

Historical American Political Finance Data at the National Archives: A Preface to the INET Edition

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ABSTRACT

Narratives in American history, politics, and economics — even those by the most accomplished researchers — often resemble donuts: at their core lies a hole that no amount of sweet speculation can truly fill. They say almost nothing about the financing behind even the most pivotal American political campaigns and elections. Both history and the social sciences suffer greatly when facts are missing and wild guesses take their place.

INET's new data archive of historical political finance records at the National Archives marks a major step toward filling this factual void. It assembles all campaign finance reports filed by political parties and presidential candidates up to 1974, the year before the Federal Election

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Commission was established. A few additional files, including one from the FEC for 1976, are also included, as detailed below.

This INET Working Paper outlines what users need to know to navigate the archive effectively and locate the data they require. The files themselves can be [found here](#).

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One afternoon years ago, after I had spent enough time haunting the reading room of the National Archives for the librarians to decide I was serious, a harried government archivist waved me past the desk and told me to just go search the stacks myself. I found the file I wanted with little trouble, but the fleeting peek into that tantalizing inner sanctum made a deep impression: For the first time I glimpsed the breathtaking sprawl of the federal government's archive: box after box of political party reports detailing their contributions and expenditures from the high Progressive Era down to the mid-nineteen seventies, just before the Federal Election Commission took over.

When they were first compiled, a handful of researchers consulted these records. But almost no one followed in their footsteps. In recent years, I and a few others have used some, but their sheer volume -- and numbing level of detail -- makes consulting and copying prohibitively expensive. Many resist duplication altogether, thanks to awkward binding or faint, faded print.

The result is that even the best work in American history, politics, and economics often resembles a donut: at their center sits a gaping hole that no amount of sugary speculation can fill. Most studies have almost nothing to say about how even the most dramatic of political campaigns or events were financed. The cost in theoretical terms for the social sciences is steep: when facts vanish, fantasy rushes in without constraint.

The Great Financial Crisis of 2008 heightened the urgency of finding realistic and serious ways to study how politics and economics actually interact. It also gave rise to an organization willing to tackle that problem head-on, rather than simply talk about it or wring its hands: the Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET), headed by Dr. Robert Johnson.

When I became its Research Director, I thought immediately of the many feet of records at the National Archives documenting facts that figure in virtually no histories or case studies. Fortunately, Dr. Johnson quickly saw how opening up that vast trove of virtually unused data could turbo charge work in several disciplines -- not just economics, political science, or history, but even literary studies, since so many American intellectuals occasionally made small contributions to political parties, too, a fact their biographers often miss.

Making this vision a reality required overcoming two challenges: securing the cooperation of the National Archives and finding someone capable of meeting INET's high technical standards. The goal was to make the data as machine-searchable as possible, though I knew from my own experience that individual files were sometimes very faint or bound in unusual ways.

INET was fortunate to surmount both challenges quickly. Dr. Richard McCulley, then in charge of the section of the National Archives housing the records, responded enthusiastically to our initial approach. A trained historian, he and others recommended Jeremy Bigwood, whose skill and experience in multi-modal photo reproduction made him the ideal person to produce the records. Without these two gifted individuals, I have no doubt that the project would never have been completed. Numerous obstacles, including, in the final stages, Archive closures due to Covid, could also easily have ended it. But thanks to their efforts, INET successfully completed the project.

There are too many riches in these files to explore here. But some cautions are in order. It would be foolish to claim they contain the whole financial history of American politics for the period they cover – they do not. Many local, state, and regional political contributions are missing.¹ The Archives also hold rosters of contributors for individual congressional races that we were unable to include in this series. And it is important to remember that the data cover formal political contributions only, not the wider spectrum of political money that is harder to trace, such as stock tips, personal investments, or consulting contracts.²

But these files offer an overwhelming wealth of new data on many of the most important people and events in American history. For example, they include far more contributions than even the extensive Congressional investigations published during the New Deal period. Analysts can also sift through much larger files of

¹ See, e.g., Thomas Ferguson, *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), Chapter 4, though the files presented in the INET collection add substantially to what was known about cases discussed there.

² See the discussion of the “Spectrum of Political Money” in Thomas Ferguson, Paul Jorgensen, and Jie Chen, “How Much Can the U.S. Congress Resist Political Money? A Quantitative Assessment,” Institute for New Economic Thinking Working Paper No. 109 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.36687/inetwp109>

contributions to Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and William Howard Taft than were easily available before.³ The funders behind Woodrow Wilson's second term are richly documented here.

Aware of the controversies surrounding the American Liberty League's role during the New Deal, and its leaders' earlier efforts to find alternative tax revenues by ending Prohibition, we made sure to include files from those campaigns as well. The Nixon campaigns records include many pages of documents that appear never to have been published previously and promise to shed new light on his financial backers.

This list could go on, and surely will, as individual researchers dive into these troves and uncover major new discoveries.

Anyone with experience in archives knows the frustrations of relying on inventories and indexes to locate documents. These can feel like geological layers – uneven, disconnected, and sometimes dangerously mixed together. Boxes often carry multiple identifying numbers or symbols, and the official lists don't always match what is actually in the stacks. Sometimes, files that are supposed to be there cannot be found.

With this in mind, we designed the reference system and record layout to mirror as closely as possible what a researcher would find if she or he were actually encountering the physical boxes themselves, warts and all.

The collection also includes a PDF of campaign contributions to presidential candidates in 1976. Originally published by the Federal Election Commission, these records have, for reasons unknown, seem to have vanished from the Commission's website. Luckily, I had purchased a microfilm copy, so we have added it here.

³ Congressional committees issued reports on contributions for various campaigns, but the published versions of those reports reported selectively; often purporting to present total donations by some subset of the largest donors. The reports here show everything that was reported, which, to repeat, was never every contribution made at all levels in the campaign.

But note: records for the major party national committees for that year, which likely had a big influence on the final campaigns, are missing. So the usual yellow flag of caution waves over the totals.

Jeremy Bigwood has also been kind enough to add notes below to help researchers understand the organization of the records. His “Technical Notes” follow.

Technical Notes

Jeremy Bigwood

The PDFs contained in this data set are digital copies of records of campaign contributions to and expenditures of US political parties from approximately 1912 to 1974. There is also one PDF for the presidential campaign of 1976, as mentioned above in Thomas Ferguson’s Preface. The original records for all but the latter are now at the Center for Legislative Archives at US National Archives’ (NARA) located in Washington, DC and are a subset of NARA’s Record Group 233.

Content:

These records are disclosures of the registered financing of political action committees and parties as stipulated by the campaign finance reforms passed by the US Congress during the Progressive Era and their subsequent amendments. Some state campaign records are also in the collection. The records detail individuals and entities that funded or were paid by legal US political entities and movements between 1912 and 1974. The warnings in the general introduction to the project by Ferguson above on the incompleteness of these records need to be taken extremely seriously. State and local contributions of all kinds were rarely reported.

The original records are held in 461 containers, 230 of them in Hollinger “document boxes” and 231 in bound volumes of a variety of sizes as well as a single microfilm. The quantity of records found in a single container can range from a handful to over two thousand pages.

Hardcopy formats:

The records themselves are comprised of a variety of both handwritten and typed paper, newspaper, photostats and mimeographs. Documents range in size from approximately 7 x 5 cm to over 43 x 28 cm. Some are extremely faint.

Post-processing:

These records were digitized starting in 2012 using various cameras and scanners over a nine-year period. Images were edited in the Photoshop Lightroom program and expressed as Adobe Acrobat Professional and ABBYY PDF formats, which were subsequently text-recognized in each of those formats and then combined into a single PDF. The results of text-recognition have been far from perfect. We recommend doing digital queries using a search program or using Acrobat Search before drilling down into the data. We also recommend that you use a fast computer – or two (so you can look at two sets of documents at a time) and extract all the records onto a hard drive and index them using a professional search program such as DTSearch.

Numbering of the containers:

Many of the boxes and volumes in this collection were labeled out of sequence and some of these were labeled with identical numbers (a common phenomenon when groups of records are not stored in the same place). The box and volume numberings were put into a more logical order by this project to avoid confusion and each container is clearly marked.

Some boxes and volumes were “missing.” Some of these may have been destroyed when the records were held in a Congressional washroom, misfiled at the National Archives, or may never have existed. The boxes that are missing are numbers 49, 137, 138, 139, 140, 162, 166 and 167. The missing volumes are 19, 22, 24, 27, 31, 32, 33, 34 and 36.

Contents of the files:

The files exist in three big sets of folders.

1. The first is “A- INDEXES-FINDING AIDS.” This contains three files that describe some of the contents of the collection.

2. “B- RECORDS BY YEAR” – this contains records by year – a separate folder for each year. Some boxes contain records that were created over several years – all in the same box or volume – and often this fact is not represented on the labeling of said box or volume. If the contents of a single box or volume contain material created over several years, you will find that same box in each of those “year” folders. Using a digital query, you may also find references to dates one to three years past the dates of the records themselves. These are the expiration dates of licenses of the Notary Publics who attested to the authenticity of the documents and are not relevant researchers.
3. “C- ALL_BOXES_AND_VOLS” – contains all the boxes and volumes – by number. This may be the most useful for querying the whole collection with a search program.

Labeling of the PDFs:

The PDFs are labeled as follows:

233-NWL-14768-b003-1920, where:

233 = NARA Record Group (all collections of documents are placed in record groups).

NWL = Center for Legislative Archives (collections in NARA from the US Congress).

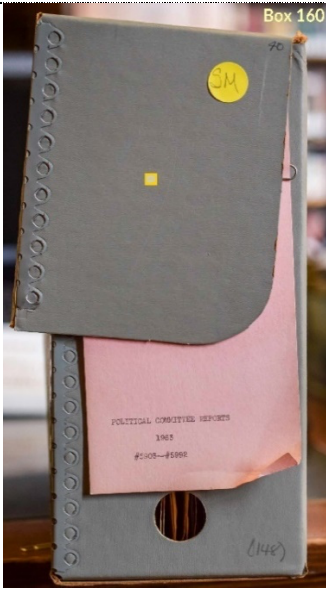
14768 = NARA assignment identifying number for the collection.

b003 = Box number three. If it were a volume, it would be “v” instead of “b.”

1920 = the year that the records were created.

233-NWL-14768-v003-1918-9 is Volume three which contains records from a date range of 1918-1919.

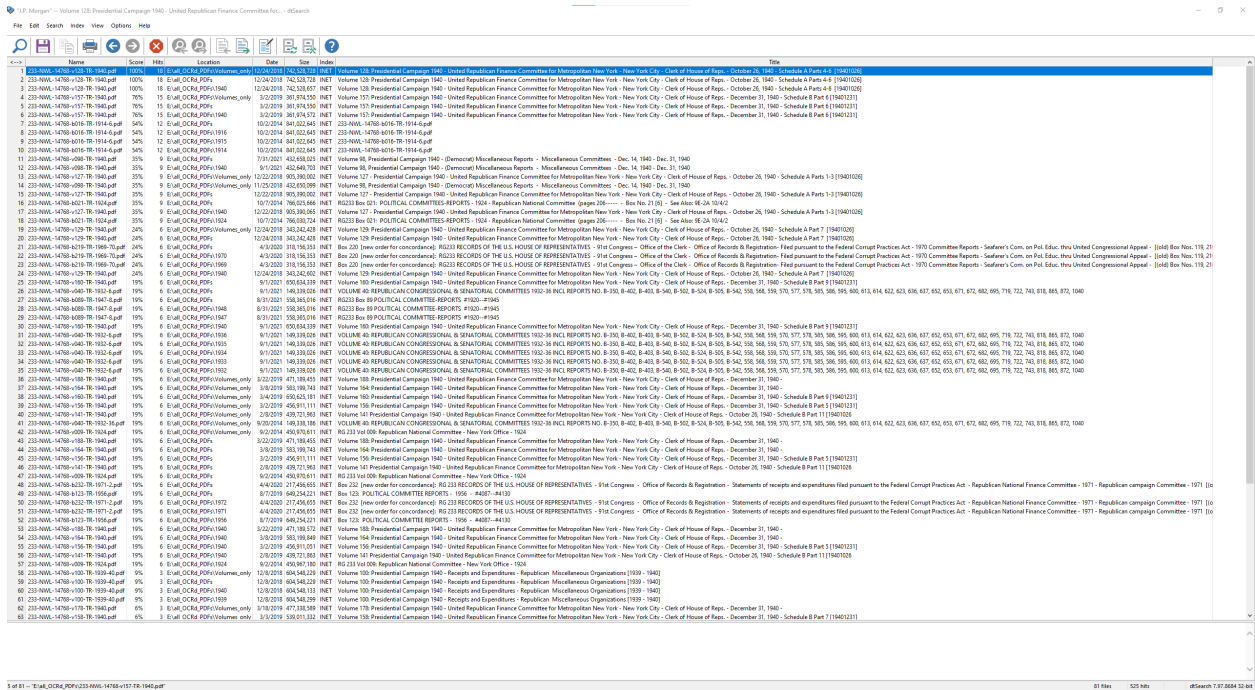
233-NWL-14768-b160[40](148)-1962-3



233-NWL-14768-b160[40](148)-1962-3 is **Box 160** using our numbering/concordance system – containing records created in 1918 and 1919. The box has also been labeled **Box 40** and **Box 148** by archivists – and may be referred to in the literature under those numbers. There are many cases of boxes having two or three separate numbers and we tried to maintain a logical numbering system.

Working with DTSearch:

Using DT Search or other search programs to query these records is clearly the fastest way to get results. Not all of the text-recognition has been effective, but this gives you a good idea of what is present in these records. The following image shows some of the results listed for a search of “J.P. Morgan:”



References

Ferguson, Thomas. *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226162010.001.0001>

Ferguson, Thomas, Paul Jorgensen, and Jie Chen. “How Much Can the U.S. Congress Resist Political Money? A Quantitative Assessment,” Institute for New Economic Thinking Working Paper No. 109 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.36687/inetwp109>