



Who Funds Seattle's Political Candidates?

Rich, white people with view homes.

Alan Durning

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Executive Summary

Overwhelmingly, rich, white people who live in Seattle's waterfront and view homes fund Seattle's political campaigns. If enacted, Honest Elections Seattle could spread the funding of campaigns from elite neighborhoods to the whole city.

The Honest Elections Seattle Initiative would, among other things, distribute \$100 of Democracy Vouchers to each registered voter in the city. Registered voters may donate their vouchers to candidates who agree to limit their spending and forgo large contributions. Democracy Vouchers would likely redraw the patterns of political giving in Seattle, just as small-donor matching grants [redrew the map of political giving in New York City](#). This report analyzes the pattern of political contributions in the 2013 city elections to explore how Honest Elections Seattle might affect giving.

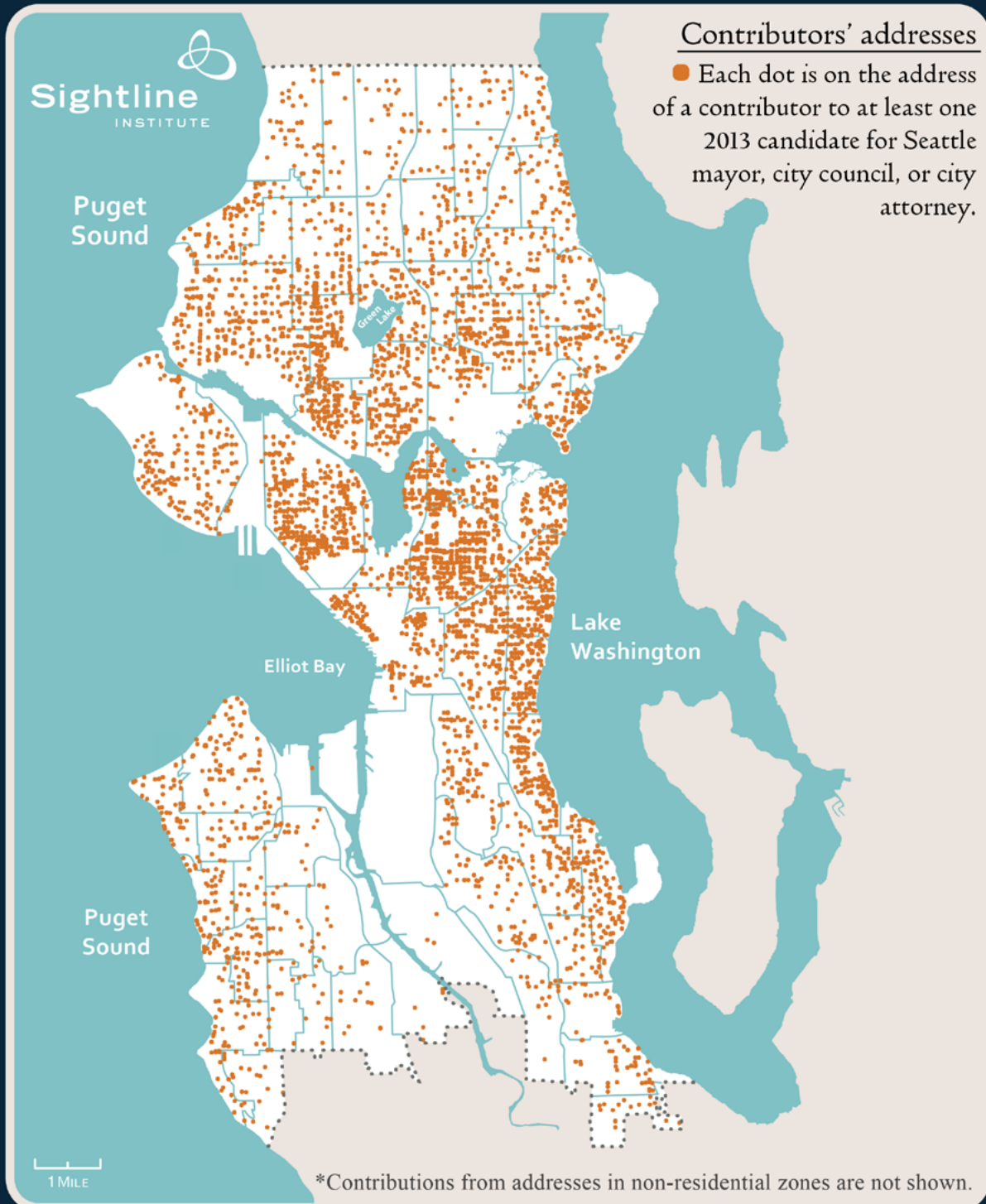
Money given by residents of the city of Seattle to 2013 candidates for mayor, city council, and city attorney came from a tiny share of the city's residents, and those residents lived disproportionately in a few neighborhoods. These neighborhoods cross the city in a narrow belt from Magnolia to Madison Park, line Lake Washington from Laurelhurst to Seward Park, and extend along its other bodies of water. These places are parts of the city where houses are expensive and have views of mountains or water. They are places disproportionately populated by people who are rich and white.

Just 1.5 percent of adults in Seattle gave money to 2013 candidates, and most of those contributors made small donations. Two-thirds of the money came from just 1,683 contributors (0.3 percent of Seattle adults), and more than a quarter came from 0.07 percent of adults: the 391 contributors who gave \$1,000 or more.

The city's most-giving neighborhoods (dubbed "Big Money Zones" in this report) hold just 4 percent of the population, but they gave as much political money as the least-giving neighborhoods (dubbed "Micro Money Zones") that house 64 percent of the city. Per person, the Big Money Zones gave more than 18 times as much as the Micro Money Zones.

Furthermore, the Big Money Zones are the city's most privileged. Compared with Micro Money Zones, Big Money Zones are 31 percent whiter and 85 percent richer. Homes in Big Money Zones are two-and-a-half times pricier and four-and-a-half times more likely to have a mountain or water view.

Contributors to Seattle Campaigns



Data sources: Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission, City of Seattle, King County

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1. Contributors to Seattle Campaigns

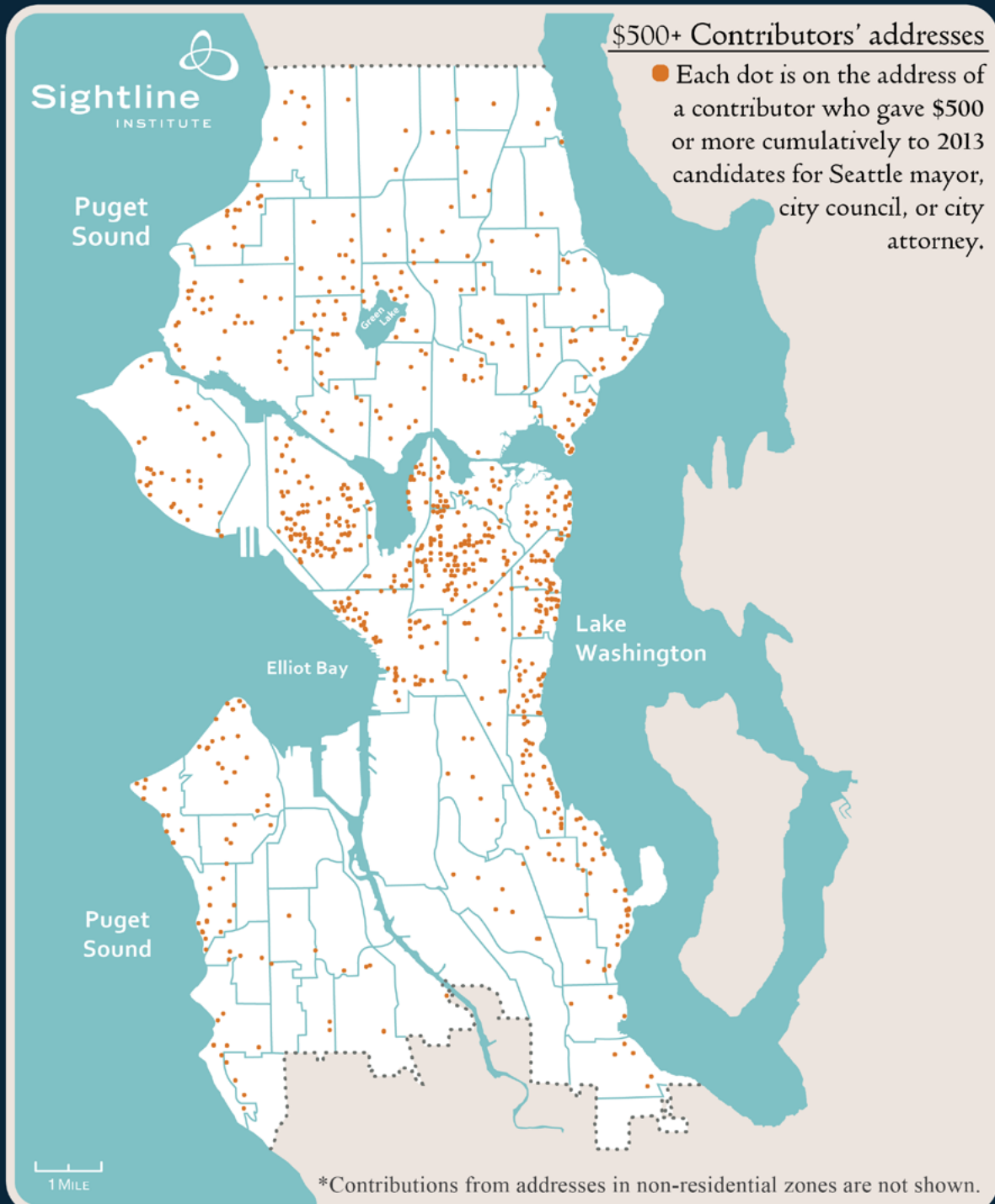
To understand the patterns of money in Seattle political campaigns, Sightline analyzed and mapped data from the 2013 election cycle. The data, provided by the Washington State Public Disclosure Commission and the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission, covered all political contributions to candidate races for mayor, four at-large city council seats, and city attorney. Eleven maps, presented in this report, reveal much about political money in Seattle.

During the 2013 election cycle, about 8,450 Seattle residents and Seattle-based organizations gave money to people running for mayor, city attorney, or city council. Some 96.5 percent of contributors were people; the remainder were for-profit corporations, unions, trade associations, political action committees, and other organizations. This map (which we will call Map 1) shows the addresses of contributors as one dot per contributor. Some 1.5 percent of adult residents of the city gave at least one political contribution in 2013 races. The contributor who gave the most spent \$5,000; the contributor who gave the least spent 2 cents.

The wide dispersal of dots reflects Seattle's comparatively high level of political participation.

Please see the notes on methods at the end of the report for important caveats and explanations.

\$500+ Contributors



Data sources: Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission, City of Seattle, King County

Cartography by CORE GIS LLC, www.coregis.net

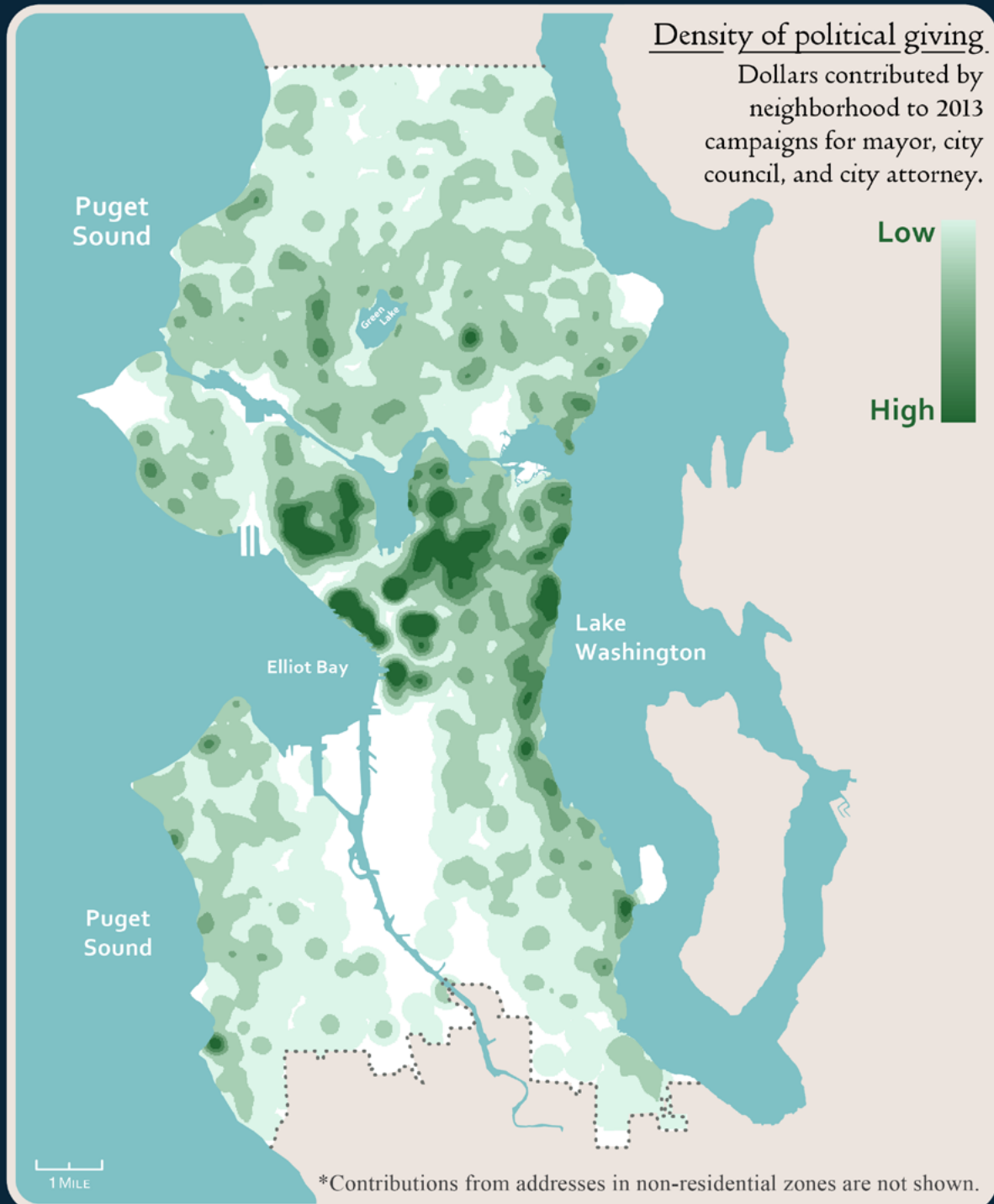
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2. \$500+ Contributors

Of the 8,450 Seattle contributors to 2013 election campaigns, more than half gave \$100 or less apiece, cumulatively, to all candidates. In combination, these small-dollar donors provided only 10 percent of all political money from Seattle residents. Meanwhile, 1,683 donors gave big money, spending at least \$500 apiece on political giving in city races that election cycle. City law capped giving at \$700 per candidate, but big-money donors often gave large gifts to several candidates.

These 1,683 big-money contributors accounted for two-thirds of all the political money: \$1.5 million of the \$2.3 million Seattleites gave. This map shows the addresses of these contributors. Like the previous one, it shows a scatter of contributors across the city, although certain neighborhoods stand out more.

Where Candidates Got Their Dollars



Data sources: Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission, City of Seattle, King County

Cartography by CORE GIS LLC, www.coregis.net

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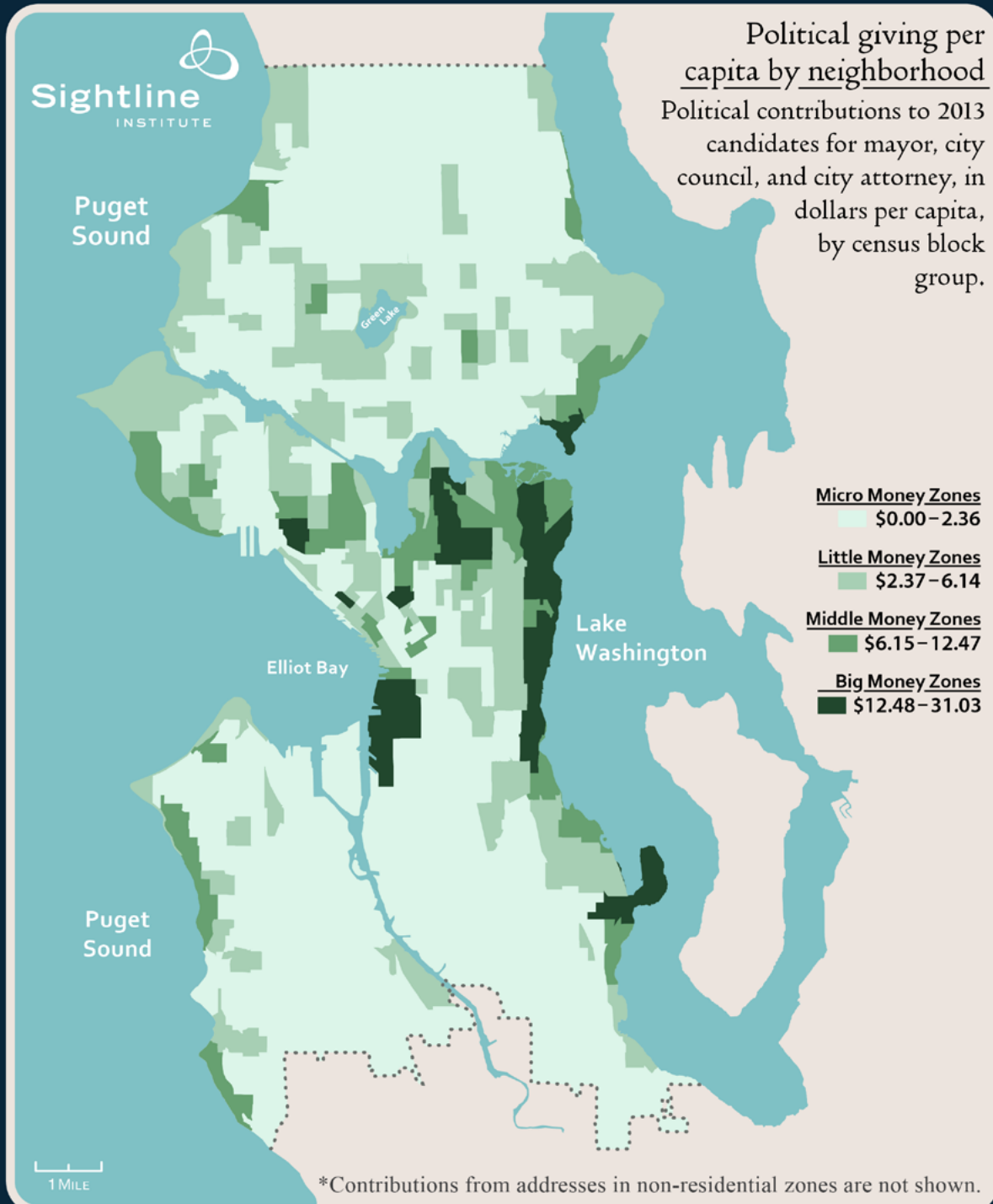
3. Where Candidates Got Their Dollars

This map plots the density of money contributed: not the number of contributors or contributions, but the number of dollars given in each neighborhood. The darker the shade, the more money candidates raised in that neighborhood. As the map shows, the greatest concentration of money comes from a belt of neighborhoods crossing Seattle at the mid-section from Queen Anne to Madison Park, plus scattered other areas, mainly on waterfronts.

A small number of donors dominate this map. 1,683 donors gave \$500 or more. Just 391 contributors—a paltry 0.07 percent of adults—gave \$1,000 or more, yet they accounted for fully 28 percent of all the money raised. With each step up the contribution ladder, the number of contributors diminished and their importance to candidates' fundraising soared.

Some of the darkest patches in this map are also the most densely populated parts of the city: the close-in neighborhoods around downtown. Is the money pattern simply a reflection of population density?

Political Money Per Capita



Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2008-12 American Community Survey, Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission, City of Seattle, King County

Cartography by CORE GIS LLC, www.coregis.net

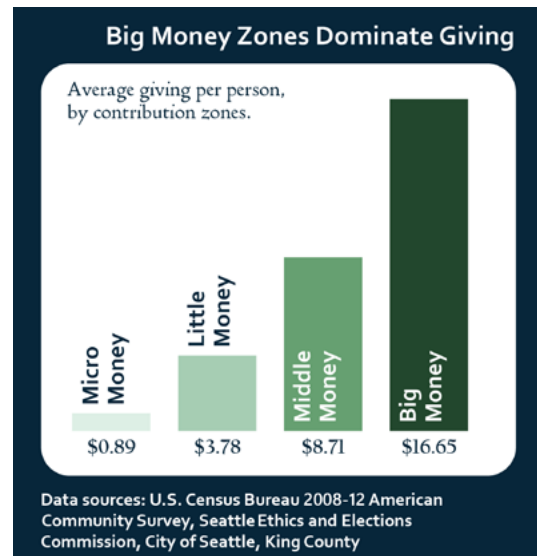
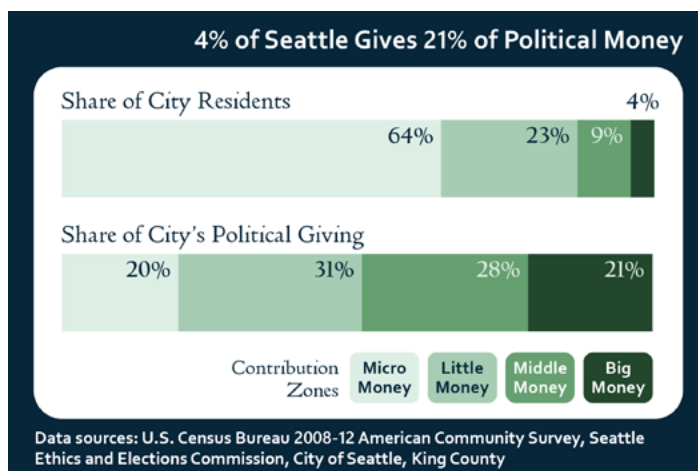
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4. Political Money Per Capita

Map 4 reveals the parts of the city with the highest per capita political contributions. It shows dollars of contributions per capita in each of Seattle's 479 census block groups—neighborhood divisions drawn by the US Bureau of the Census that typically hold 1,000 to 1,500 residents each.

The map illustrates starkly that giving per person is highest in a narrow belt that crosses the city from Magnolia to Madison Park by way of Queen Anne and north Capitol Hill. In Madison Park, the east-west belt meets a north-south belt of political giving that follows the shores of Lake Washington from Laurelhurst south through Denny Blaine, Madrona, Leschi, and Mount Baker, to Seward Park. (A map of Seattle neighborhoods is at the end of this report for reference.) To a lesser extent, political giving follows other city waterfronts, not only on the East along Lake Washington, but also on Puget Sound, Lake Union, and Green Lake. Proximity to water is associated with political giving. Proximity to downtown also seems to predict political giving, with close-in waterfronts providing more political money per person than more-distant waterfront neighborhoods.

This map divides the city's census block groups into four categories, which we call the Micro Money Zones, Little Money Zones, Middle Money Zones, and Big Money Zones. They are not of equal size. The Micro Money Zones (the lightest shade on the map) covered most of the north and south ends of the city and held fully 64 percent of Seattle residents. These areas provided candidates with only 20 percent of Seattle's political dollars, 89 cents per resident. (See figures.)

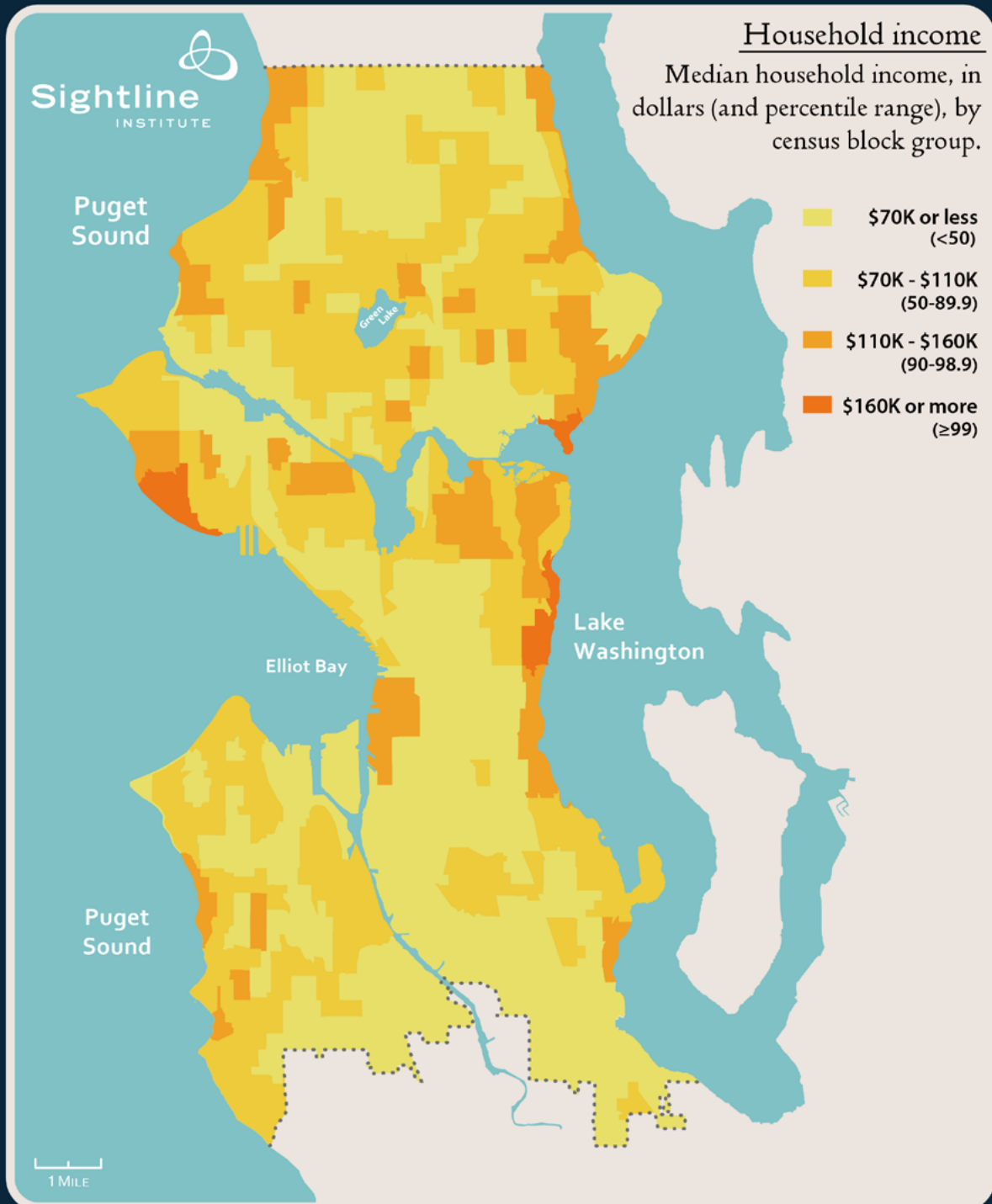


The Little Money Zones (the second lightest shade) covered the homes of 23 percent of Seattleites and contributed 31 percent of the political money collected in the city. Residents of these neighborhoods gave \$3.78 per person, on average, during the 2013 election campaigns.

The Middle Money Zones (the second darkest shade) included the neighborhoods of 9 percent of Seattleites. These areas accounted for 28 percent of all giving and contributed \$8.71 per person. The Big

Money Zones (the darkest shade) were home to just 4 percent of Seattleites, but they provided fully 21 percent of the city's political money—\$16.65 per capita. Half of the money, in other words, came from 13 percent of the people: the Middle and Big Money Zones.

Where the Money Is



Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2008-12 American Community Survey, City of Seattle, King County

Cartography by CORE GIS LLC, www.coregis.net

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5. Where the Money Is

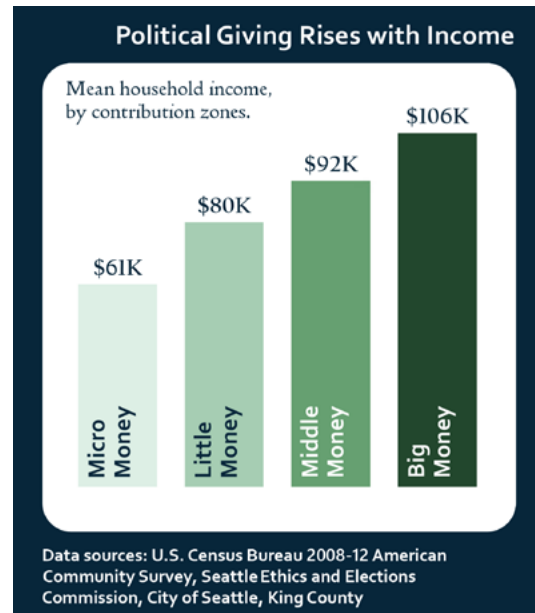
This map looks at first glance much like the previous: the same crosswise belt from Magnolia to Madison Park, the same Lake Washington stripe from Laurelhurst to Seward Park, the same shadings along other waterfronts across the city, the same voids in the middles of the south and north ends of the city. But it shows completely different data. It's a map of household incomes, not political giving.

To an impressive but perhaps not surprising degree, campaigns raise money where the money is—in neighborhoods where many rich people live. Madrona and Denny-Blaine, Webster Point in Laurelhurst, and the southwest quadrant of Magnolia have the highest median incomes in Seattle. They are shown in the darkest shades on the map and defined as census block groups in the top 1 percent of median incomes in the city, those with median household incomes above \$160,000 a year. These favored places account for just 1 percent of the city's population. The second-richest category of neighborhoods (the second-darkest shades on the map) is home to people with median annual household incomes above \$110,000. They hold another 9 percent of the city's residents. These two categories together—the richest tenth of neighborhoods—contributed 26 percent of political money in the 2013 campaigns.

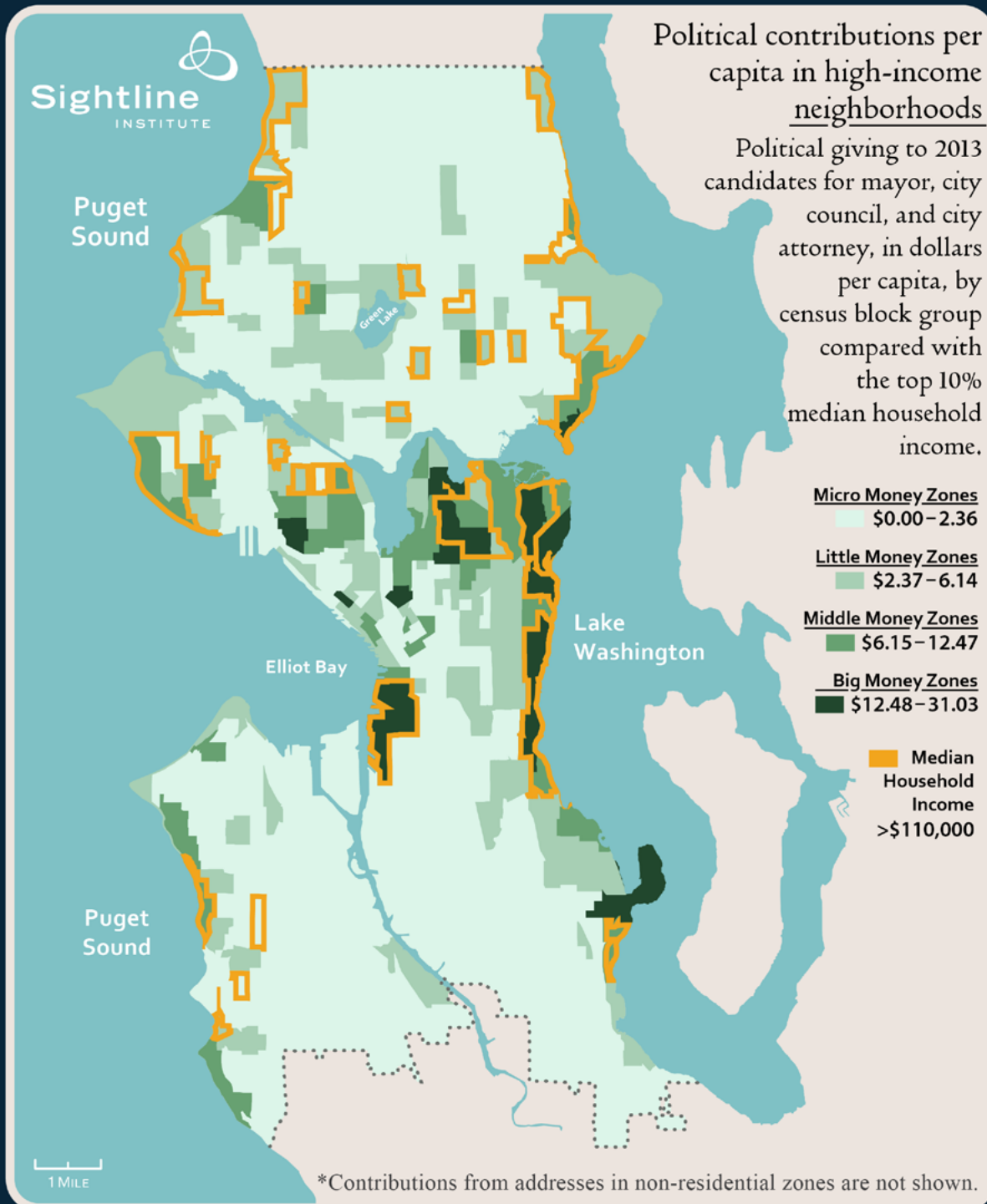
Another 43 percent of the political money came from the category shown in the second-lightest shade on the map. These areas house 37 percent of Seattleites and have median incomes above \$70,000 a year. The neighborhoods in the bottom 60 percentiles of median household incomes in Seattle, the lightest shaded zones on the map, contributed just 30 percent of the political cash.

These figures may understate the degree to which income and giving are tied, because Seattle neighborhoods are not uniform in household incomes. Retirees who bought their Madrona homes in the 1960s live beside tech millionaires, and pockets of high-end housing are sprinkled across the city. Unfortunately, no separate source of data is available on the incomes of donors; we can only estimate from the neighborhoods they live in.

Another way to examine the relationship between affluence and giving is to consider the incomes of the neighborhoods that give the most, rather than the contributions of the richest neighborhoods. As the figure illustrates, median incomes rise in steps from the Micro Money Zones to the Big Money Zones.



Overlap: Political Giving Comes from High Income Areas



Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2008-12 American Community Survey, Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission, City of Seattle, King County

Cartography by CORE GIS LLC, www.coregis.net

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6. Overlap: Political Giving Comes from High-Income Areas

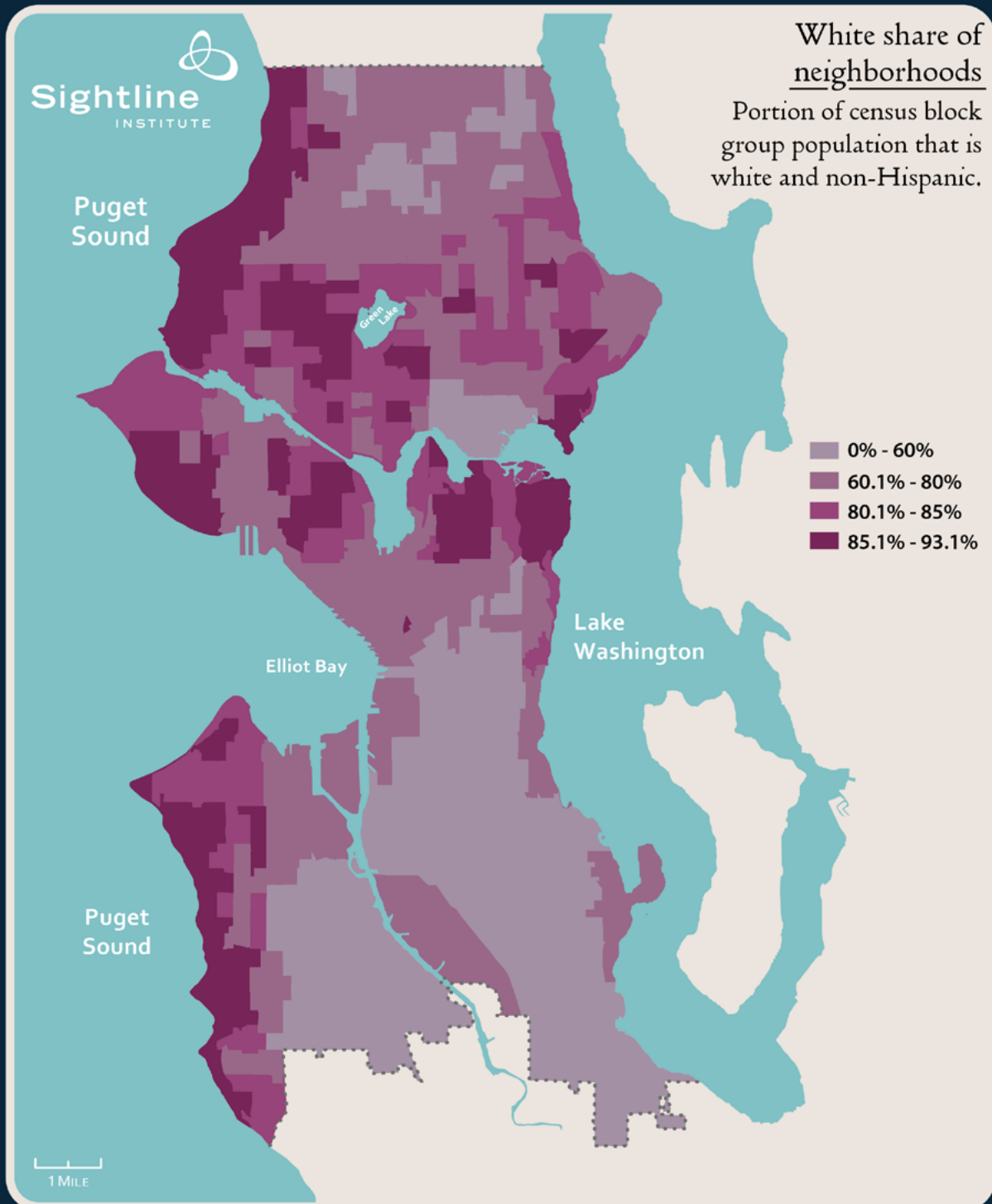
This map draws the boundaries of the richest neighborhoods on the political giving map. That is, we superimpose the outline in yellow from Map 5 “Where the Money Is” of census block groups in the top two income categories—where median household income exceeds \$110,000 per year—on Map 4 “Political Money per Person.” The result reveals the close overlap between high incomes and political giving. The Big Money and Middle Money Zones in many cases *are* the richest neighborhoods. In other cases they are nearby, and almost no Big Money or Middle Money neighborhood has a median income below \$70,000.

Because neighborhood incomes are not uniform, political giving and incomes may match even more closely than this map suggests. In Queen Anne, for example, this map shows the high income areas in yellow, slightly farther north than the belt of Big Money and Middle Money. Neighborhood demographics may explain this pattern. South Queen Anne holds both multi-million-dollar homes and middle-income apartments. This mixing lowers the neighborhood’s median income. North Queen Anne is more uniform in holding only single-family homes. Although those homes are less expensive than the ones in South Queen Anne, the median income is higher in the north because there are no middle-income apartments to pull down the median. The Big Money Zone in Queen Anne is in the south, where the most expensive homes are. A fine grained analysis might therefore find an even tighter correlation between income and giving.

Furthermore, the fact that some of the contributions on “Political Money per Capita” were recorded with workplace addresses may also weaken the correlation. For example, in the mixed neighborhoods of workplaces and apartments close to downtown, political giving is more prevalent than high incomes. Workplace giving likely inflates the political money tallies in these neighborhoods.

Even with these distortions, the overlap between political giving and high incomes is striking. Political money comes mostly from high-income neighborhoods.

Where White People Live



Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census SF1, City of Seattle, King County

Cartography by CORE GIS LLC, www.coregis.net

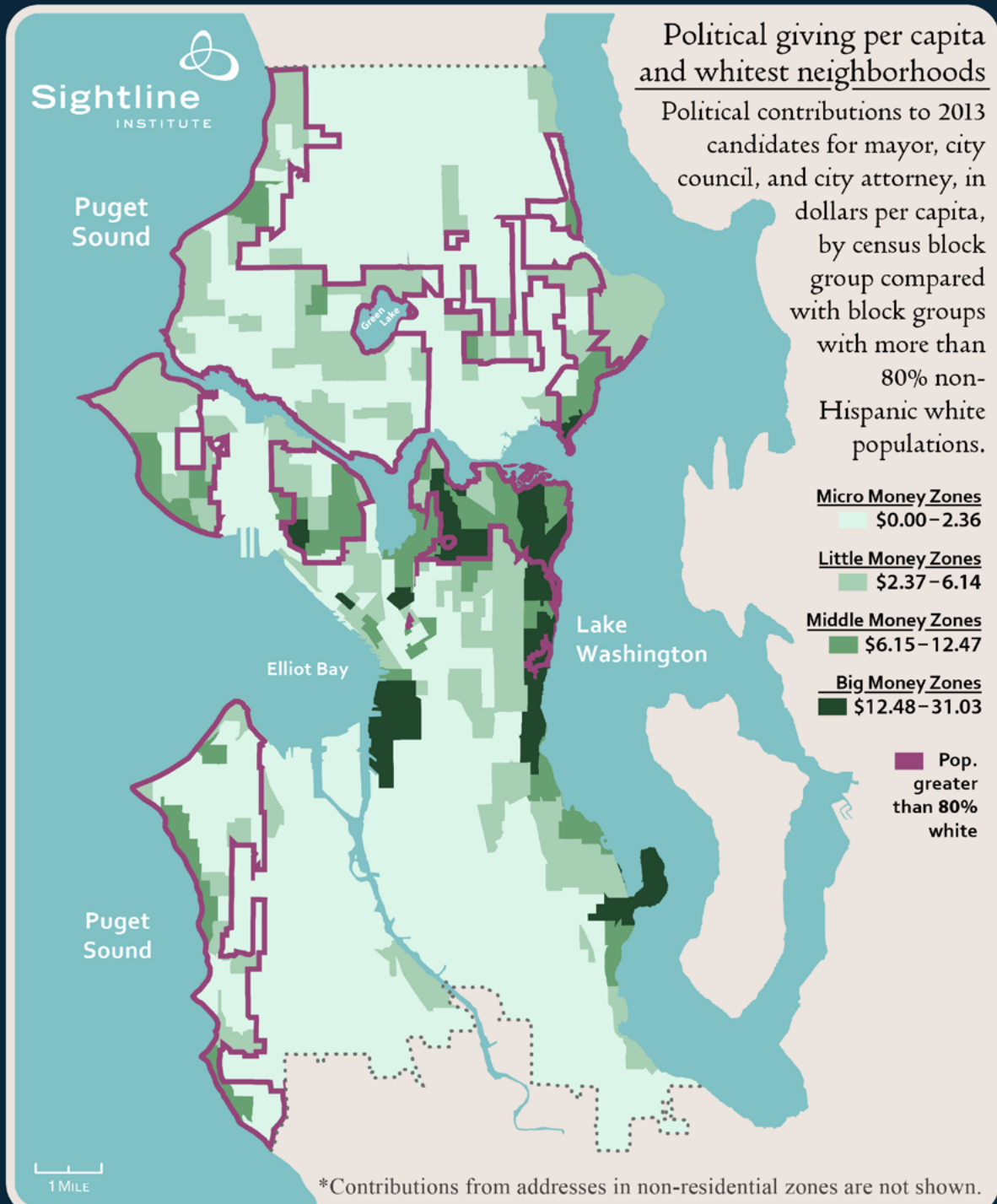
Design by GoodMeasures, www.GoodMeasures.biz

7. Where White People Live

This map shows the whitest neighborhoods of Seattle, and it looks a lot like the Map 4 “Political Money per Capita”: the shading shows the same belt from Magnolia to Madison Park, the same streak from Laurelhurst south to Seward Park, the same waterfronts elsewhere in the city. Judging from the neighborhoods it inhabits, the political donor class is not only overwhelming rich, it’s also overwhelmingly white and non-Hispanic.

Seattle is a heavily white city in any event, with 67 percent of the population non-Hispanic white at the time of the 2010 census. But the subset of neighborhoods that gave half of the money (the two darkest shades on Map 4) were 80 percent white. Conversely, the lightest shaded zones in Map 4, which were home to 64 percent of Seattleites and gave just 20 percent of the political money, were only 61 percent non-Hispanic white.

Overlap: Political Giving and White Neighborhoods



Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census SF1 and 2008-12 American Community Survey, Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission, City of Seattle, King County

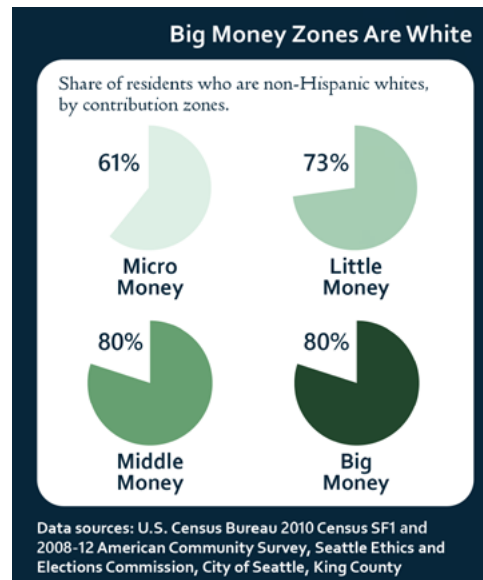
Cartography by CORE GIS LLC, www.coregis.net

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8. Overlap: Political Giving and White Neighborhoods

This map shows the whitest neighborhoods overlaid on Map 4 “Political Giving per Capita.” The census block groups outlined in purple are the ones where the 2010 census reported that non-Hispanic whites constituted 80 percent or more of the population.

With few exceptions, Seattle's Big Money and Middle Money Zones are inside the purple lines. Exceptions include areas close to downtown, where workplaces likely distort the political giving map, and on the shores of Lake Washington south of Madison Park.



Homes With Views



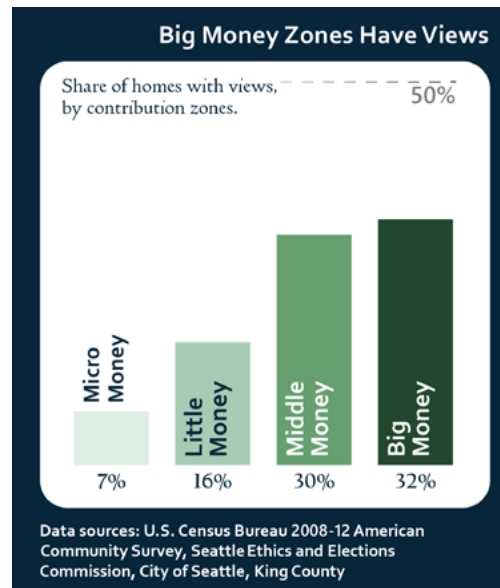
Data sources: City of Seattle, King County

Cartography by CORE GIS LLC, www.coregis.net

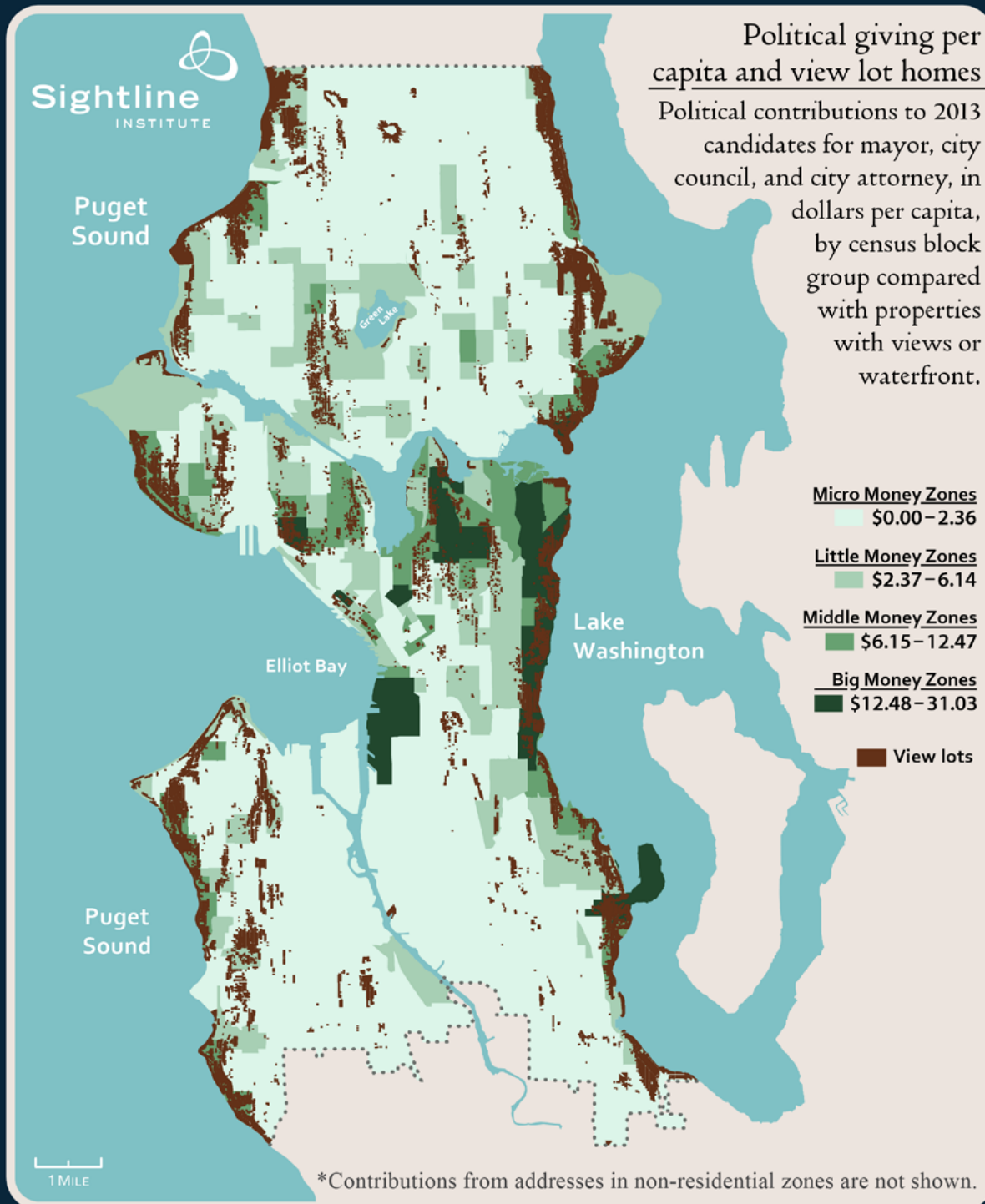
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9. Homes with Views

In Seattle, political giving is also correlated with living in a home with a view of the water or the mountains. This map shows all residential lots in the city that the King County Assessor records as being either waterfront property or having a mountain or water view. It too shows the pattern of Map 4 “Political Money per Capita”: the belt from Magnolia to Madison Park, the stripe along Lake Washington, and many of the same other dark spots. In Seattle, having a view is a function of having money, and so is political giving.



Overlap: Political Giving Comes from View Homes



Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2008-12 American Community Survey, Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission, City of Seattle, King County

Cartography by CORE GIS LLC, www.coregis.net

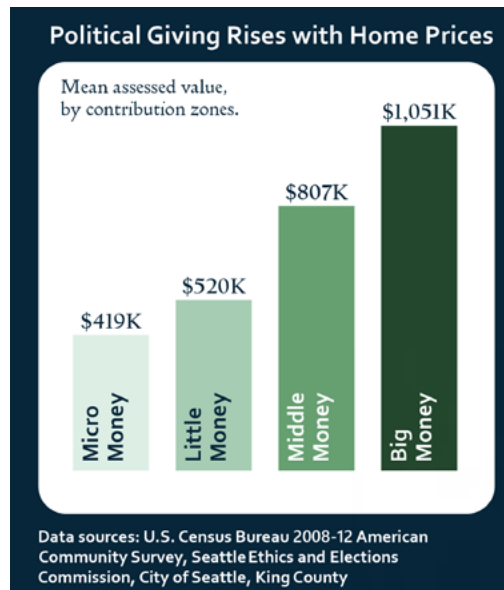
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10. Overlap: Political Giving Comes from View Homes

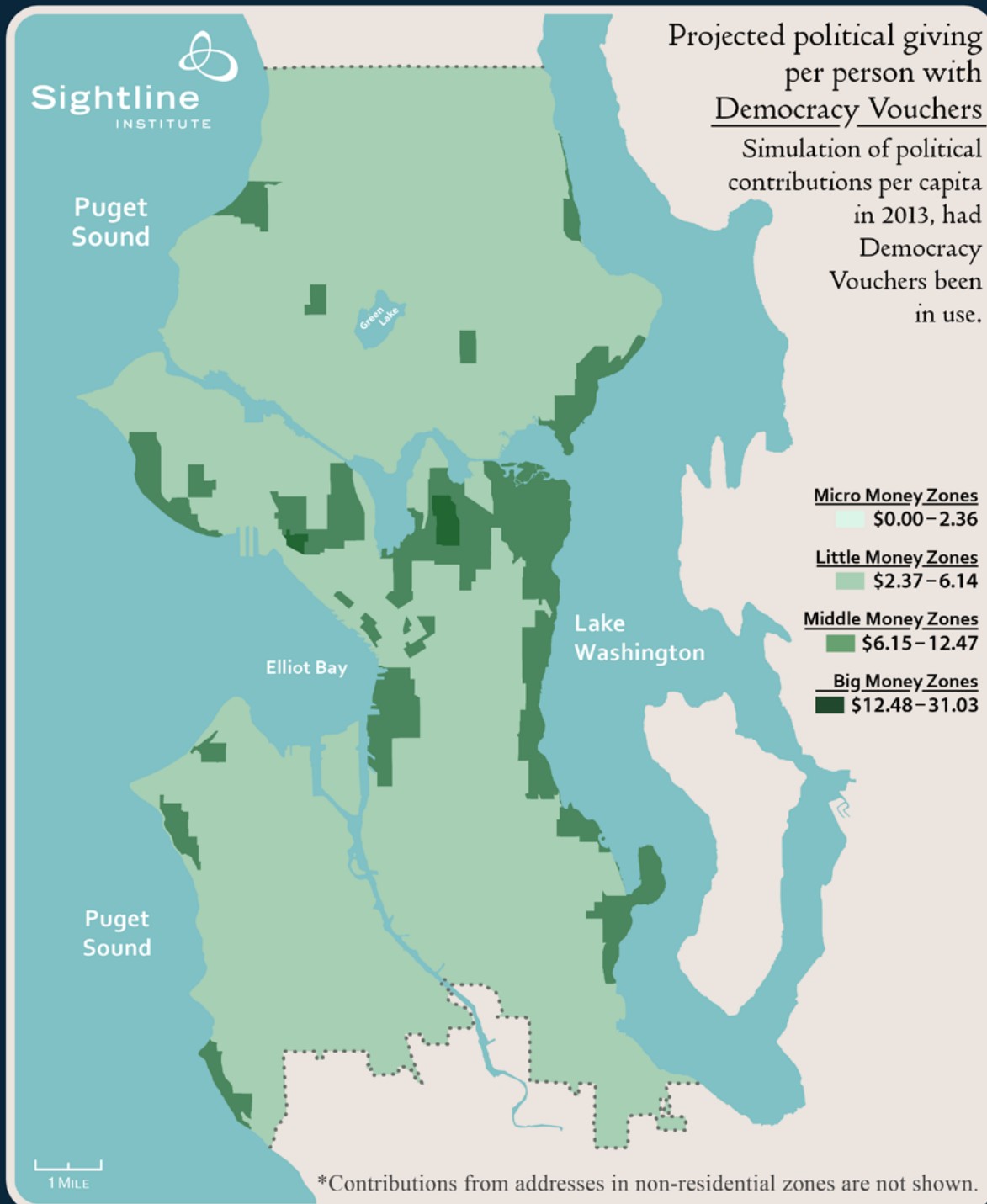
This map overlays view lots from the previous on Map 4 “Political Money per Capita” to show how closely the two line up.

Only 7 percent of homes in the Micro Money Zones have a view, while 32 percent of homes in the Big Money Zones do. A more fine-grained analysis, contributor by contributor and lot by lot, might find an even closer correlation.

More generally, political money overwhelmingly comes from parts of the city with high property values. A map (not published here) of assessed values shows the same pattern as Map 4, though somewhat less powerfully than does the map of view homes. Assessed values reflect population density, land-use regulations, and proximity to downtown, which complicate the relationship to political giving. Average assessed home values, from the King County Assessor's Office, reflect the familiar pattern (see figure): the typical assessed home in the Micro Money Zones is worth about \$414,000; among the elite donors of the Big Money Zones, homes average two-and-a-half times as much, at about \$1,050,000.



What if? Political Giving under Honest Elections Seattle



Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau 2010 Census SF1 and 2008-12 American Community Survey, Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission, City of Seattle, King County

Cartography by CORE GIS LLC, www.coregis.net

Design by GoodMeasures, www.GoodMeasures.biz

11. What Honest Elections Seattle Will Do

In 1999, University of Washington demographer Richard Morrill mapped contributions in the 1997 city election cycle. He found, as summarized by the [Seattle Times](#), “that downtown, north Capitol Hill, Madrona, and south Queen Anne dominated the contribution list, and that minority neighborhoods hardly contributed at all to most of the campaigns.” Apparently, little has changed. The same rich, white neighborhoods still dominate political giving in Seattle.

If voters approve the Honest Elections Seattle Initiative in November 2015, what might it do to the map of Seattle's political giving? Let's take the initiative's key provisions about campaign funding in turn.

Honest Elections Seattle will reduce the maximum contribution any donor may make to any candidate from \$700 to \$500.

If the maximum contribution in 2013 had been \$500 rather than \$700, donors would have “maxed out” with smaller checks. In the 2013 cycle, 924 contributions were greater than \$500. They totaled \$643,000. If those 924 contributions had each been trimmed to \$500, the total raised would have been \$462,000, reducing fundraising totals by \$181,000. Of course, candidates might have worked harder to raise \$500 contributions from others because they have campaign budgets to support. The people who can write \$500 checks are a slightly less exclusive club than the people who can write \$700 checks. Still, the change would have been modest and likely would not have changed the map of political giving dramatically.

Honest Elections Seattle will provide \$100 in Democracy Vouchers to every registered voter in the city.

Voters may give their vouchers (four of them worth \$25 each) to city candidates who have qualified for the Honest Elections program and pledged to limit their spending and cap contributions at \$250 plus vouchers.

Democracy Vouchers are a pioneering venture discussed [by theorists for years](#) and awaiting their world debut in practice. The rate of voter participation is therefore impossible to predict. In 2013, some 1.5 percent of Seattle adults contributed to any local candidate's campaign. In Minnesota, as many as 5 percent of adults contribute to state candidates, thanks to a tax program that allows voters to get a refund for small-dollar contributions they make. Democracy Vouchers will be simpler for voters to use than Minnesota's tax refund. We therefore expect them to attract wider utilization: perhaps as many as 10 percent of adults will contribute at least one of their vouchers to a candidate, raising the number of contributors from the 8,450 witnessed in 2013 to perhaps 55,000. The number seems unlikely to go much higher than that, unfortunately, considering that most people pay only glancing attention to politics, especially local politics. Fewer than [a third of registered Seattle voters](#) cast a ballot in primary elections, even in the hotly contested primary between Kshama Sawant and Richard Conlin in 2013.

Vouchers will make it easy for voters to contribute. They will also give voters more reason to attend candidate forums, house parties, and the like: they'll have vouchers to give to their favorite candidates.

Similarly, Democracy Vouchers will upend the incentives for candidates: they'll make every voter in the city an easy prospect for \$100 in contributions. It will probably be easier to collect vouchers than to dial for dollars from the donor class. Candidates may instead call on their supporters mostly to assemble their friends and neighbors to meet the candidate and let the candidate ask for vouchers. Members of the donor class may even become less inclined to give money themselves, knowing that vouchers are plentiful and free for the taking by any well-run and persuasive campaign. Community groups, unions, business associations, and many other organizations, for their part, will likely rush to assemble voters and then encourage candidates to come ask for support—and vouchers. Democracy Vouchers could be game changers that rearrange the political money map of the city.

The Big Money and Middle Money Zones will still give, no doubt. They are already on candidates' fundraising lists and are accustomed to participating in campaigns as donors. Because of their wealth, furthermore, they will likely continue to give a disproportionate share of remaining financial contributions to campaigns. But vouchers will make the Micro Money and Little Money Zones fruitful fundraising territory for the first time. Doorbelling, house parties, receptions, fundraisers of many types, community forums, debates, street markets, and outdoor festivals—all the places candidates go to meet voters in person will become fundraising venues. Grassroots campaigning may expand markedly.

The final map shows one possible outcome: a hypothetical 2013 campaign cycle in which we imagine Democracy Vouchers had been in use. In it, we assume that candidates collected two-thirds of their funds from vouchers and one-third the old-fashioned way. We assume that slightly more than 10 percent of Seattle adults gave at least one voucher to an Honest Elections-qualified candidate, and that on average, these adults assigned half of their vouchers, or \$50 each. We assume that contributions of money diminish by two-thirds, and that the decrease is proportional across the city. That is, all neighborhoods give one-third as much in this scenario as what they actually gave in 2013. We then sum voucher giving and money giving and map the results.

Under these assumptions, no part of the city remains in the Micro Money Zones. There is a new floor of political participation citywide, and the Big Money and Middle Money Zones both shrink. That's what Honest Elections Seattle might do to the political map of Seattle: spread participation from the rich, white, expensive neighborhoods with view homes to the whole city.

Note on Methods

For the maps in this report, Sightline made a public information request from the Seattle Ethics and Elections Commission and received a complete data file of donors' names, addresses, contribution amounts, and recipients. Sightline retained the services of CoreGIS to sort, clean, and geocode the data to create the maps presented here. CoreGIS excluded several thousand contributions from contributors who listed non-Seattle addresses. CoreGIS added data layers to the maps from public sources, such as the US Bureau of the Census, for population, race and ethnicity, and median household income by census block group. From the King County Assessor's office, CoreGIS obtained data on assessed property values and the locations of view lots. From the city of Seattle, it obtained non-residential land-use classification data in order to screen out some of the workplace giving to political campaigns. Under Sightline's instructions, CoreGIS then analyzed the overlaps and relationships among these various data layers.

Meanwhile, Sightline separately downloaded data from the state Public Disclosure Commission for the same races in the City of Seattle for separate analysis. (SEEC and PDC both track spending in city campaigns.) Like CoreGIS, Sightline excluded contributions from contributors who listed non-Seattle addresses. Sightline researchers went through all of the more than 15,000 contributions, line by line, to correct typos, synchronize spellings and abbreviations of names (in order to be able to correctly analyze for *contributors*, not just *contributions*), and to categorize contributors into three classes: individual people, unions and liberal advocacy nonprofits, and for-profit corporations and those who represent them such as trade associations.

Because Sightline and CoreGIS used different data sources and different data-cleaning methods, the numbers from these two methods do not match perfectly. Nonetheless, they are so close that they tend to validate each other's accuracy. In this report, we relied on CoreGIS analysis when the statements are directly related to the maps. We added context from the Sightline/PDC data.

Our maps all show political contributions during the 2013 election cycle, not just during calendar year 2013. Under state and city rules, the 2013 election fundraising cycle ran from April 2011 to April 2014, but fundraising began in earnest in 2012 and dwindled quickly after the election in November 2013.

Many contributors' addresses are so close together that the dots on the first two maps ("Contributors to Seattle Candidates" and "\$500+ Contributors") are stacked on top of each other. For example, three family members might each be campaign contributors, along with a next door neighbor. At the scale of our maps, all of those four dots merge into one. In both maps, the number of dots on the map is only about one-third of the actual number of contributors, because of this stacking effect. The stacking effect is most pronounced in areas with more people or more contributors, so the maps tend to understate political giving in densely populated or giving-intensive zones.

About 3.5 percent of contributors were corporations, not people. (Sightline plans a subsequent analysis of these contributions.) Corporations included, among others, for-profit companies, trade associations, political action committees, and trade unions. Another share of contributors were individual people who reported not their home addresses but their work addresses on disclosure forms. Consequently,

a small share of the dots on the first two maps reflect not home addresses but business addresses—either of corporations that gave or of employees. To focus on where contributors lived, not where they worked, Sightline instructed CoreGIS to exclude areas of the city where housing is not permitted, such as in industrial zones and parts of downtown. CoreGIS did the same for all of the maps of political money and for the data summarizing those maps.

This decision to exclude nonresidential zones removed about one fifth of the dots from the first two maps and one-fourth of the dollars contributed from all of the maps. The lion's share of these contributors was probably Seattle residents who reported workplace addresses. We have no way of knowing what neighborhoods they lived in, or even if they lived in the city, except that some contributors reported their home addresses on some contributions and their business addresses on others. In these cases, the map reflects the residential addresses.

Others of the excluded contributors were from among the 3.5 percent of all contributors that were corporations. Because many corporations have offices in parts of the city where housing is allowed, though, some corporate contributors are still on the maps. It's also true that some political money still shown on the maps reflect workplace addresses of employees who live elsewhere in the city or beyond its borders. Still, the overall pattern would not likely change significantly if we could more-accurately pin point residential addresses for all contributors.

Credits

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Sightline Institute is a think tank providing leading original analysis of energy, economic, and environmental policy in the Pacific Northwest.

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Mapping and analysis: Matt Stevenson, CORE GIS LLC

Graphic design of maps and figures: Devin Porter, Good Measures

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Appendix: Seattle Neighborhoods

