



U4 BRIEF 2025:5

Aled Williams

Reforming money politics to reduce environmental harm

Corruption erodes sustainable and inclusive development. It is both a political and technical challenge. The U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre (U4) works to understand and counter corruption worldwide.

U4 is part of the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), an independent development research institute in Norway.

www.u4.no

u4@cmi.no

Read online

www.u4.no/r/BR2505

Money politics undermines governance when campaign finance and lobbying serve as tools for undue influence. One overlooked consequence is environmental harm. Industries with vested interests often channel money into politics to weaken regulations and delay reforms. Evidence links political finance to climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, and reform efforts are emerging – such as civil society monitoring, international transparency initiatives, and national advocacy campaigns – alongside proposed actions to strengthen oversight and reduce corruption-driven environmental damage.

advocacy, and awareness-raising efforts are growing, but coordinated action is needed to link political finance reform to environmental governance and anti-corruption agendas.

- Opportunities include expanding research, creating practitioner guidance, and building dedicated reform coalitions. Incentivising political parties and candidates to embrace transparent financing could strengthen democracy while reducing corruption-driven environmental harm.

Main points

- Poorly regulated political finance and lobbying enable polluting industries to shape laws and enforcement. This influence undermines climate policies, weakens environmental standards, and entrenches harmful practices that accelerate ecological degradation.
- Research is concentrated in North America and Europe, but evidence from Brazil, Indonesia, and Peru shows how campaign finance and lobbying drive deforestation, environmental crimes, and pollution, pointing to a global problem requiring broader study.
- Lobbying by fossil fuel, mining, and chemical sectors typically seeks to dilute or delay environmental regulation. Exceptions exist, where firms support stronger controls.
- Policy and practice initiatives remain fragmented. Civil society monitoring,

Contents

The link between money politics and environmental harm	7
Existing efforts to address money politics that result in environmental harm	10
1. Advancing new resolutions as part of the UN Convention against Corruption , (UNCAC)	10
2. Cross-country civil society initiatives in resource rich-states	11
3. International awareness-raising events	11
4. National advocacy and reform efforts	12
5. Global communities of practice	12
Recommendations	13
1. Invest in more systematic research and evidence generation.	13
2. Carefully raise and reinforce popular and policy awareness of these issues.	13
3. Fund and produce a practitioner handbook, platform, or guidance document.	13
4. Establish a dedicated subgroup focused on political finance, lobbying, and environmental harm.	14
5. Clarify, target, and reinforce reform incentives at national and provincial levels.	14
References	15

Money fuels politics in all societies, from liberal democracies to autocracies. Money can enable political participation and the representation of different interests and voices in political and policy processes. But if it becomes a *quid-pro-quo* tool, money undermines the integrity of politics, institutions, and the quality of governance, allowing corruption to thrive. Reforming the finances of political parties and elections, as well as lobbying rules, are urgent tasks in an era of hard-to-track cryptocurrencies, disinformation, foreign interference, and state capture. Less recognised is the relationship between dysfunctional money politics and environmental harm, despite the importance of addressing the [triple planetary crisis](#) of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. This U4 Brief summarises evidence of the connections between political finance, corruption, and environmental harm. It covers emerging policy and practice efforts in this space, as well as gaps, opportunities, and recommendations for action.

Industries and corporations with significant environmental impacts, such as fossil fuel, mining and chemical companies, often contribute large sums of money to political campaigns and engage in lobbying. This can lead to regulatory capture, aligning regulators' interests with those of polluting industries, leading to weaker environmental regulations or enforcement. When political finance is dominated by industries with a vested interest in maintaining environmentally harmful practices, the result is often weaker environmental protection, increased pollution, and greater ecological damage. Similarly, there are examples of politicians engaging in environmentally harmful activities to fund their election. Addressing this requires reforms in campaign finance, lobbying, and regulatory processes to reduce the undue influence of money leading to environmental harm.

Our research is grounded in mixed methods. Secondary data is from a light-touch literature review completed via the Google and Google Scholar search engines, to a depth of three pages. Combinations of these terms were used: political finance, environmental harm, money politics, biodiversity loss, campaign finance, environmental degradation, lobbying. There were 54 grey and scholarly publication hits which were complemented by six qualitative interviews with organisations working on money politics and/or environmental harms ([International Foundation for Electoral Systems](#), [WWF International](#), [WWF Sweden](#), [Transparency International Secretariat](#), [Bantay Kita](#), and the [National Democratic Institute](#)). Interviewees were asked:

1. What are your priorities in addressing the nexus between political finance and environmental harms?
2. What are your main activities in this space to date and what do you have planned for the future?
3. How do you collaborate with others on this topic and can you give examples of

past collaborations or ideas for future partnerships?

4. What are the most important outputs on this topic and what outputs are you working on?
5. Do you have anything else to share of potential relevance?

The link between money politics and environmental harm

A focus on money politics, lobbying, and environmental harm - such as deforestation and biodiversity loss - is quite recent, though older literature connects money politics, fossil fuel or chemical pollution, and climate policies. Evidence of the connections between political finance and environmental harm skews towards democracies in Europe and North America, with less evidence emerging from Asia, Africa or Latin America. The literature largely focuses on political finance or lobbying and environmental harm in democracies, though some studies address lobbying and how it affects environmental outcomes in authoritarian states. The evidence mostly confirms that poorly regulated political finance in democracies worsens environmental outcomes. The evidence shows that various environmental harms result from political finance or lobbying, from the undermining of policies that address climate change to local pollution controls. Political finance is also only one of several tools used to obstruct environmental regulation, with others being lobbying and public disinformation campaigns.

The majority of the literature focused on North American and European democracies, particularly corporate lobbying on environment and climate policies in the US. The literature on lobbying in lower income economies is underdeveloped,¹ but this does not mean that political finance, lobbying, and environmental harm are more important in North America and Europe than elsewhere. There is likely greater research on these topics in North America and Europe, and researcher bias may mean studies on other contexts are categorised differently, such as under 'corruption' or 'political economy'. Lobbying is relatively more transparent in North America and European democracies, making relevant data more accessible for research. Yet, understanding of the nexus between political finance, lobbying, and environmental harm is likely skewed due to evidence being available mainly in North American and European democracies. Practitioners should bear this in mind when

1. Fjeldstad and Johnson 2017.

working in, or applying lessons to, other contexts. Weighty evidence is, however, available for Brazil,² Colombia,³ Ecuador,⁴ Indonesia,⁵ Japan,⁶ and Peru.⁷

Since leaders in authoritarian states do not answer to their populations via free and fair elections, most of the literature surveyed focused on democracies, where money is used to influence political parties, elections, and politicians. Few studies focused on political finance and lobbying in democracies generating environmental harm in other contexts, though the number of studies may increase if we focus on the roles of banks and financial institutions. One study focused on US oil firms unduly influencing US federal authorities regarding overseas extractive operations,⁸ leading to environmental harms in Ecuador. Few studies address political finance and lobbying leading to environmental harm in autocracies, though one study focused on variations in lobbying and policy influence on environmental harms (eg lower air and water quality) in Vietnam.⁹

The evidence reviewed shows that poorly regulated political finance and lobbying generates environmental harm. Industry associations for key sectors and some of the largest companies in the world were found by one study to be lobbying to delay, dilute, and rollback policies aimed at preventing and reversing biodiversity loss in the EU and US.¹⁰ Another study found campaign finance regulations to be a key variable in the adoption of environmentally harmful policies.¹¹ This study noted it helped explain why some affluent democracies (eg Germany, Denmark, and Spain) had become world leaders in renewable energy, while others (eg Japan, Switzerland, and the US), had made less progress. Yet counterfactual cases were also identified: one study pointed to the paradox of polluting firms lobbying for enhanced environmental controls (eg corporate lobbying for ozone protection policies).¹² This shows that although most corporate political finance and lobbying in democracies undermines environmentally beneficial policies, this is not always true. Political finance and lobbying regimes in democracies can also be used to promote environmental goods, though this seems dependent on the quality and transparency of these regimes.

2. Ruggiero et al 2021, Santos et al 2024.

3. Harding et al 2024.

4. Ofrias 2017.

5. Hansen et al 2011, Aspinall and Berenschot 2019.

6. Zell 2020.

7. Paredes et al 2024.

8. Ofrias 2017.

9. Carlitz and Povitkina 2021.

10. Influence Map 2022.

11. Zell 2020.

12. Grey 2017.

Though most studies, particularly those focused on the US, concentrated either on extractive industries lobbying to dilute policies that could address carbon emissions or more local pollution, some studies focused on deforestation and/or biodiversity loss. One study found that policymakers' incentives during election campaigns ultimately led to deforestation in Brazil's Atlantic Forest.¹³ Another study found that corporate political activity is associated with environmental crimes in Brazil,¹⁴ while studies on Indonesia and Peru link political finance, illegal logging, and deforestation.¹⁵ A further study examined a range of environmental harms, finding that political finance and lobbying led to harms in all environmental categories.¹⁶

13. Ruggiero et al 2021.

14. Santos et al 2024.

15. Aspinall and Berenschot 2019, Paredes et al 2024.

16. Quan et al 2006.

Existing efforts to address money politics that result in environmental harm

Few policy and practice efforts attempt to address the nexus between money politics and environmental harm. Organisations focused more broadly on political finance and/or money politics are, however, now paying more attention to this nexus, even if efforts remain ad hoc and fragmented. This section maps existing and emerging activities, with a view to informing gaps, opportunities, and recommendations for emerging work in this area.

Interviews revealed that the absence of activities focused on political finance and environmental harm has partly been due to the need to first develop global political finance standards. Toolkits and handbooks (eg [International IDEA's handbook on political finance](#)) addressing political finance reforms could, if used effectively, bring about changes in states that reduce environmental harm. Political finance integrity standards (eg from [Transparency International](#)) could likewise lead to environmental improvements if rigorously enforced by states. The impacts of such reforms on environmental harm could be greatest where natural resource commodities represent a large proportion of corporate finance entering political systems. Yet, the capture of state institutions through the leveraging of resource wealth presents particular difficulties for progressing such reforms, which is partly why global transparency initiatives such as [Publish What You Pay \(PWYP\)](#) and the [Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative \(EITI\)](#) exist.

Though there is a general lack of policy and practice activities focused on political finance and environmental harm, pockets of activities do exist.

1. Advancing new resolutions as part of the [UN Convention against Corruption, \(UNCAC\)](#)

In 2023, International IDEA, with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), Transparency International, the [UNCAC Coalition](#), and [Westminster Foundation for Democracy](#), drafted a call (signed by more than 100 organisations) to States Parties of the UNCAC to prioritise and enhance political finance transparency as part of the convention's framework. Pointing to a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report on Chapter II of the UNCAC, the [call](#) highlighted that Article 7.3 (calling on states to implement measures to enhance transparency in the funding of candidacies for public office, as well as, where applicable, political party financing) represents the greatest challenge among

82 countries reviewed, with 80 countries receiving recommendations in this area. Identified challenges were a lack of comprehensive legislation or administrative measures to regulate the funding of candidates for elected office and the funding of political parties, including in relation to adequate limits to private donations and restrictions of anonymous and foreign donations, effective disclosure obligations and oversight and audit mechanisms. Given no new resolution in this area was adopted by States Parties at the UNCAC CoSP in Atlanta, there is a renewed attempt at passing a resolution on political finance transparency at the Doha CoSP in December 2025.

2. Cross-country civil society initiatives in resource rich-states

Transparency International (TI) has developed a project called '[Clean Money in Elections](#)' with TI National Chapters in Venezuela, Panama, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Zambia. The technical lead for this project is [TI Colombia](#), with support from the TI Secretariat. All countries in the project have minimal or no regulatory standards on political finance transparency, with several having bills that have been pending in parliaments for many years. For the project, a series of civic monitoring tools have been developed, which are platforms that allow reporting of abuses of state resources for electoral gain and provide data on campaign income and expenditure. The project involves publishing before and during elections, taking data in whatever form it exists, including from Freedom of Information requests, to make clear the abuse of state resources for electoral gain or to point at undue influence through campaign donations. Although not specifically focused on environmental harm that might result from these abuses, several of the countries involved are resource-rich states where resource revenues are used to fund election campaigns, eg Indonesia.

3. International awareness-raising events

At the [International Anti-Corruption Conference](#) in Vilnius, Lithuania, 2024, WWF International, IFES and U4 collaborated with UNODC, Bantay Kita, National Democratic Institute, and [Proetica](#), to organise a workshop titled 'In debt to nature: How financing election campaigns drives environmental destruction'. The workshop explored the nexus between political finance and environmental harm, using research and cases from Indonesia, Peru, and the Philippines (watch the [recorded workshop video](#)). The case examples revealed remarkably similar manifestations of the problem across countries. More broadly, in March 2022, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy organised a [conference](#) that brought together the democracy support and environmental communities, aiming to unlock the potential of an 'environmental democracy approach'. Although the conference was not focused

on the nexus between political finance and environmental harm, this and closely related issues were discussed among other topics.

4. National advocacy and reform efforts

There are likely many local or national initiatives around the world addressing money politics and environmental harm that are challenging to analyse given their grassroots character and limited online presence. Bantay Kita's work on the nexus between political finance and mining provides an example of initiatives underway. Bantay Kita investigates mining investments and beneficial owners of mining firms, and how these are linked to political leaders, disseminating information via social media to reach younger voters. They engage with the [Philippines Centre for Investigative Journalism](#) and [EITI Philippines](#), to pursue an open beneficial ownership registry. Interviews revealed that environmental and climate litigation cases are also a means of identifying (alleged or proven) connections to political finance and lobbying. Another national initiative in the US is the '[For Our Freedom Amendment](#)' by the group [American Promise](#). This initiative recognises that curtailing the influence of money politics on negative social and environmental impacts requires structural reform and advocates a new amendment to the US constitution.

5. Global communities of practice

There are several global communities of practice of relevance to the nexus between political finance and environmental harm. The community of practice on political finance convened by IFES includes organisations interested in further pursuing work and activities on this nexus. Likewise, the community of practice on environmental crime and corruption convened by the UNCAC Coalition and [Wildlife Justice Commission](#), includes organisations interested in further pursuing work and activities that link with political finance, money politics, and lobbying. There is a further community of practice – the [Countering Environmental Corruption Practitioners Forum](#) – formed by WWF International, [Basel Institute on Governance](#), [TRAFFIC](#) and [TI](#), which is also of relevance. However, there is no dedicated subgroup focused on the nexus between political finance, lobbying, and environmental harm.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence collected, several gaps, opportunities, and recommendations are identified below to further efforts in the area of political finance and environmental harm. These fall into five categories: (i) research, (ii) awareness-raising, (iii) practitioner guidance, (iv) global standards, and (v) national and provincial level initiatives.

1. Invest in more systematic research and evidence generation.

Research on political finance, lobbying, and environmental harm is limited. Available evidence exposes serious challenges, but research tends to skew towards democracies in North America and Europe. Given the seriousness of the challenges shown in existing evidence, investment in more systematic research and evidence generation is warranted. More research could be funded exploring the effectiveness of political finance reforms under varying conditions on environmental outcomes, including the transnational environmental dimensions of political finance in national jurisdictions. This could possibly involve existing research networks such as the [Climate Social Science Network](#).

2. Carefully raise and reinforce popular and policy awareness of these issues.

A greater focus could be placed on carefully making more people aware of the benefits of reforming political finance and lobbying rules and disseminating success stories. This could connect to other policy agendas such as countering disinformation and foreign influence in elections, raising climate, conservation, and biodiversity finance, and implementing the [Sevilla Commitment](#) on financing for development. One possibility could be to link awareness-raising to the [fossil fuel non-proliferation treaty](#) that is gaining some momentum.

3. Fund and produce a practitioner handbook, platform, or guidance document.

No such tool exists and producing one will likely help. A limitation in producing such a tool is the relative lack of research on political finance and environmental harm outside North America and Europe. This gap will need addressing before a high-quality handbook can be produced.

4. Establish a dedicated subgroup focused on political finance, lobbying, and environmental harm.

Such a subgroup could ensure that environmental questions are not lost in broader discussions and activities on political finance or lobbying reform. Ideally, it would span various organisations from around the world with interests across political finance, lobbying, money politics, and different forms of environmental harm.

5. Clarify, target, and reinforce reform incentives at national and provincial levels.

Why should political parties, candidates for public office, or elected politicians reform political finance or lobbying rules to reduce environmental harm? One perspective emerging from interviews is that elected politicians, as well as political parties, care about their public image, since this impacts election prospects and whether they govern. This offers a potential avenue to make progress on money politics, going beyond existing codes of conduct for political parties. NDI, for example, have been exploring a collaboration among like-minded organisations on whether an [ISO standard](#) for political party financing could be created. If one were established, political parties and candidates could be incentivised to advertise their own certification to the standard, if they perceived it to improve their election prospects.

References

- Aspinall, E., and Berenschot, W. 2019. *Democracy for sale: Elections, clientelism, and the state in Indonesia*. Cornell University Press.
- Carlitz, R.D., and Povitkina, M. 2021. Local interest group activity and environmental degradation in authoritarian regimes. *World Development*, 142: 105425.
- Fjeldstad, O.H., and J. Johnsen. 2017. Governance challenges in Tanzania's natural gas sector: unregulated lobbying and uncoordinated policy. In: *Corruption, Natural Resources and Development*, ed. Williams, D.A. and P. Le Billon, 44-57. Edward Elgar Publishing. Cheltenham and Northampton (MA).
- Grey, F. 2017. Corporate lobbying for environmental protection. Faculty of Economics, University of Cambridge. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.15502>.
- Harding, R., Prem, M., Ruiz, N.A., Vargas, D.L. 2024. Buying a Blind Eye: Campaign Donations, Regulatory Enforcement, and Deforestation. *American Political Science Review* 118(2): 635-653.
- Influence Map. 2022. Industry Influence on Biodiversity Policy.
- Ofrias, L. 2017. Invisible harms, invisible profits: A theory of the incentive to contaminate. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 58(4): 435-456.
- Paredes, M., Gianella, C., & Olivera, S. 2024. Corrupting climate change institutions from the inside Systemic Collusion in the Peruvian Forest Governance. *Political Geography*, 108: 102991.
- Li, Q. and Reuveny, R. 2006. Democracy and Environmental Degradation, *International Studies Quarterly* 50 (4): 935-956.
- Ruggiero, P.G., Pfaff, A., Nichols, E., Rosa, M. and Metzger, J.P. 2021. Election cycles affect deforestation within Brazil's Atlantic Forest. *Conservation Letters* 14(5): e12818.
- Santos, A.N., de Souza, G.M., Abdalla, M.M., Ferreira, A., and Nogueira, N.J. 2024. Lobbying and environmental crimes: An analysis based on the Brazilian mining sector. *The Extractive Industries and Society* 17: 101419.
- Zell, C. 2020. Renewable Energy Adoption Among OECD Countries: The Role of Public Campaign Finance. Department of Political Science. University of California, San Diego.

About the author

Aled Williams

Aled Williams is a political scientist and senior researcher at Chr. Michelsen Institute and a principal adviser at the U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre. He is responsible for U4's thematic work on *corruption in natural resources and energy*, and holds a PhD from SOAS, University of London, on political ecology of REDD+ in Indonesia.

Keywords

political finance – lobbying – money politics – environment

How to cite

Williams, A. 2025. Reforming money politics to reduce environmental harm. Bergen: U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, Chr. Michelsen Institute (U4 Brief 2025:5)

Publication

First published 19 September 2025

Disclaimer

All views in this text are the author(s)', and may differ from the U4 partner agencies' policies.

Cover photo

rudall30/Shutterstock – license: copyrighted

<https://www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/puppeteer-pile-money-manipulating-politicians-podium-2520852055>

Creative commons

This work is licenced under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)



U4 partner agencies

German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development – BMZ

Global Affairs Canada

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark / Danish International Development Assistance – Danida

Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation – Norad

Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency – Sida

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – SDC

UK Aid – Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office

Corruption erodes sustainable and inclusive development. It is both a political and technical challenge. The U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre (U4) works to understand and counter corruption worldwide.

U4 is part of the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), an independent development research institute in Norway.

