

NUMBER 7-2026

CPP REPORT

January 2026



AUTHORS

Gail J. Buttorff
Samuel T. Danilola
Jim Granato
Catherine M. Miers
Soran Mohtadi
Maria P. Perez Argüelles
Pablo M. Pinto
Savannah L. Sipole
Garrett P. Upchurch
Agustín Vallejo
M.C. Sunny Wong

Campaign Giving and Campaign-Finance Attitudes in Greater Houston

We examine monetary giving and campaign-finance attitudes in the Greater Houston area. Using data from the third wave of the SPACE City panel, we find that while about half of residents report donating money in the past year, direct political contributions are uncommon. Among political donors, most contributions are small, though a limited number of donors account for higher-end giving. Political donations most frequently support congressional and state or local races. Lowering inflation and provision of public services are the most salient issues shaping donations. Attitudes toward small-dollar donations are largely neutral, whereas large donations generate broad discomfort. Overall, intentions to donate in upcoming elections remain low, with meaningful variation by age and partisan identification.



Center for Public Policy
Hobby School of Public Affairs

Key Takeaways

1. **Monetary giving is common, but direct donations to political campaigns are rare:** About half of Greater Houston respondents report donating money in the past 12 months (49.6%), while fewer than one in ten report donating directly to political campaigns (8.8%).
2. **Giving is concentrated in lower-to-mid amounts, with a high-end tail:** Most donors report giving less than \$500 last year, but a non-trivial percentage report donating \$5,000 or more.
3. **Political donations most often target congressional and state/local contests:** Among political donors, contributions most commonly target congressional campaigns and state and local contests, with many donors giving across multiple political channels.
4. **Inflation reduction and core public services are the strongest motivators for political giving:** Respondents report the highest issue importance for inflation reduction and provision of public services such as healthcare, energy affordability, public safety, and jobs, when considering political donations, while trade and immigration are more likely to be deemed “not important.”
5. **Attitudes are neutral on small-dollar giving but negative on large donations:** Views on increasing small-dollar donations are dominated by neutrality, whereas a majority report discomfort with large (> \$20,000) political donations; unfamiliarity dominates views of campaign contributions from political action committees while the best-known PACs tend to receive more disapproval than approval.
6. **Low intent to donate in upcoming elections:** Few Greater Houston area residents intend on donating to campaigns this election cycle, with variation by age and party.

Introduction

Political participation is most often assessed through voting behavior, while less attention is paid to participation through campaign contributions. Yet the role of money in U.S. elections has become increasingly controversial over the past decade, particularly following the Supreme Court’s 2010 decision in *Citizens United v. FEC*, which removed limits on independent political expenditures by corporations and unions and facilitated the growth of outside spending groups such as Super PACs. Since then, campaign-finance debates have increasingly focused on whether rising expenditures amplify the political influence of a small number of wealthy donors.

These concerns are grounded in recent electoral trends. The 2024 federal election cycle was among the most expensive in U.S. history, with total spending across presidential, congressional, and Senate races approaching \$16 billion. Independent expenditures alone accounted for several billion dollars, reflecting the growing prominence of outside groups in financing electoral activity.¹ In addition, so-called “dark money”—political spending by organizations not required to disclose their donors—reached a record \$1.9 billion in 2024, further intensifying concerns about transparency and accountability in campaign finance.²

Against this national backdrop, understanding how ordinary citizens view political donations—and whether they are willing to participate financially—takes on renewed importance. In this report we offer a snapshot of campaign giving and perceptions of campaign finance among residents of the Greater Houston area. In December 2025, our research team asked participants in the University of Hous-

ton Hobby School’s **SPACE City Panel** about campaign finance. Our analysis provides answers to the following questions: *To what causes do area residents donate?; How much do they give?; Which political offices and causes attract contributions?; How do respondents perceive small and large donations?; What is their opinion on PACs; and how likely are residents to donate in the future?*

Donation Types and Amounts

Nearly half of Greater Houston area residents donated money in the last 12 months. Figure 1 shows that this giving is directed primarily toward charitable and nonprofit organizations: 43.8% of respondents say they contributed to a charitable or nonprofit cause, far exceeding the shares who donated to crowdfunding or social appeals (9.9%) or directly to political campaigns (8.8%). Only 2.8% report other types of donations. Overall, while half of the Houston residents donate money, political contributions represent a comparatively small slice of reported giving activity.

Donations less than \$500 are the most common. Among Houston area residents that reported donating to any cause in the last 12 months, we asked approximately how much they donated across all causes. Figure 2 reports the distribution of self-reported donation amounts. Contributions are concentrated in the lower and mid-range brackets. The modal category is \$50–\$199 (23.8%), followed by \$200–\$499 (19.2%) and donations under \$50 (18.8%). In contrast, fewer respondents report giving at higher levels: 12.0% donated \$500–\$999 and about one in ten gave \$1k–\$2.5k (10.3%). Larger contributions are less common; yet, 5.6% report donating between \$2.5k–\$5k and 10.4% report donating \$5k or more. Overall, the figure suggests that the vast majority

of Greater Houston area residents donated less than \$500 across all causes in 2025.

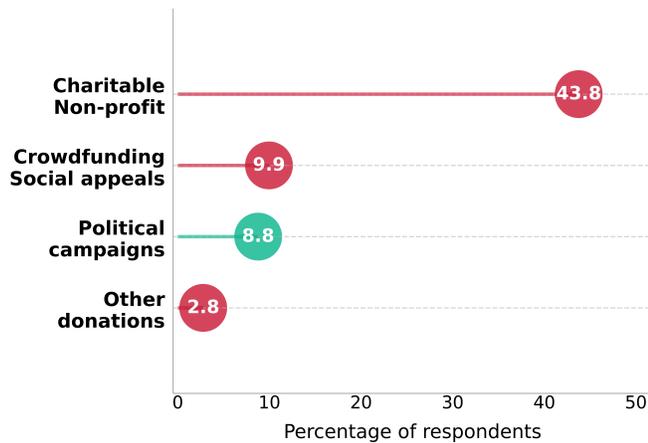


Figure 1 Share of respondents by type of donation



Figure 2 Amount donated to all causes in past 12 months

Where Political Donations Go and What Motivates them

Most political donations go to district or local races. Figure 3 shows that, among respondents who report donating to political campaigns in the past 12 months, contributions most commonly flow to candidate-centered races, especially Congress. A majority of political donors say they contributed to a congressional campaign (57.1%), followed by state or local offices (45.6%). Presidential campaigns also attract a substantial share of donors (37.9%) as do political parties (34.5%). Donations to advocacy groups are somewhat less common (29.3%), and fewer than one in five donors report giving to a PAC (18.2%). Because respondents could donate to multiple campaign types, these percentages do not sum to 100; instead, they indicate that many donors spread giving across several political channels, with the strongest emphasis on congressional and state and local offices.

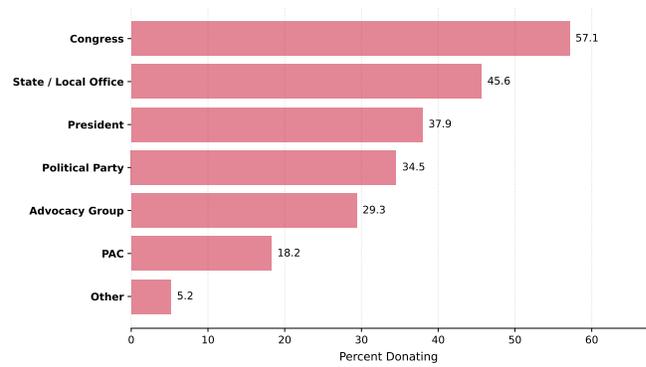


Figure 3 Percentage of donors by type of political campaign

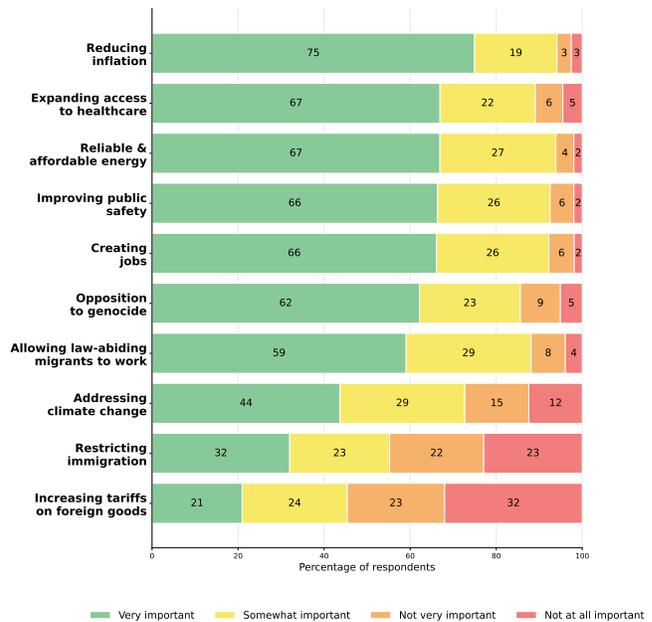


Figure 4 Importance of policy issues in shaping donation decisions

Economic concerns can be important motivators of political giving. Figure 4 broadens the lens to all respondents and asks which policy issues are important when thinking about donating to candidates. The results reveal a clear hierarchy of priorities in the Greater Houston area. Reducing inflation is overwhelmingly salient, with 75.0% calling it very important and another 19.2% somewhat important. Several other issues also command broad importance, including expanding access to healthcare (66.9% very; 22.1% somewhat), reliable and affordable energy (66.9% very; 26.9% somewhat), improving public safety (66.4% very; 26.1% somewhat), and creating jobs (66.1% very; 26.1% somewhat). In contrast, some issues appear more divisive or less central to donation decisions. Addressing climate change, for example, is more mixed (43.7% very important; 29.0% somewhat important; 27.3% not very or not at all), while restricting immigration and increasing tariffs on foreign goods draw the

largest shares saying the issue is *not at all important* (22.9% and 32.0%, respectively). Increasing tariffs also has the lowest share of “very important” responses (20.9%). The results suggest that prospective political donations are most strongly tied to bread-and-butter economic conditions and core public services, while immigration, climate, and trade-related issues generate more polarized reactions.

Taken together, Figures 3 and 4 indicate that political donors most often direct contributions toward candidate races, especially Congress and state and local offices, while the broader public’s issue priorities point to economic pressures as the most powerful potential motivator for campaign giving.³ The next section examines perceptions of small versus large political contributions.

Small vs. Large Donations

Increasing small-dollar contributions attracts modest net support, but most respondents are undecided. Small-dollar donations are defined as individual donations totaling \$200 or less. About one-third of respondents either *agree* (18.8%) or *strongly agree* (13.2%) that small-dollar donations should be increased (32.0% total), compared with 20.9% who *disagree* (9.1%) or *strongly disagree* (11.8%). The plurality position is *neither agree nor disagree* (47.1%), indicating that many Greater Houston area residents do not hold a settled view on whether campaigns (or reforms) should prioritize expanding individual, small-dollar participation.

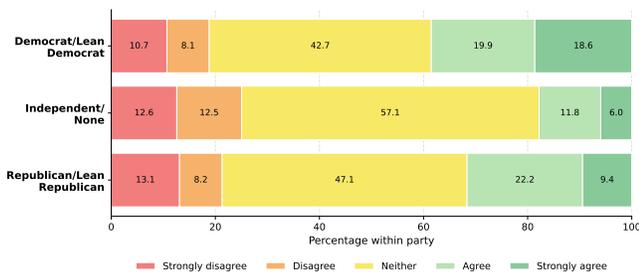


Figure 5 Support for increasing small-dollar donations By Party ID

Support for expanding small-dollar donations is strongest among Democrats and weakest among Independents. Figure 5 shows attitudes by partisan identification, revealing clear differences in support. Democrats and those that lean Democrat are the most supportive (19.9% agree; 18.6% strongly agree), while Republicans and respondents who lean Republican show more mixed support (22.2% agree; 9.4% strongly agree) alongside a sizable neutral bloc (47.1%). Independents stand out for uncertainty: 57.1% are neutral and comparatively few express support (11.8% agree; 6.0% strongly agree). In short, even where small-dollar donations draw more support than opposition overall, that support is concentrated more among partisan identifiers, especially Democrats.

Large contributions generate broad discomfort. Most respondents (55.5%) are uncomfortable with large donations, while only 11.8% are comfortable. Another 32.7% reported either not knowing or having no opinion. Compared with the tepid, but net-positive, support for increasing small-dollar giving, reactions to large contributions are more clearly negative.

The partisan gap persists for large donations, though discomfort remains the dominant view. Figure 6 indicates that Democrats/lean Democrats are the most uncomfortable with large donations (66.5%). Republicans and those that lean Republican are more than twice as likely to say they are comfortable with large donations compared to Democrats and Independents. Still, a plurality of Republicans/lean Republicans reports discomfort (45.8%). Independents and those with other or no party ID report the highest uncertainty (48.6% don’t know/no opinion). Taken together, these results suggest a broad normative preference for limiting the role of large donors, even as views on encouraging small-dollar donations are less crystallized.

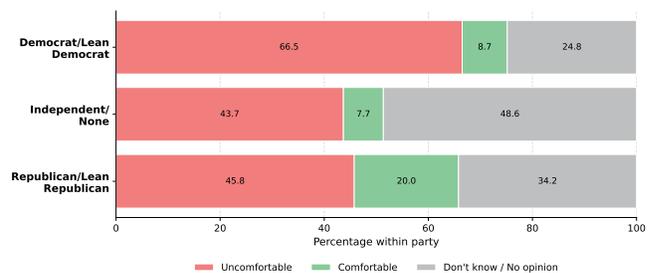


Figure 6 Comfort with large political donations By Party.

Views of PAC donations are shaped as much by unfamiliarity as by approval or disapproval. The survey also asked all respondents about whether they supported their preferred candidates taking donations from any of the top five Political Action Committees (PACs) in the 2023-2024 election cycle.⁴ Figure 7 shows that many respondents have not heard of several of the PACs included in the question, most notably *Never Back Down* which 46% of respondents have not heard of. Unfamiliarity is also substantial for AIPAC (19%) and the National Beer Wholesalers Association (19%), while the National Association of Realtors is slightly better known (16% haven’t heard). By contrast, Blue Cross Blue Shield is widely recognized (only 7% haven’t heard), but evaluations are more polarized and lean negative: 19% disapprove and 20% strongly disapprove of their preferred candidate taking contributions from them. Across four of the five PACs, the modal response is *neither approve nor disapprove* (ranging from 26% to 40%), underscoring that even when respondents recognize a PAC, many do not hold firm opinions about whether candidates they support should take donations from them.

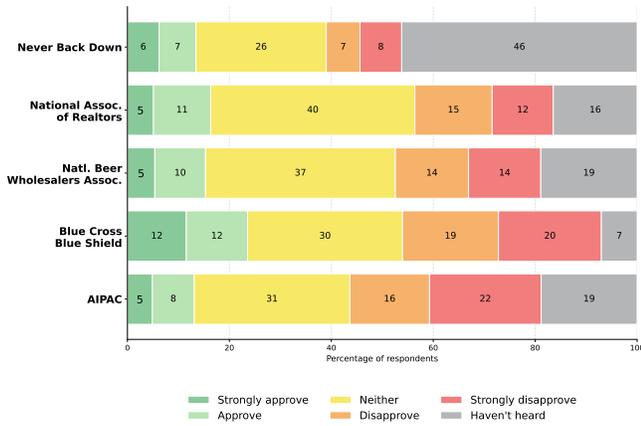


Figure 7 Awareness and approval of selected PACs

Democrats are more likely to disapprove. Thirty-percent of Democrats/lean Democrats disapprove or strongly disapprove of candidates taking money from the National Association of Realtors compared to 23.2% of Republicans/lean Republicans. Similarly, 45.4% of Democrats/lean Democrats disapprove of candidates taking money from AIPAC compared to 17.1% of Republicans/lean Republicans. Democrats and Republicans, however, are similarly disapproving of their preferred candidates taking money from Blue Cross Blue Shield: 42.2% of Democrats/lean Democrats and 41.5% of Republicans/lean Republicans disapprove or strongly disapprove. The next section turns to the likelihood of donating in the next election cycle.

The Future of Political Giving: Likelihood of Donating in Upcoming Elections

Political contributions are unlikely for most Greater Houston residents. Figure 8 shows that a majority of respondents describe themselves as *extremely unlikely* to donate to a political campaign (51.0%), and an additional 14.3% say they are *somewhat unlikely*. About one in five (19.9%) report being *neither likely nor unlikely*, indicating a sizable pool of respondents whose behavior may depend on candidates, is-

sues, or campaign outreach. In contrast, only 11.1% say they are *somewhat likely* to donate, and just 3.8% are *extremely likely*. Overall, the distribution is heavily weighted toward low intention to donate, implying that future political giving will likely continue to come from a relatively small share of highly motivated contributors, with limited expansion unless campaigns can mobilize those currently on the fence.

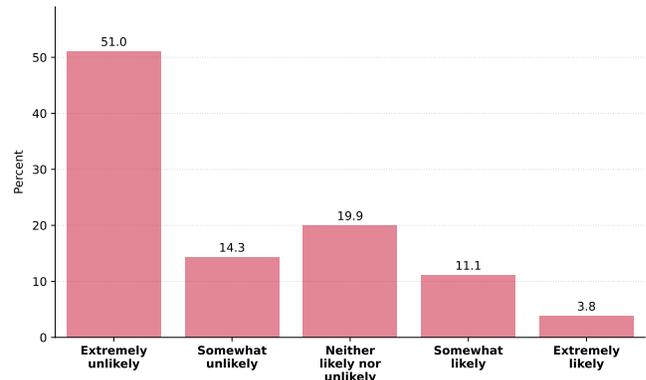


Figure 8 Self-reported likelihood of donating to a political campaign in upcoming elections

Figure 9 shows that reluctance to contribute in upcoming elections is common across every age group, though the intensity of that reluctance varies. Among ages 18–34, 49.1% say they are *extremely unlikely* to donate and 15.9% are *somewhat unlikely*, compared with 11.7% who describe themselves as either *somewhat* or *extremely likely* (7.8% and 3.9%, respectively). Respondents ages 35–49 are the least inclined: 56.7% are *extremely unlikely* and only 12.7% report being likely (10.4% somewhat and 2.3% extremely). Older residents are modestly more open to contributing. Nearly one in five of those 50–64 (19.1%) report being likely (13.5% somewhat likely; 5.6% extremely likely), while among those 65+ the likely share is similar (17.9% alongside a comparatively large neutral group (23.1%). The gauge summary reinforces this pattern: the average likelihood index is lowest for ages 35–49 (22) and highest for ages 65+ (30), with ages 18–34 (25) and 50–64 (27) in between.⁵

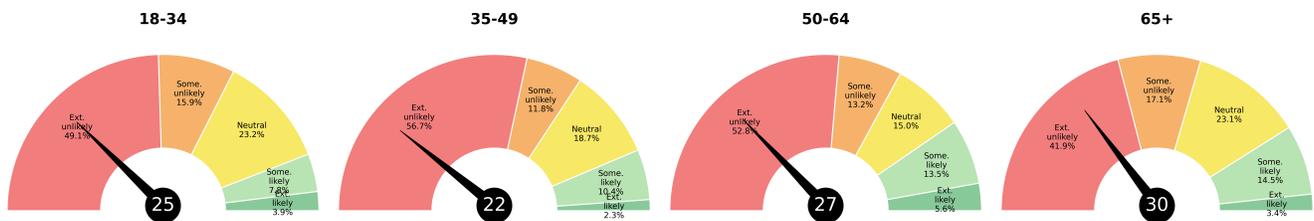


Figure 9 Likelihood of donating to political campaigns in upcoming elections, by age group.

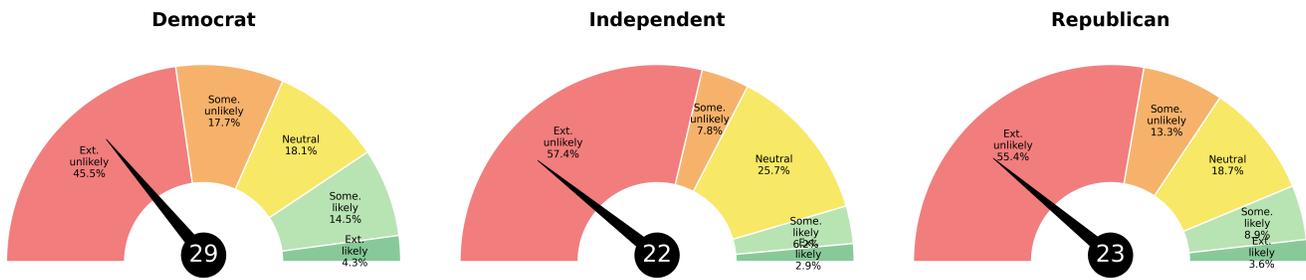


Figure 10 Likelihood of donating to political campaigns in upcoming elections, by party identification.

Partisanship is strongly associated with the intention to donate. Figure 10 shows that majorities of Independents and Republicans describe themselves as *extremely unlikely* to donate to political campaigns in upcoming elections (57.4% and 55.4%, respectively), compared with 45.5% of Democrats. Democrats are also more likely than other groups to indicate some openness to contributing: 14.5% report being *somewhat likely* and 4.3% *extremely likely* (18.8% combined), versus 9.9% among Republicans (6.3% somewhat; 3.6% extremely) and 9.5% among Independents (6.6% somewhat; 2.9% extremely). Independents stand out for having the largest neutral share (25.7%), suggesting a comparatively sizable group whose donating behavior may be more contingent on candidates or circumstances. Consistent with these distributions, the likelihood index is highest among Democrats (29) and lower among Republicans (23) and Independents (22). In other words, despite broad reluctance to donate among Greater Houston residents, Democrats appear more enthusiastic about contributing than Independents or Republicans.

Conclusion

This report provides a descriptive profile of monetary giving and campaign-finance perceptions in the Greater Houston area using responses from the third wave of the SPACE City Panel. The results place political giving in context: while roughly half of respondents report donating to some cause in the prior year, a much smaller share report donating directly to political campaigns. Among donors, reported contribution amounts cluster below \$500 but exhibit a measurable right tail, indicating that a minority of donors account for higher-end giving brackets.

Among political donors, contributions most frequently flow to candidate-centered races for congressional and state and local offices, suggesting that campaign-directed giving, when it occurs, is oriented toward electoral targets rather than toward parties or organized committees. Overall, respondents across partisan groups express discomfort with large political donations, while most remain unwilling to donate financially themselves, which could indicate a broad concern about the influence of money in politics alongside limited appetite for donor-driven engagement.

Taken together, these findings highlight a persistent tension

in contemporary campaign finance: widespread public unease about the role of money in politics coexists with low levels of direct financial participation. Understanding this gap between concern and engagement is essential for policymakers, campaigns, and reform advocates seeking to assess the representativeness and perceived legitimacy of the current campaign-finance system.

Notes

1. Federal Election Commission, April 23, 2025. “Statistical Summary of 24-Month Campaign Activity of the 2023–2024 Election Cycle.” <https://www.fec.gov/updates/statistical-summary-of-24-month-campaign-activity-of-the-2023-2024-election-cycle/>. See also OpenSecrets, “Cost of Election,” <https://www.opensecrets.org/elections-overview/cost-of-election>, reporting total federal election spending nearing \$15 billion in 2024.
2. The Brennan Center reports documents unprecedented levels of nondisclosed political spending. See Anna Masoglia, May 7, 2025. “Dark Money Hit a Record \$1.9 Billion in the 2024 Federal Election,” Expert Brief, Brennan Center for Justice. <https://www.brennan-center.org/our-work/research-reports/dark-money-hit-record-high-19-billion-2024-federal-races>
3. Figure 3 is calculated only among respondents who reported donating to politics in the past 12 months, while Figure 6 reports issue importance among all survey respondents, regardless of whether they donated.
4. OpenSecrets, “Top PACs,” <https://www.opensecrets.org/political-action-committees-pacs/top-pacs/2024>.
5. To place the needle, responses are converted to a simple 0–100 index: *extremely unlikely*=0, *somewhat unlikely*=25, *neither likely nor unlikely*=50, *somewhat likely*=75, and *extremely likely*=100. The needle (and center number) show the average score for each age group.

Methodology

Sample & data collection. *SPACE City Panel, Wave 3, Dec. 2025/Jan. 2026; N = 1,549; mode: online. MOE: ±3.47%.*

Weights. *Post-stratified to age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, county. Missing demographics imputed.*

Exclusions. *Unless explicit in figure Don't knows and Skipped responses excluded from figures or analyses.*

Percentages: *Unless explicit in text of figure, percentages calculated over the total of respondents.*

Definitions. *Small Donations refer to individual contributions below \$200, while Large Donations denote those \$20,000 or above.*



Contact Information:

For information about learning or using the **Space Panel**, please contact us:
Visit: Space City Panel
Email: hobbycpp@central.uh.edu
Phone: (713) 743-3970

How to cite: Buttorff, G., Danilola, S., Granato, J., Miers C. M., Mohtadi S., Perez Argüelles, M. P., Pinto, P. M., Sipole, S. L., Upchurch, G. P., Vallejo, A., & Wong, M. C. S. (2026). **Campaign Giving and Campaign-Finance Attitudes in Greater Houston.** *CPP Report 7-2026*.

Corresponding Author:

Agustín Vallejo
E-mail: avallejo7@uh.edu

Template Design

Agustín Vallejo, avallejo7@uh.edu