

# How to reduce the cost of politics and strengthen democracy in Asia Pacific

Strategies identified at the  
Democracy Action Partnership  
conference 2024

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### About the author

Jamie Hitchen is an independent research analyst with more than a decade of experience working on issues related to democracy, governance, and politics. He has researched and written extensively about the role and impact of social media on election processes in West Africa for national and international organisations. Currently, Jamie leads WFD's growing portfolio of work exploring the drivers and costs of seeking and maintaining political office, and the implications for democracy. An Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham, Jamie has authored several academic journal publications, as well as a range of policy focused reports and briefs, and commentary pieces for national and international media.

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### Disclaimer

The content of this briefing paper reflects the discussions and recommendations put forth by participants of WFD's Democracy Action Partnership (DAP), which took place on 9–10 December 2024 in Bogor, Indonesia. These represent important contributions to efforts towards tackling the high and increasing cost of politics but do not represent the full extent of WFD's programming and policy work on the cost of politics. More of this can be found on our [cost of politics website](#).

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## BACKGROUND

In December 2024, Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) hosted its second Democracy Action Partnership (DAP) in Indonesia. This briefing paper expands on the insights and recommendations exchanged during the discussions which were attended by more than 100 civil society practitioners, parliamentarians, government officials, researchers, and representatives of electoral institutions.

The focus was the threats posed to inclusive and accountable democracy by the growing cost of politics. A theme that cuts across a number of core areas of WFD's work. It aligns with initiatives to strengthen elections and incremental changes that support improvements throughout the election cycle.

It also links with ongoing work to support enhanced participation of women in politics, one of several underrepresented groups affected by the high cost of politics.

This paper identifies six action areas to strengthen responses to the high cost of politics, based on discussions at the two-day DAP. This includes the critical importance of enhanced civic engagement and education, and how these can underpin, or take place alongside, reforms to the internal workings of political parties and enforcement of tailored regulatory regimes. Together, these initiatives can contribute to making politics more inclusive, accountable, and representative.





## What do we mean by the cost of politics?

The cost of politics covers the financial and non-financial costs that a political candidate incurs in seeking and maintaining legislative office. This concept is supported by a robust methodology that aims to understand how these costs differ among candidates on the basis of gender, age and even party. It continues to adapt and evolve with further research.

It is both narrower and broader than the related concepts of political party and campaign finance. It is narrower in that it focuses on individuals rather than political party expenditure. Simultaneously, it is broader than other political finance approaches which focus on elections only.

The cost of politics encompasses all costs incurred in an election cycle: from pre-selection campaigning, through candidate nomination, to running an election or re-election campaign, to the expenditure whilst in office or during periods outside of formal politics, for those unsuccessful.

WFD's research, with studies in over 30 countries and counting, shows that in many contexts, the cost of politics is not a consequence of the political, legal and electoral landscape but an integral part of its design. Its embeddedness in the wider political economy points to the need for a multifaceted and comprehensive approach to addressing the problem.



# The challenges and impacts of the rising cost of politics

The high and rising costs of entering and participating in politics contributes to the exclusion of certain groups from representative bodies, the heightening of corruption, and a reduction in citizens' appetite to participate fully in democratic processes.

In Indonesia, politics is increasingly dominated by wealthy candidates or those from political dynasties. These are the predominant profile of candidates who fill female-only seats in the national legislature or who parties point to when asked to show how they are enabling youth voices to emerge. A similar story exists in Pakistan, India, and, until recently, Bangladesh. The majority of legislative representatives in these countries now come from business backgrounds. This is a shift from their previous role as financial backers.

Although well-resourced candidates are needed to meet parties' self-funding requirements, they are often driven to join politics for personal rather than public gains. This increases the likelihood of corruption. Candidates are more vulnerable to corrupt actions given the debts they accrue contesting and during political office. In the 2024 Indonesian elections, candidates average expenditure was USD \$315,000. These are amounts that need to be paid back in cash or kind.

High and rising costs are also driven by citizens' expectations of political aspirants and legislators. Representatives in the Maldives spend an average of three-quarters of their campaign funds responding to constituent or community needs. They are then expected to continue to deliver basic services and provide access to government jobs, if elected. In circumventing the structures that are designed to deliver services in ways which are accountable, transparent and open to scrutiny, politics becomes more transactional. There is growing citizen disillusionment to challenge what one DAP participant described as the growth of "ideological bankruptcy" in politics in the region.

Yet disillusionment can also transform into anger and action. Upon realising that the distribution of resources favours only the elites, popular uprisings in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh emerged to restore balance. In Thailand, the emergence of a progressive party brought fresh voices to the forefront of politics. Examples that show opportunities to change the dynamics around the high cost of politics do exist.

# A vision of the future

Both political actors and voters see current political systems as unsustainable. This is an entry point to start conversations about how they can be changed for the better. To address the challenges posed by the unsustainable cost of politics, DAP participants created a collective vision. It sets out what representative democracy ideally looks like and how it can mitigate present threats posed by political impunity, populism, social media and shrinking civic space.

Inclusion is a core tenant. Inclusion here means more women, youth, and minority groups, including people from different religions, ethnicities, and lower incomes, in positions of political power. As opposed to being tokens, these diverse representatives would be competent, work for the public interest at large and act with integrity. The importance of diverse representatives was emphasised to reflect the multitude of backgrounds and viewpoints of various communities, including the structurally disadvantaged.

Representatives should have a deep connection with and understand the needs of their constituency. Moreover, they would work diligently to translate promises into concrete impact for the betterment of their constituents' daily lives. They would speak openly and fiercely to advocate for their constituents, including listening to and collaborating with civil society, who would also play a vital role in holding political actors to account. This all would further public trust in the political system.

To ensure these types of representatives emerge, political parties would have fair and transparent processes for identifying candidates – selecting the best person for the job, not judging them by the thickness of their wallet. Crucially, the work of political parties and their members would be driven by established values rather than self-interest.

Finally, electoral systems and accompanying legislation would be designed to enable anybody to run as candidates. Money and/or political connections are not decisive determinants. Relevant authorities would ensure transparency and enact robust oversight throughout the electoral process, including enforcing campaign finance regulations.

# Taking action

DAP participants identified six key thematic areas for realising their collective vision in addressing the high cost of politics. The need to adapt to specific contexts, engage with allies, and collaborate widely were viewed as critical cross-cutting approaches to create the conditions for these changes to emerge.

## Action 1

Enhanced civic education and sustained citizen engagement

## Action 4

Established funding models that enhance equity in political participation

## Action 2

Accountable and more inclusive political party processes

## Action 5

Strengthened grassroots service delivery

## Action 3

Tailored and enforceable regulation to limit influence of money in electoral politics

## Action 6

Empowered networks with capacity to share knowledge about the high cost of politics

## Enhanced civic education and sustained citizen engagement

**Core action underpinning all interventions aimed at changing politics through empowering voters.**

Voters are not mere bystanders but often active participants in driving the cost of politics. They put expectations on political aspirants at various phases of the electoral cycle to provide them with direct support. Moving away from this transactional politics to one driven more by sustained and transparent engagement is key. But the responsibility does not rest solely on citizens to channel their demands in more structured ways. Political candidates and office holders need to be responsive and transparent in addressing these demands.

### 1/ Conduct targeted civic education

**Action for: CSOs, media and electoral commissions (ideally in partnership)**

Civic education initiatives can cover themes that explain the different roles and responsibilities of government officials or give examples of the benefits that come from issue-based, rather than transactional, politics. Partnerships with traditional media, utilising digital media platforms and the interactive tools they provide access to, and/or in-person sessions led by civic actors, and supported by respected community figures, can enhance social acceptability.

### 2/ Create platforms that engage citizens with clear agendas

**Action for: CSOs, politicians**

Regular town halls and/or issue-focused citizen assemblies can provide platforms for fostering engagement, dialogue, and creating a shared understanding of challenges between citizens and aspiring or elected candidates. They can also provide a forum to discuss potential solutions. Drop-in clinics at constituency level and digital tools that create channels for citizen feedback can also support sustained citizen engagement.

### 3/ Establish anti-vote buying collective agreements

**Action for: CSOs, social interest groups (unions, womens associations etc)**

Community driven commitments to resist vote-buying that are publicised can push candidates to formulate, and explain, how they would effectively represent and develop the community.

### 4/ Support citizen-led monitoring of election conduct

**Action for: Social interest groups, CSOs, media**

Compel political aspirants to commit to codes of conduct that promote issue-based campaigning, expenditure transparency and reject vote-buying. Monitoring of adherence to these commitments can be undertaken by grassroots structures, empowered to publicly report on compliance in ways that boost citizen awareness.



# Accountable and more inclusive political party processes

**Link with efforts to review funding modalities. Can work best alongside efforts that strengthen civic engagement and awareness.**

Political parties prefer candidates with the resources to run effective campaigns with minimal financial support. This has reduced ideological commitments to well defined party values. This is not only weakening parties' coherence on issues, but further constricting the space for more diverse candidates to emerge. To address these shortcomings, sustained and strategic lobbying, initially directed at smaller or emerging parties, can drive change.

### 1/ Increase transparency in candidate selection

#### Action for: Political parties

Push for commitments to make internal party processes more transparent. Encourage parties to make public the criteria used for selecting candidates or to set strict conditions about who is eligible to contest. This can limit last minute entrants, with significant resources, buying nominations.

### 2/ Independently assess competitive party primaries

#### Action for: CSOs/media

Increase external and regulatory scrutiny of competitive primary processes. Networks of domestic observer groups can draw greater attention to the transparency and credibility of this important part of the election process.

### 3/ Strengthen internal commitments to diversity

#### Action for: Political parties

Strengthen or enforce existing party commitments to create pathways for diverse representatives to emerge. Internal quotas for the selection of youth and female party members can be done alongside efforts to strengthen youth or women's wings.

### 4/ Develop and distribute issue-based agendas

#### Action for: Political parties, CSOs, media

Provide technical support to parties to develop actionable and issue-based manifestos, and ensure they are translated into local languages. More issued-focused campaign commitments can be used by citizens to hold parties, and their representatives, to account.

### Tailored and enforceable regulation to limit influence of money in electoral politics

**Most effective when combined with political party reforms and enhanced civic engagement and awareness.**

Tackling election expenditure requires going beyond the confines of the campaign period. It must also include money spent by individuals who, in trying to get elected, spend sums that often exceed the remuneration they receive in office. Regulation of political expenditure needs to be more responsive and adapted to these realities. But also more rigorously and diligently enforced. Strong and independent accountability institutions are critical in enhancing efforts to clamp down on corruption - a consequence of the high costs of running for political office.

#### **1/ Expand campaign finance regulation to include individuals**

##### **Action for: EMBs/legislators**

Update or create regulation to compel individual candidates to submit expenditure reports for the election campaign period. Ensure that campaign expenditure caps are realistic.

#### **2/ Ensure compliance with the legal framework**

##### **Action for: Regulatory authorities, political parties/candidates**

Build the capacity of dedicated teams within existing oversight institutions - such as the electoral commission, anti-corruption body or national audit office - to better enforce election expenditure regulation. Complete coverage is unrealistic. Instead, random, in-depth, and publicly available audits of select candidates from all parties can be used as a tool to foster wider compliance. Advocate for those who are found to breach the rules, to be held accountable.

#### **3/ Strengthen scrutiny of procurement processes**

##### **Action for: Regulatory authorities**

Target procurement and contract award processes in anti-corruption efforts to reduce the incentives for investing heavily in electoral politics.

#### **4/ Push for public asset declarations**

##### **Action for: CSOs, media, regulatory authorities**

Advocate for legislators to declare financial assets and any potential conflicts of interest before taking their seat in the legislature, and at the end of each term, to the anti-corruption body. Make summaries of this information readily available to media and other civic actors for further scrutiny.

#### **5/ Capture online expenditure**

##### **Action for: Legislatures/EMBs/regulatory authorities**

Lobby government or regional bodies to push social media companies to share details of candidates' and political parties' expenditure with agencies tasked to enforce compliance with campaign finance regulations.

#### **6/ Push for a more level playing field**

##### **Action for: EMB/regulatory agencies**

Limit incumbency advantages in the year or six months preceding an election. Implement embargos on launching new constituency level projects in the immediate pre-election period or combining official visits, funded by the state, with informal campaign activities.

#### **7/ Provide space for independent voices**

##### **Action for: Legislators/EMB**

Ensure provisions exist for independent candidacies. This can help create space for more diverse voices to be represented during political campaigns.

## Action 4

### Established funding models that enhance equity in political participation

**A component that will have greatest impact when accompanied by, or following, internal political party reforms and improved implementation of a strengthened regulatory regime.**

Political outreach and engagement require resources. Highly unequal access to funds skews the electoral landscape in favour of those with the most resources. This reality has shaped the increasingly transactional nature of electoral politics. Resources are mostly raised by individual candidates – either on their own or backstopped by family, friends and, increasingly, businesses. But alternative funding modalities can reduce the individual, and overall, cost of politics, particularly during the formal campaign period.

#### **1/ Create more equitable funding models**

##### **Action for: Governments, political parties**

Provide state funding for political parties, where it does not already exist, for those that meet certain vote thresholds. Support mechanisms that encourage its equitable distribution both to parties, and within them. Reduced personal expenditure during campaigns can address the need to recoup these amounts when in office.

#### **2/ Establish funds designed to promote diversity in representation**

##### **Action for: Governments, political parties**

Create state-financed diversity funds for election expenditure. Allocations, managed by a political party regulatory body or equivalent, would support new political entrants from smaller parties or those running as independents.

#### **3/ Push candidates towards grassroots fundraising models**

##### **Action for: Regulatory bodies, CSOs, political parties/candidates**

Introduce and/or enforce caps on donations that individual candidates can receive to fund campaigns. Align this with support and efforts to encourage more grassroots fundraising.

#### **4/ Support representatives to regularly engage constituents**

##### **Action for: Parliaments**

Ensure parliamentary salaries or benefits include, or are sufficient to cover, regular visits to legislators' constituencies. This would allow them to attend, or even establish, regular forums that foster engagement with constituents.

### Strengthened grassroots service delivery

**Needs to be delivered instep with civic engagement and advocacy initiatives.**

The direct delivery of basic services regularly falls on elected officials. Others use constituency development funds to personalise the development agenda as part of ongoing efforts to boost their re-election chances. As a result, constituents expect their elected representatives to directly provide for them, rather than to represent and advocate. Alongside enhanced civic awareness, improved and responsive service delivery and project implementation are key.

**1/ Ensure local service delivery is functioning effectively**

**Action for: Governments**

Build the capacity of local government officials to deliver the mandate and development responsibility assigned to them.

**2/ Build local development agendas more collaboratively**

**Action for: Local governments, CSOs, social interest groups, media**

Strengthen local government capacity to listen to and meet constituents' development needs. Enhance transparency and understanding about how service delivery should work at the constituency level and/or how constituency development funds are managed and implemented. Including local officials – both appointed and elected – in citizen assembly or town hall dialogues, alongside legislators, can create more cohesive local development agendas and action plans.



## Action 6

### Empowered networks with capacity to share knowledge about the high cost of politics

**A standalone response that can support and strengthen other action interventions.**

In partnership, WFD aims to build a strong evidence base in the region, and across the globe, that outlines the drivers, impacts and implications of the rising cost of politics. There is still more to learn. Opportunities exist to do this in ways that build or strengthen national, regional and even global networks working to support inclusive, accountable and representative democracy.

#### 1/ Expand the research geographically

##### **Action for: CSOs, academics/think-tanks**

Use the WFD methodology and a political economy lens to undertake further studies in countries not yet covered.

#### 2/ Dig deeper into key themes

##### **Action for: CSOs, academics, think-tanks**

Conduct in-depth research into themes or issues raised by existing cost of politics studies, either at national or regional level. Exploring topics such as the incentives shaping transactional politics, vote buying, or the costs involved in getting nominated by a party for women in more detail would strengthen the existing knowledge base. Enhanced understandings can support more tailored and nuanced responses to address the challenges identified.

#### 3/ Create platforms for enhancing research

##### **Action for: CSOs, academics/think-tanks**

Establish national and/or regional networks of researchers and practitioners that can provide a forum for discussing emerging findings. Platforms can help ensure research is responsive to shifting democratic patterns and practitioner needs and is actionable.

#### 4/ Build networks of like-minded political actors

##### **Action for: Political parties/actors**

Explore opportunities for creating cross political party or individual candidate networks with the aim of tackling the rise in the cost of politics. These can provide spaces for experience sharing among specific sub-groups, such as youth, female or other underrepresented candidates.

#### 5/ Share regulatory success stories

##### **Action for: EMBS, regulatory institutions**

Create learning and experience sharing platforms for regulatory institutions and election management bodies. Forums that can be used to discuss how they are seeking to respond to the challenges posed by the increased cost of politics.

#### 6/ Create networks to enhance civic engagement

##### **Action for: CSOs, media**

Facilitate dialogues and opportunities for regional learning among civil society organisations and media on innovative civic engagement approaches to tackling the issue of the rising cost of politics.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating internationally, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.



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