

Want to make an impact on climate change? Focus on elections.



Choosing individual actions for climate change can take many forms. Drawing on an analysis of elections and their impact on climate policy, offset against other forms of climate action, [Seth Wynes](#) argues for the effectiveness of supporting politicians backing environmental policies. Drawing a comparison with the way in which fossil fuel interests have systematically sought to influence politics at all levels, he suggests climate advocates would be well advised to adopt similar strategies.

Elections are critical to climate action, but climate activists and donors could do more to capitalize on these high leverage moments. While some [climate advocates](#) prefer to focus on technology at the expense of politics, others campaign in elections, but focus only on the most newsworthy races. Can we evaluate these competing strategies?

We can begin by considering elections from the perspective of a single voter. Here, the desired outcome is to cast a deciding ballot in a tied election, ideally for a candidate with the best climate policies. The likelihood of casting a “pivotal vote” is low – In the last US election at best [one in about 10 million](#) for residents of swing states. But, the consequences of elections can be just as big as the odds of a pivotal vote are small.

Much like calculating the expected value of playing in lotteries with slim chances but huge jackpots, we can use a formula to weigh the probability of casting a pivotal vote against what is at stake. In a recent [paper](#), my colleagues and I used this math to show that donating to a politician who wants to reduce greenhouse gas emissions can be more effective than giving to a tree-planting carbon offset fund.

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The idea is probabilistic; your one donation is unlikely to be pivotal in generating the votes that swing an election. But many donations over many races will win some elections, and those elections will be more important for the climate than many tree plantations. This makes some intuitive sense: the tree-planting company only plants trees, while the politician may conserve a forest, subsidize public transit and shut down coal power plants.

But, leveraging elections to reduce emissions requires activists and donors to avoid some counterproductive instincts. A few guidelines could help.

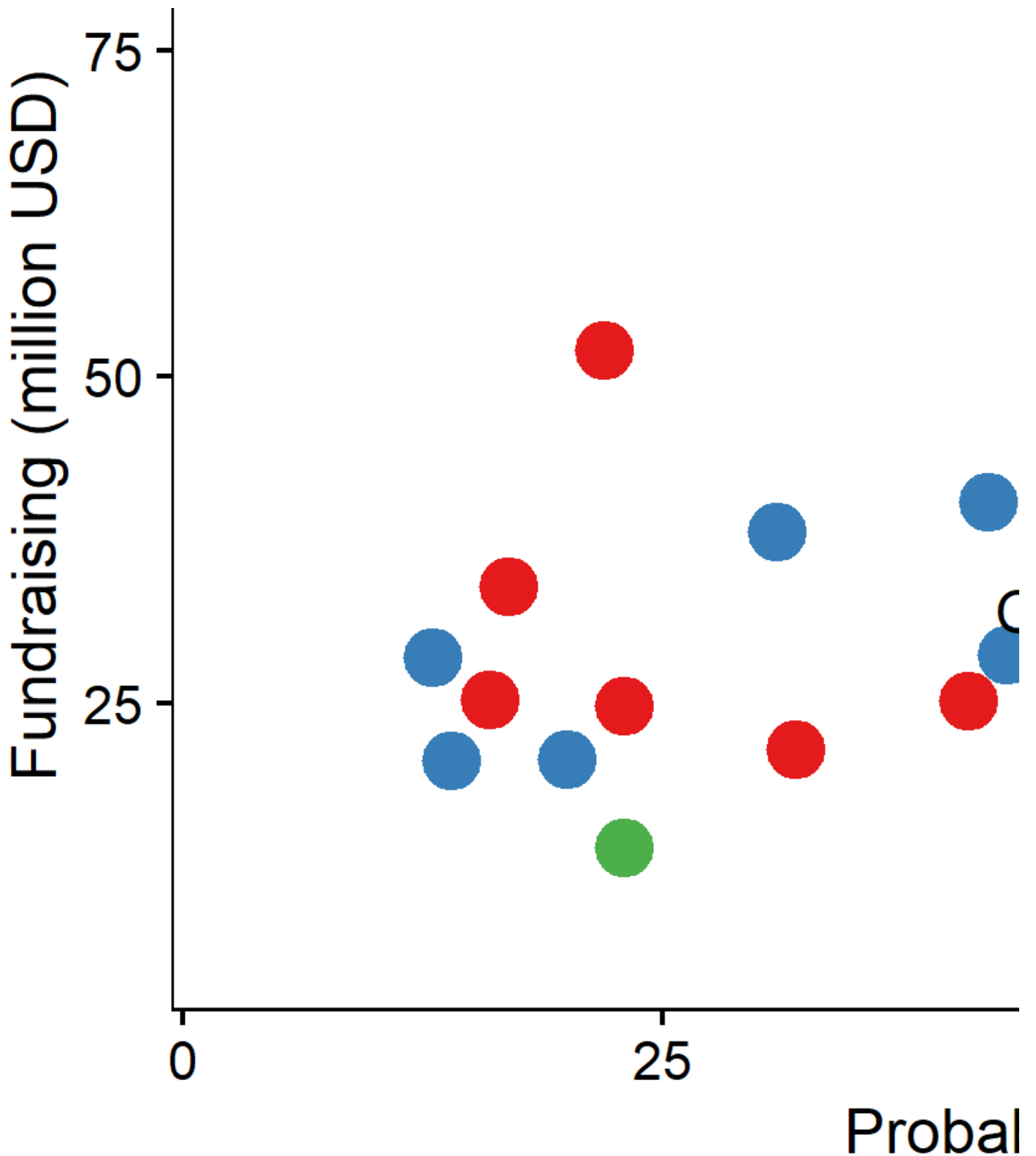
First, if you’re supporting a candidate in a race, the election forecast should be close. The likelihood of your vote (or the donation that turns out an additional vote) swinging an election increases exponentially the closer the race is to a 50-50 contest.

If donors already invested in candidates rationally, you would expect candidates in close races to receive the most support. As you can see from data on US senate races, this is not the case.

Figure 1 – Probability of winning the election (take from [fivethirtyeight.com](#)) versus fundraising (third quarter values taken from the Campaign Finance Institute). If donors were spending more strategically, we would expect to see candidates near 50% receiving more donations.



McGrath



Why did Amy McGrath, with only a 4% chance of winning her race, receive over \$80 million in donations? Ostensibly because Democrats detest her opponent, Mitch McConnell. A more effective strategy for ousting McConnell would have been trying to take away his position as Senate Majority Leader by giving to underfunded Democrats in closer races, like Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock.

The second rule for making climate progress through elections is focusing on races where there is a big difference in the climate ambitions of the leading candidates. Unfortunately, it's pretty easy to find examples where one candidate proposes climate action and the second will do either nothing or worse: Trump versus Biden comes to mind, and even in the UK, a politician's party is a reliable [guide](#) to their climate credentials.

Third, it's better to support challengers than incumbents, partially because they spend more on getting elected rather than paying off [old debts](#).

Finally, the quieter the race, the better. Big races are saturated with money and attention, so additional cash doesn't go very far. But in low-key races a little advertising can really raise the profile of a new candidate. Mike Bloomberg supporting clean energy advocates in the obscure Arizona Corporation Commission [election](#) was quite clever, while his \$500 million contribution to his own Presidential campaign was not.

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It's hard to overstate what is at stake in elections. We investigated the [2019 Canadian federal election](#), where the distinct policies of the leading parties allowed us to estimate the difference in emissions between the two likeliest outcomes. We then allocated responsibility for those saved emissions to voters much like a carbon calculator shares emissions from an aircraft amongst passengers.

The median emissions responsibility of a voter who selected a winning candidate was 34.2 tCO₂e. That works out to a stunning 14 times more than the emissions that comes from a year of driving.

Fossil fuel donors have long understood that they can structure the decision-making of consumers in their favour by winning elections even at a very granular scale. The Koch brothers have a [history](#) of opposing public transit ballot initiatives, which are perfect examples of under the radar elections where a little money and grassroots organizing can upset the trajectory of a race. Climate activists should adopt the same kind of thinking.

- *This blog post draws on the author's co-authored article, "[Understanding the climate responsibility associated with elections](#)", published in *One Earth*. and first appeared at [LSE Impact of Social Sciences](#).*
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