

Step 2. Identify the campaign finance problems to address

Focus of this chapter: Campaign finance challenges in different countries and why the next step after identifying the CFM project's long-term goals should be to consider what campaign finance challenges the project should address.

Content of this chapter:

- Different campaign finance problems
- Why identifying campaign finance problems is essential

Political party and campaign finance are not inherently problems to be solved. Money is necessary for democratic election campaigns, wherein contestants can explain their political program to the electorate and hear from the voters how they want their country to be governed. The right to stand for elected office is a fundamental part of the democratic process. One of the implications of this is that those running must be allowed to use resources to further their candidacy.

FIGURE 7. COMMON CFM FOCUS



However, money in elections may lead to activities that corrupt elections and the wider democratic process. All countries have minor or major concerns regarding the role of money in politics, which stakeholders feel need to be addressed.¹⁰

All countries have at least some issues with campaign finance, but the exact problems vary from region to region, from country to country and sometimes within the same country over time (or between different parts of a single country). Some of the most common campaign finance problems which have been focused on in previous CFM projects are outlined in Figure 7 above. These problems vary from a lack of transparency in how political parties and candidates raise and spend money to the opaque involvement of non-contestants (“third parties”) in campaigning, to potential foreign influence in the campaign process. While the level of vote buying varies greatly between regions and countries, the abuse of state resources for electoral gain is a problem that has proven to be particularly difficult to address in a wide range of countries.

Although all countries have at least some regulations for campaign finance in place, political actors can, in many countries, violate these rules with near-total impunity. The practical enforcement of regulations by political finance oversight institutions is limited in many countries, and in the worst case, they may be implemented in a biased manner targeting certain political forces. Even where the political finance oversight institution does actively monitor compliance with regulations, courts seldom impose sanctions in cases of serious violations.

The campaign finance problems a CFM project focuses on will depend on the long-term goals that have been established. Focusing on abuse of state resources may be particularly relevant if the project’s main long-term goal is to contribute to the integrity of the state administration or the equal opportunity for political actors to participate in elections. If political finance transparency in elections is the main goal, it may be more relevant to focus on accuracy in financial reporting by political parties and candidates and compliance with campaign finance regulations. In practice, you are likely to go back and forth between long-term goals and which campaign finance problems to address before firmly deciding on each.

Unfortunately, many countries struggle with a wide range of campaign finance problems. Trying to address too many as part of one CFM project may however reduce your chances of effectively addressing any of them. To help identify the most important problems to focus on, you can use reports that you or other CSOs have written on political finance or elections in the past, as well as international election observation mission reports and similar documents.¹¹

The design of the CFM project will be largely determined by which campaign finance problems the monitoring effort has decided to focus on. This includes the desired outcomes the project is aiming for, which is the topic of the next chapter.

¹⁰ This is reflected in the fact that out of the 180 countries reviewed in the International IDEA database of political finance regulation, every single country had adopted at least some regulations on political finance issues. It seems unlikely that such regulations would be passed if there were no concerns regarding the role of money in the political process.

¹¹ You can also draw on existing standards documents on political finance. These are unfortunately few and seldom detailed (cf. Article 7(3) in the United Nations Convention Against Corruption). One of the more detailed standards documents at a regional level is OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission (2020).