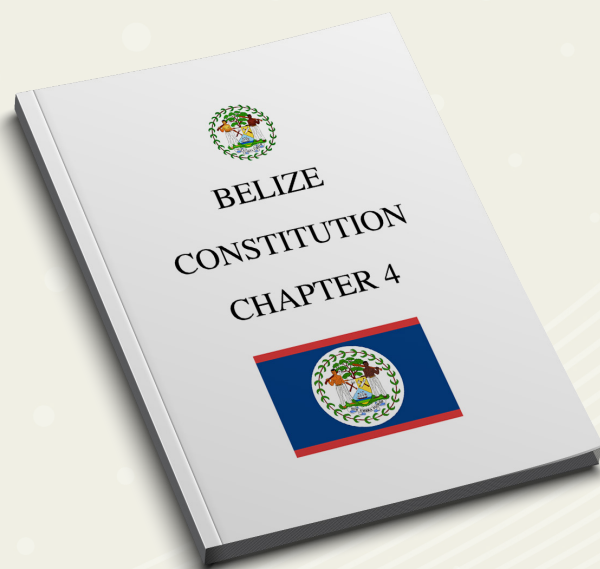
IN this final chapter we present thirteen considered recommendations for regulating money in politics with the goal of bringing more fairness and equity to political participation, mitigate corruption and clientelism, decrease waste of public resources, punish violations and help to restore trust in the political process. These recommendations are based on the principal considerations for approaching regulation that were prioritized in Chapter 5.

It is important to emphasize our arguments for proposing a dual approach for Belize that regulates political financing for both the contribution and the spending sides of the coin. The major challenges of money in politics in Belize that we have identified can be boiled down to two broad categories: political corruption and lack of equity in political participation. Each of these requires unique mitigating measures. International best practice has demonstrated that (a) decreasing the corruption side of the coin is best accomplished by targeting the quid pro quo that inevitability accompanies the offering and the solicitation of monies for politics, and (b) increasing equity in participation is best achieved by limiting the costs of participation. Belize needs both! It is not a matter of selecting one or the other but one of finding the right mix.

On the contribution side, while we argue that political parties and candidates should record all contributions, we propose that there be a ceiling of monetary above which public disclosure is mandatory. On the spending side, we propose not only limits on spending by political parties and by candidates but, as importantly, measures to decrease the time demands and the costs of political participation itself and help level the political playing field for alternative parties and new aspirants.

We also understand well the sensitivities that will surround any debate on the use of public funds for supporting political financing in the Belize context. However, we make our recommendations on this with the knowledge that it has proven useful in other states to promote equity in participation and also to mitigate some aspects of corruption. As noted, public funds are already being abused for political influence and, at the very least, this must be mitigated before phasing in any public funding element to regulate political financing.

The authors of the Report eventually decided against proposing exact financial amounts for monetary limitations and penalties for two key reasons. First, due to lack of information on the actual cost of financing political parties and campaigns, selecting a baseline is challenging. This is best done as part of the consultation process that is recommended below. Second,



the authors assessed that sharing exact figures would likely become the primary focus of readers at the expense of more important aspects of the overall regulatory framework. As noted, the monetary limitations proposed in the BCCI Bill and the Bradley Bill should inform this debate.

The thirteen recommendations we offer are not presented in the form of final or fully drafted amendments or legislative bills. Such drafting is best done by expert legal drafters after there is national consensus on the way forward for regulation. Instead, the recommendations are presented as guides to inform a national process to debate and develop constitutional amendments and new legislation for regulating political financing in Belize. Four recommendations are for constitutional amendments, eight for legislative reform and one for the process to move to enactment.

I: AMENDMENTS TO THE CONSTITUTION OF BELIZE

It is proposed that the National Assembly add new provisions to the Constitution of Belize to allow for the registration of political parties and for the regulation of political finance. These will set out basic principles and standards to be fleshed out in ordinary legislation and regulations. We share four recommendations for constitutional amendments to be included as new sections inserted just after Sections 84 to 93 of the Constitution that deal directly with electoral matters.

Recommendation 01

Fixed dates for elections and fixed campaign periods

That the National Assembly amends Part VI of the Constitution to provide for:

- (a) Fixed dates for general elections to take place every five years on the first Wednesday of the first month after the five years have expired since the last election,
- (b) Limits on periods for campaigning by political parties and political candidates to sixty days before the date a general election.

Recommendation 02

Establishment of a Political Party and Political Finance Regulation Commission

That the National Assembly amends Part VI of the Constitution to provide for:

- a) The establishment of an independent and autonomous Political Party and Political Finance Regulation Commission to oversee the registration of political parties and regulation of political finance;
- b) The appointment of one Commission member each by the four social partner Senators for staggered terms of four to six-years, with no one member serving more than two terms;

- c) The appointment of the President of the Commission to one non-renewable seven-year term by the four social partner Senators, acting based on consensus;
- d) The prohibition of membership on the Commission by political party appointees;
- e) The Commission not being subject to the direction or control of any other person or authority;
- f) The operations of the Commission in accordance with the Constitution and with the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act.

Recommendation 03

Registration of Political Parties

That the National Assembly amends Part VI of the Constitution to provide for:

- (a) The registration of political parties as a requirement to participate in elections in Belize;
- (b) The registration and oversight of political parties to be in accordance with the Constitution and with the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act.

Recommendation 04

Regulation of Political Finance

That the National Assembly amends Part VI of the Constitution to provide for:

- (a) The setting of financial limits for private contributions to political parties and political candidates;
- (b) The prohibition of contributions from (i) anonymous sources, (ii) foreign sources, except for Belizean citizens residing abroad, (iii) any individual or company that has a current contract to supply goods or services to the Government of Belize, and (iv) indirect contributions;
- (c) The prohibition of all forms of voter-bribery;¹⁵³
- (d) The duty for political parties and political candidates to keep records of all contributions received and all expenditures made;
- (e) The duty for political parties and political candidates to disclose all contributions received and all expenditures made that are above limits allowed in the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act.
- (f) The setting of penalties and punishments for violations;
- (g) The use of public resources to support political parties and political candidates in good standing, based on the principle of equity;

¹⁵³As discussed in Chapter 5, the intent is to move the section on voter bribery from the ROPA.

- (h) The prohibition of all other forms of allocation of public funds to political parties and political candidates, except for constituency office support for elected representatives;
- (i) These and any other matter required for the regulation of political finance to be in accordance with the Constitution and with the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act.

II: ENACTING NEW LEGISLATION

It is proposed that the National Assembly enact a new and stand-alone Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act, based on the principles and direction mandated by the proposed constitutional amendments in Recommendations 1 to 4. The intention is to provide a framework upon which the new legislation can be constructed once there is consensus on the way forward.¹⁵⁴ Eight recommendations are made in this regard.

Recommendation 05

Oversight Mechanism

That the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act have a Part that:

- a) Establishes an independent and autonomous Political Party and Political Finance Regulation Commission (the Commission);
- b) Establishes a Secretariat to serve the Commission led by a Regulator of Political Parties and Political Finance;
- c) Gives the Commission the constitutional and legal mandate to oversee the registration of political parties and regulation of political finance, based on the provisions of the Act. In particular, the Commission has the responsibilities to:
 - i. Nominate the person to serve as the Regulator of Political Parties and Political Finance for ratification by the Senate,
 - ii. Establish and administer a register of political parties,
 - iii. Review and decide on registration applications from political parties,
 - iv. Review reports from political parties as required under this Act,
 - v. Require that audits be done of financial reports of political parties,
 - vi. Publish financial reports of political parties in the gazette,
 - vii. Investigate violations and determine when a penalty is to be imposed,
 - viii. Produce an annual report on the execution of its responsibilities for presentation to the Senate,
 - ix. Make regulations for the use of public resources for supporting political parties and political candidates,
 - x. Establish and administer regulations for free and equal airtime on radio and television for political parties and political candidates during campaign periods.

¹⁵⁴In this regard, there are several international and regional organisations that provide model legislation that can be used by legal drafters once there is public and political consensus on the way forward. The model legislation of the OAS is particularly useful. See, <https://www.oas.org/fpdb/press/DRAFT-MODEL-LAW-ON-THE-REGISTRATION-AND-REGULATION-OF-POLITICAL-PARTIES.pdf>

- d) Details the appointment of the five members of the Commission such that:
 - i. Four members are appointed based on nominations of the social partner organizations that serve on the Senate,
 - ii. The President of the Commission is appointed by the four social partner Senators, acting based on consensus;
 - iii. The President serves for one seven-year non-renewable term,
 - iv. The four other members serve staggered terms of four to six-years, with no one member serving more than two terms.

Recommendation 06

Registration of Political Parties

That the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act have a Part that:

- (a) Makes the registration of a political party a requirement for participation in general and municipal elections;
- (b) Requires that political party shall be democratic in its aims, constitution, organization, internal elections and actions;
- (c) Requires that a political party shall not engage in actions that are inconsistent or that contravene the Constitution of Belize;
- (d) Requires that a political party shall not engage in actions that are inconsistent or that contravene the Representation of the People Act, the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act, nor any other Act that imposes requirements on political parties;
- (e) Details the requirements for applying for registration of a political party, to include:¹⁵⁵
 - i. A petition for registration signed by the party's executive and/or by a fixed number of members of the party who are also registered voters,
 - ii. The names and addresses of the Leader and the authorized representative of the political party,
 - iii. A copy of the constitution of the political party,
 - iv. A description of the identifying symbols and colours of the political party,
 - v. The address of the headquarters of the political party,
 - vi. A statement of assets and liabilities,
 - vii. The prescribed registration fee, and,
 - viii. Such other particulars as the Commission may reasonably require.

¹⁵⁵These are adapted from: Organization of American States, "Draft Model Law on the Registration and Regulation of Political Parties," (Washington D.C., 2019), Section 7.2. <https://www.oas.org/fpdb/press/DRAFT-MODEL-LAW-ON-THE-REGISTRATION-AND-REGULATION-OF-POLITICAL-PARTIES.pdf>.

- (f) Details the grounds for refusal of registration or the cancellation of registration of a party;
- (g) Details the process a political party can appeal to the Commission and/or to the High Court for denial of registration;
- (h) Requires that political parties provide annual party reports that detail any changes in party constitutions, party leadership, party address, and other information that the Commission may request;
- (i) Details the sanctions for non-registration and for lack of compliance with the requirements of registration.¹⁵⁶

Recommendation 07

Requirements for Participation of Individual Candidates

That the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act have a Part that:

- (a) Specifies requirements under the Act for individual candidates who are attached to a political party, such that one month before nomination day, the candidate provides to the Commission (i) a statement from the political party confirming party representation, and (ii) a financial statement of income and expenditure received since the start of the official campaign period, and (c) semi-annual statements of donations and expenditure;
- (b) Specifies requirements under the Act for individual candidates who are not attached to a political party, such that one month before nomination day, the candidate provides to the Commission a financial statement of income and expenditures since the start of the official campaign period.

Recommendation 08

Bans and Limits on Private Contributions

That the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act have a Part that:

- (a) Details the financial limits on the amount of any single contribution to a political party, which may be adjusted for inflation from time to time, such that:

¹⁵⁶These may include fines for the non-registration of a political party and for providing false information on application form.

- i. Contributions from legal companies cannot exceed \$_____ per contribution per year,
 - ii. Contributions from individuals cannot exceed \$_____ per contribution per year;
- (b) Details the financial limits on the amount of any single contribution to a political candidate, which may be adjusted for inflation from time to time, such that:
 - i. Contributions from legal companies cannot exceed \$_____ per contribution per year,
 - ii. Contributions from individuals cannot exceed \$_____ per contribution per year;
- (c) Prohibit contributions to political parties and political candidates from:
 - i. Anonymous sources,
 - ii. Indirect sources,
 - iii. Any foreign sources, except for Belizean citizens residing abroad,
 - iv. Any individual or company that has a current contract to supply goods or services to the Government of Belize, and,
- (d) Details any other matter required for the regulation of political finance contributions.

Recommendation 09

Public Funding and Support

That the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act have a Part that:

- (a) Establishes a Public Political Finance Fund from public resources and from private donations for supporting political parties and political candidates;
- (b) Details the requirements for political parties to receive finances from the Fund, to include:
 - i. Being registered,
 - ii. Being in good standing with reporting requirements,
- (c) Details the requirements for candidates contesting elections to receive finances from the Fund, to include:
 - i. Being duly nominated and accepted under the ROPA to contest an election,
 - ii. Being in good standing with all other requirements in this Act and all relevant Acts;
- (d) Provides for political parties and political candidates to receive free and equal airtime on radio and television during the election campaign period, based on regulations to be developed by the Commission;

- (e) Prohibits any political party, any elected representative of the House of Representatives or any political candidate seeking election to the House of Representatives from directly receiving public resources, except for:
 - i. Those funds that are provided to an elected representative specifically for the operation of a constituency office,
 - ii. Those funds that are provided to political parties and political candidates from the Public Political Finance Fund;
- (f) Details any other matter required for the regulation of public funds and support for political finance.

Recommendation 10

Regulations on Spending

That the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act have a Part that:

- (a) Details spending caps allowed per political party per year and per election campaign period;
- (b) Details spending caps allowed per candidate per constituency per year and per election campaign period;
- (c) Prohibits and regulates all forms of spending for voter-bribery and vote-trading by political parties and political candidates, such that:
 - i. All forms of spending for voter-bribery by political parties and political candidates are more strictly prohibited and monitored,
 - ii. All sections in the ROPA that deal with voter bribery and treating are moved to the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act,
- (d) Prohibits the spending of any public resources and any use of public services by elected representatives and by party aspirants for direct distribution to citizens and companies;
- (e) Prohibits spending by all political candidates for personal use or benefit;
- (f) Requires that for all public political advertising (where funds are expended to support a particular party or candidate) (i) the identity of the advertiser(s) must be disclosed to the Commission, (ii) the identity of the advertiser(s) must be stated during the advertisement when being aired, and (iii) the advertisement must follow basic ethical guidelines for political advertising to be developed by the Commission.

Recommendation 11

Record Keeping and Reporting

That Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act have a Part that:

- (a) Requires that all registered political parties and all political candidates keep clear records of all contributions received and all expenditures made for political financing;
- (b) Requires that political parties and political candidates keep separate bank accounts to be used specifically for deposits and withdrawals of allowable financial contributions;
- (c) Requires that political parties and political candidates prepare annual financial reports and post-election financial reports on both contributions and expenditure for sharing with the Commission;
- (d) Requires that political parties and political candidates disclose to the Commission the identities of all contributors who make contributions that are above the permitted amount;
- (e) Requires political parties and candidates to facilitate audits of accounts by the Office of the Auditor General of Belize, on the request of the Commission.

Recommendation 12

Sanctions

That the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Act have a Part that:

- (a) Provides for heavy fines, penalties and punishment for any violations of the provisions of the Act;
- (b) Provides for increases in fines and prison time (in relation to those in the ROPA) for persons found guilty of violating regulations on voter bribery;
- (c) Prohibits any individual or company that contributes over the stated limits to a political party from receiving government contracts;
- (d) Grants the right of appeal to the High Court to all political parties and individuals who are issued a fine or penalty by the Commission.

IV: TOWARDS ENACTMENT

Recommendation 13

Preparation and Enactment of Bills

That, as a matter of urgency, the Government of Belize mandates the preparation of (a) a Constitution Amendment Bill and (b) the Regulation of Political Parties and Political Finance Bill, in a manner such that:

- (a) The Bills are enacted by the National Assembly by the end of 2027 to be applicable for the next general election due in 2030 and all general and municipal elections thereafter;
- (b) The Bills are drafted with input from all political parties that participated in the 2025 election and from social partners;
- (c) The Bills are informed by a well-designed, inclusive and time-limited process for public education and consultations;
- (d) The Bills are informed by the proposals for regulation of political parties and political finance made by groups and individuals since independence, and by international and regional best practice as summarised;
- (e) The Bills are enacted through a phased approach such that:
 - Phase 1 includes the constitutional amendments and the establishment of the Political Party and Political Finance Regulation Commission before the end of 2027,
 - Phase 2 includes the registration of political parties and launch of disclosure of private contributions and of spending limits before the next general election,
 - Phase 3 includes the establishment of a public funding element to be rolled out after the next general election.
- (f) Existing Acts are reviewed and amended as relevant to ensure legal coherence with the new constitutional amendments and new legislation. These Acts include but are not limited to the ROPA, the Prevention of Corruption Act, the Finance and Audit (Reform) Act, the Ombudsman Act, the Freedom of Information Act, the Money Laundering and Terrorism (Prevention) Act and the Civil Asset Recovery and Unexplained Wealth Act.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰Some of these Acts themselves may need reform. For proposals in this regard, see Integrity, Anti-Corruption Legislative Gap Analysis: An Assessment of Belize's Legal and Institutional Framework.

V: CONCLUSION

The broken partisan promises, defeatism and stagnation that have plagued the issue for over 30 years must be overcome in the interest of the Belizean nation and people...the principal obstacles will be the key targets of the regulations themselves: the two major political parties.

Breaking the Regulation Deadlock

Advancing these recommendations into effective and lasting legislative action requires moving past the regulation deadlock that has persisted in post-independent Belize. Enacting, implementing and overseeing political party and political finance regulations will face substantive and entrenched obstacles. Most critically, the broken partisan promises, defeatism and stagnation that have plagued the issue for over 30 years must be overcome in the interest of the Belizean nation and people.

It should be expected that the principal obstacles will be the key targets of the regulations themselves: the two major political parties and their political leadership. More arguments will be made that it is too difficult, that it has not worked in other countries, that loopholes will be found or that Belizeans do not have the capacity to do it well. Implementation will be challenging but there are success stories in other countries. Loopholes, by definition, can be plugged. It will be difficult, but Belizeans have done difficult things, including achieving independence in the context of a territorial claim.

Importantly, the analysis conducted in this Report indicates that many Belizeans understand the negative relationships between money in politics and persistent corruption and would welcome measures for its regulation. For over three decades now, this message has been clearly sent to the political directorate by non-state actors, including by the largest organisations representing labour, the business sector and CSOs.

If taken at their word, some political leaders of both major political parties indicate that they support some aspects of regulating money in politics. Over the years, we have seen some politicians complaining about the frustrations and hardships of having to continually locate resources to campaign and to respond to people's needs or demands – including outside of election campaign periods. To the extent this is true, there may be partisan overlap with the civil society advocacy for political finance regulation.

Because Belize's centralised political system and winner-takes-all electoral process help to create an enabling environment for a negative relationship between political financing and the quality of democracy, policy action to regulate political finance and political parties should ideally be integrated into wider political reform efforts.

These may include reforms such as drawing ministers of cabinet from outside House of Representatives, decreasing the discretionary powers of ministers (especially as in relation to control over allocations of public resources and services), introducing an element of proportionality in the electoral system and increasing the independence and capacities of the Elections and Boundaries Commission and other oversight bodies.

However, the need to enact political finance regulation is too urgent to be delayed by inefficiencies and the pace of wider reform processes, including follow-up on the 2025 Report of the PCC.

Call to Action

This Report has detailed three post-independence decades of regulatory failure across administrations of both major political parties to develop policy and enact legislation to regulate political parties and political finance. Tempering the ugly side of political financing in Belize – especially in a neoliberal world – is a difficult and long-term venture. But Belize must begin!

It is clear that the issue of regulating political finance requires an all-of-society approach. Coordination among Belize's political leadership, political parties, civil society organisations and citizens is required to debate and enact constitutional, legislative and regulatory reform measures to mitigate the wide-spread and systemic abuse of political financing and its dangerous nexus with corruption and clientelism.

We offer this Report as a tool for increasing awareness about the deep burdens that the lack of regulation of political parties and their financing place on Belizean society and Belizean democracy. It is hoped that the considered discussions of options for regulation help to inform policy and laws for Belize that best suit our national context and conjuncture. The Belizean people deserve nothing less as part of the transformational process of improving their livelihoods and enhancing the quality of Belize's democracy.



Appendix 1

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Abuse of state resources:

Undue advantages obtained by certain parties or candidates, through use of their official positions or connections to govern-mental institutions, to influence the outcome of elections.

Campaign contributions

Any monetary donations, gifts having a monetary value and in-kind donations, given by an individual or a legal entity, made with the knowledge and consent of a candidate or a political party, for funding election campaigns.

Campaign expenditures:

Any expenditure, monetary or in-kind, made by or on behalf of a candidate or a party during an electoral campaign for electoral purposes.

Campaign finance disclosure:

A requirement that the sources and amounts of campaign finance contributions and the nature and amounts of campaign expenditures of electoral actors be made public.

Campaign finance reporting:

A requirement that electoral actors submit, throughout the campaign or at a set time after the elections, reports on their campaign contributions and expenditures to an oversight body.

Corruption:

A form of dishonesty or a criminal offense that is undertaken by a person or organization, that is entrusted in a position of authority, to acquire illicit benefits or abuse of power for one's gain.¹⁶¹

Institutional oversight:

The role performed by a regulatory body to monitor and assess electoral actors' compliance with campaign finance regulations. Oversight of campaign finance can also be carried out by civil society and international organizations.

Legal entities:

May include corporations, trade unions, non-governmen-tal organizations, enterprises with government contracts, political parties or foundations and other organizations.

Qualitative limitations:

Are defined by the type of transaction. This may be a source of contributions, for example foreign, state, or anonymous donations. Alternatively, it may refer to limitations on the type of expenditure, for exam-ple paid political advertising.

¹⁶¹Transparency International: <https://www.transparency.org/en/about>.

Quantitative limitations:

Are defined in monetary terms and may include limitations on the amount that individuals or legal entities may donate. Alternatively, they may constitute a limit on how much a candidate or party may spend during an election campaign.

Political clientelism: (aka handout politics)

A political exchange between politicians, who provide or promise a variety of resources and favours to individuals (clients), who, in exchange, provide or promise political support.¹⁶²

Political clinics:¹⁶³

In Belize, there are the year-round operations at the constituency level, where constituents can visit with representatives and candidates for receiving information, sharing needs and/or engaging in clientelist bargains.

Political finance:

All contributions and expenses, monetary and in-kind, made to and incurred by political parties and candidates for electoral purposes. This broader term includes campaign finance.

Political party financing:

Monetary and in-kind contributions and expenses made to and incurred by political parties in their routine activities.

Political participation:

Behaviour influencing or attempting to influence the distribution of public goods, inclusive of informal participation.¹⁶⁴

Private financing:

Financial and in-kind contributions from individuals and private entities made directly to political parties and candidates for the purpose of an electoral campaign.

Public Financing:

Direct or indirect funding or other support from the state to political parties and candidates towards their political financing needs.

Third-party financing:

Campaign expenditures made independently of a candidate or party with the aim of promoting or opposing a candidate or party, either directly or indirectly. Third-party financing is sometimes referred to as “independent speech” or “non-party campaigning”.

Voter bribery:

A form of electoral malpractice intended to increase the number of votes that a particular candidate or political party receives in an election by providing money or other benefits to constituents in exchange for their vote.

¹⁶²Dylan Vernon, *Political Clientelism and Democracy in Belize: From my Hand to Yours* (Kingston, Jamaica: The University of the West Indies Press, 2022), 1.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶⁴John A. Booth and Mitchell A. Seligson, eds., *Political Participation in Latin America: Citizen and the State*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (New York, NY and London: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1978), 6.

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