Season 2 Episode 4: Give Me Five Dollars or I'll Start Crying

HUNT: It is a great day here at Scandalized because we are joined in the studio by Lacey Daley, Boise State Public Radio's digital strategy manager. How's it going, Lacey?

DALEY: This is the best day of my life. I get to cameo on my favorite podcast with my favorite people, so I'm very happy to be here and excited to hear what's going on.

KETTLER: Well, Lacey, you've been amazingly supportive of Scandalized and getting it off the ground. And so we wanted to give something back. We know that so much of public radio is listener supported, which means that sometimes you have to do some fundraising, which may be not the most fun. So we think we can be helpful here.

DALEY: Ooh, I can't wait.

KETTLER: Well, so we're political scientists, as you know, and candidates and outside groups have raised record amounts of money this election cycle. We figured they must be doing something right. So we've been digging through their campaign fundraising emails.

HUNT: So, Lacey, we wanted to share with you a few really amazing and innovative ideas from our part of the world that we think will get Boise State Public Radio its biggest fundraising quarter ever. What do you think?

DALEY: I am all ears.

HUNT: Excellent. So I'm going to read some of these to you, Lacey. And keep in mind these are pretty much verbatim from the fundraising emails that we've been reading. We didn't want to change them in really any way. Okay. So I'm just going to. But they always write directly to a person. So I'm going to stick your name in there as since you are also an avid Boise State Public Radio listener.

DALEY: Absolutely.

HUNT: Okay. Here's the first one. Dear Lacey, our general manager just checked in with the team, and he asked why he hadn't heard back from you yet. Are you ignoring us? We asked you once. We asked you twice. Now we're asking you for an eighth time. We need public radio listeners nationwide to take action. But no one is donating five exclamation points.

DALEY: Ooh. Five. Um, I like the urgency, but it seems a little much on the aggression.

HUNT: A little aggressive. We'll try to dial it back.

DALEY: We try not to bully people here.

HUNT: Okay. No bullying. Okay, I'll give you one with a with a lighter touch, but still kind of intimate here. Dear Lacey, I don't want this to be the message I wish I had sent sooner. I'd hate to look back and wonder if reaching you one more time could have changed everything. Please read here.

DALEY: Okay. Um. We like tone down the aggression, but we really turned up the dramatics. Okay. Yeah, that one is probably gonna miss most public radio supporters.

HUNT: Shoot. Okay, well, don't worry, we still have. We still have one.

DALEY: Oh. Thank goodness.

HUNT: Okay. And I think this one is the best one.

DALEY: So best for last.

HUNT: Dear Lacey. During our last meeting, we went over the list of patriots who had already contributed to Boise State Public Radio to get their 250th USA Patriot pin. We were asked why your name wasn't on the list, and we had to report that your offer expired. We were hoping it wasn't true, but we pulled your file to confirm for one day only. We have been authorized to reactivate your offer to receive your 250th USA Patriot pin. We're reconvening again in a few days, and we don't want to see another list without your name on it.

DALEY: Wow. Uh.

HUNT: Gets right to the point, I feel like. Plus, there's a gift.

DALEY: And a gift. Yeah. You know, we love our swag. Um, that is so mean.

KETTLER: Well.

HUNT: You think a little, like a little too threatening.

DALEY: Like a little too threatening, uh, kind of shaming me and that nobody likes to be shamed. Oh, also, like, my BS alert is going off.

HUNT: Mhm.

KETTLER: You don't think there's a pen?

DALEY: Yeah. I'm not, I'm not, I'm not buying that that that there was a list and you're checking it and you like you this is all automated. It's stopped trying to make it a personal touch.

HUNT: Lacey, would it shock you to learn that when I looked at this email, the picture of the pin was really, really obviously AI generated.

DALEY: I feel like this whole email was.

KETTLER: From Boise State Public Radio. This is Scandalized. I'm Jaci Kettler.

HUNT: And I'm Charlie Hunt. Money is a huge part of our campaigns and elections, whether we like it or not. Jaci and I study campaign finance for a living, but some of the tactics we've seen emerge in the last few elections have us seriously thinking of a career change.

KETTLER: This week on the show, the increasingly fiery, desperate and downright scammy tactics that both parties are using to fund their candidates and the vulnerable donors that suffer the consequences. Charlie, I know it seems like it was a while back, but just a few years ago, Donald Trump was besieged with legal challenges and had a massive bill to go along with them.

MEDIA CLIP: While Donald Trump holds a decisive lead in the 2024 Republican presidential primary. His 2024 calendar will be full of legal challenges and court appearances and four major criminal cases. The former president faces 91 felony counts, and two key civil cases could cost him millions of dollars in damages.

HUNT: I've never faced any felony charges myself, but I can imagine that this would maybe rack up quite the legal bill for President Trump.

KETTLER: The New York Times calculated that Trump was spending, on average, more than $90,000 a day on legal expenses in the several years after he left office in 2021. This added up to over $100 million in legal bills by early 2024.

HUNT: Yikes. Okay. Well, as we've discussed before on the podcast, Trump was pretty busy during this time selling items like Trump watches and guitars and Bibles. But I'm guessing selling sneakers alone was never really going to be enough to cover all those legal bills. So what does?

KETTLER: Well, Trump also drew from a sizable pool of money available to him. His campaign funds. This is money that individuals and political groups donated to his campaign committee to assist his reelection efforts. Believe it or not, this effort began right after he lost the 2020 election.

MEDIA CLIP: Now, Donald Trump rejected the results. He said he didn't, in fact, lose, and he cried foul. And he told his supporters, give to me. Give to an election defense fund. His supporters responded in a really unprecedented way between Election Day 2020 and the day that Joe Biden was sworn in as president in January, Donald Trump raised more than $250 million online.

HUNT: Okay, very, very cool. So Trump is inflaming these divisions and sowing distrust in our elections in order to pay for his legal bills.

KETTLER: Yeah, it kind of seems like it. Some of that money did pay for recounts, election related legal expenses and his impeachment defense. But according to The New York Times, Trump held on to most of that cash raised after the 2020 election for Non-campaign legal expenses.

HUNT: So it actually is legal to use campaign funds to pay for some legal expenses that are specifically related to the campaign. But in this case, these are Trump's personal legal bills. And we know from a few other characters that we've covered on this podcast that you aren't allowed to use these campaign funds on personal expenses. So how did the Trump campaign get away with this?

KETTLER: You mentioned the prohibition of using campaign funds for personal expenses, but there is a loophole.

HUNT: I should have guessed, there's always a loophole when it comes to campaign finance laws.

KETTLER: Our campaign finance laws prohibit funds from candidates, campaign committees being used for personal expenses, but not money from political action committees or PACs. There are several different types of PACs, but generally speaking, traditional packs are organizations that collect donations from individuals and political groups. Pacs then used the pooled money to support multiple campaigns and influence elections. After the 2020 election, Trump transitioned his campaign account into a separate, free standing PAC that he called Maga PAC. Because this was no longer a campaign committee, he could use it to pay legal fees, including for personal matters. He also created a leadership PAC called the Save America PAC. Both of these packs were used to pay Trump's legal bills over the next several years.

HUNT: Okay, so Trump has these hundreds of millions of dollars lying around in his campaign account where they can't be used to pay for his legal bills. So he just transfers the money out of this campaign account and into these PACs, which do allow for the usage. Problem solved, I guess.

KETTLER: And these PACs weren't the only ones coughing up money for these legal expenses. The Republican National Committee also sent money to the Save America PAC. In fact, the RNC also directly paid some of Trump's legal bills.

HUNT: But this isn't totally unprecedented, right? I seem to remember the Democratic National Committee also paying some of President Biden's legal bills during the investigation into his handling of classified documents.

KETTLER: True, but some Republicans weren't happy about this arrangement with Trump in 2024. There was even a resolution to prevent the Republican National Committee from paying Trump's legal bills. The resolution ultimately failed. A majority of RNC members supported the party committee, helping pay for Trump's legal bills. But one of Trump's challengers for the Republican presidential nomination in 2024, Nikki Haley, really wasn't thrilled.

MEDIA CLIP: His remaining Republican challenger said it should be a wake up call for the party.

MEDIA CLIP: The part I worry about is the RNC is now going to be the piggy bank for Trump's legal fees.

HUNT: I gotta say, this is pretty understandable. I mean, if the party is spending money on things like one candidate's legal bills, it could be pulling money from supporting the eventual nominee, whoever it is. Plus, even though it might seem like it does in politics, money does not in fact grow on trees. And every dollar the RNC spent on Trumps legal bills was a dollar they then could not spend on advertisements or candidate recruitment or get out the vote operations. So it's not a big mystery to me why some Republicans weren't so wild about this.

KETTLER: In his resolution to stop the RNC from paying Trump's legal bills, Henry Barbour made this exact argument.

MEDIA CLIP: The RNC should spend its resources solely on winning elections and not paying any candidates legal bills. And I think it's important for RNC donors to know when they give money that it's going towards winning elections.

KETTLER: To help assess whether this was wrong, let's turn to our George Costanza test.

MEDIA CLIP: Was that wrong? Should I not have done that?

KETTLER: At the time, there was a lot of debate about whether Trumps packs could legally pay his legal bills. Things were murky because some cases did involve campaigner election related expenses, while others were purely personal. Trump found and used at least one loophole to use PAC money for his legal bills. Groups like the Campaign Legal Center did file complaints with the Federal Election Commission. But after a great deal of media coverage while Trump was out of office, it kind of seemed like there was a general shrug about the legality of the spending during the 2024 campaign. So maybe at least elements of Trump's use of PACs to pay his legal bills weren't always technically against the law. But do you think it was a good practice, Charlie?

HUNT: It's not the practice I would use if, I mean, I wouldn't I would try not to be under all these felony indictments to begin with, but it's not the practice I would use, in part because, like what you and I know about these campaign donations, Jaci, is like, if you're making a donation to a campaign, the reason you're making that donation is because you believe in this person as a candidate and you want them to win their election. And so when those funds aren't used for that purpose, when they're used for some totally other purpose. I think it's not really a mystery why voters might get upset when that happens. To me, it kind of disrespects the voters original intention. Especially

because like, we know that Donald Trump, you know, for all his faults, really, really adept at raising lots and lots of money from small donors, including people who are not really rich like he is. So when you're using those small donors, you know, middle class Americans, political donations to pay for defenses against all your indictments that have nothing to do with your campaign or even really your presidency. I could see that coming across a little disrespectful.

KETTLER: I think that is a really important point, especially when combined with some of Trump's other fundraising scandals. When Trump was fundraising for his 2020 reelection campaign, his campaign came under fire for a controversial fundraising tactic they used. When making a donation to his campaign website. Donors were automatically agreeing for this to be a reoccurring donation to Trump's campaign. Those making a contribution had to manually uncheck a box in order to opt out of the reoccurring donation and make it a one time donation.

HUNT: That does seem like a pretty sneaky practice. I think people are used to donations being just a one time thing, and you might not think to uncheck some box that would make it a recurring donations. And so I'm guessing we ended up with some folks who had some bills piling up as a result.

KETTLER: That's right. And to make it even worse, an investigation by The New York Times found the campaign made it even harder to find the disclaimer about their reoccurring donation agreement. Plus, they eventually added a second prechecked box, doubling the contribution.

HUNT: So not only are they charging them more times than they probably originally intended, but they are charging them for more money than they originally agreed to. That seems like a pretty terrible way to treat your own supporters.

KETTLER: Yeah. The campaign referred to the second Prechecked box as the Money Bomb.

HUNT: As absolutely infuriating as that is, Jaci. It does speak to an important point that can allow us to kind of get in the heads of these folks, which is clearly they saw this as something that would make them a lot of money in their campaigns. And so unfortunately, it sounds like this tactic works.

KETTLER: There are so many awful stories about people on limited incomes that thought they were making a small donation and ended up donating kind of a lot of

money. For example, one Trump supporter was in hospice care, and after hearing Rush Limbaugh talk about how badly the Trump campaign needed money, he scraped together $500 to donate to Trump. However, campaign finance records showed that that one $500 donation kept growing to a total of $3,000 in one month. The supporter didn't even know his bank account was being charged until his rent and utility payments bounced. The supporters brother said, quote, it felt like it was a scam.

HUNT: Jaci, I wouldn't say that feels like a scam. I would say that definitely is a scam.

KETTLER: Another supporters $990 donation to Trump's campaign reoccurred to become almost $8,000. His response said it all quote bandits. I'm retired. I can't afford to pay all that damn money.

HUNT: I think most of us couldn't.

KETTLER: The Trump campaign did refund some of those unexpected donations. The New York Times analysis we referenced earlier estimates that the Trump campaign refunded more than 10% of all their online donations in 2020. The campaign also argued that their aggressive fundraising practices were in line with what other campaigns in the parties were doing.

HUNT: Unfortunately, Jaci, they might actually be right about this. Coming up after the break, candidates across the board, and not just Donald Trump are using fundraising rhetoric in their emails and text messages that matches their out of control tactics, plus the vulnerable Americans caught in the crossfire.

HUNT: So, Jaci, there are actually a few more interesting tidbits about Trump's usage of his campaign funds that we might want to get into since. What the hell is that? Anyway, like I was saying, Trump's corruption in this instance is really interesting because.

ADS!!!!: To tell you how important our daily fundraising goals are.

KETTLER: Uh. All right, Charlie, I think we're probably gonna have to deal with this.

HUNT: But, you know, if we miss his special getting a little difficult to ignore.

ADS!!!!: Grassroots Democrats chipping in to retake the Senate.

HUNT: I've been getting a lot of weird text messages lately, and I'm guessing you have, too. They show up hour after hour, right next to texts from my wife, from my parents, from you, Jaci, sending me yet another link about a ridiculous scandal. And from Pizza Hut with their latest deal on a medium stuffed crust pizza.

KETTLER: Pizza hut. Charlie?

HUNT: It's been a long year. Don't judge me.

KETTLER: Well, stuffed crust aside, I've gotta say I've had the same experience. And we're guessing that you have two text messages and emails, too. Ah, the modern frontier on which candidates and outside groups are fighting for every last dollar you have to spare for their campaigns. These emails typically do have a way to unsubscribe from them at the bottom. The texts usually have an all caps stop to end message at the end.

HUNT: It's true. Although I have questions about how effective these requests are. The stop texts I send back are honestly starting to feel like the button elevators have that are supposed to close the doors. That is completely useless, and they're only to give us some small sense that we have control over what happens next.

KETTLER: Oh, or the Remember Me box. You can check for a website to remember your password and yet never does.

HUNT: Yeah, the whole exercise can feel pretty futile, but maybe it's not surprising since candidates for office at all levels of government and the groups that support them are raising more money and from more sources than ever before.

KETTLER: Even after adjusting for inflation, the amount of money raised and spent in federal elections alone continues to balloon with every election cycle. The last two presidential election cycles saw a combined total of nearly $35 billion in spending. Meanwhile, 2026 will certainly be the most expensive congressional election cycle in history likely to top $10 billion.

HUNT: So maybe it makes sense that candidates, parties and other groups are turning to emails and texts to get those numbers up so high. But what makes quite a bit less sense, at least to me, are the methods and messages campaigns are using to get that money out of your pocket and into their war chest. The fire hose of texts and emails was a little too much for us to handle ourselves, so we called up Derek Willis, a lecturer in

data and computational journalism at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland. He's also a data journalist and self-described campaign finance geek. Join the club, Derek, who's done extensive work and data collection in this area and who does the immense public service of alerting his social media followers to particularly unhinged fundraising emails. Derek spoke with us about a few of the more ridiculous modern methods and messages campaigns resort to in order to separate you from your money.

WILLIS: The one that sticks with me the most is sort of the desperation one. Like the, for lack of a better term, like hostage video, almost. It's like time is running out. Only you can save me. And if you don't do this, it's it's over.

HUNT: Derek says this tactic, which we found plenty of evidence of in our own perusal of campaign emails, is used to create a sense of urgency to use fear, panic, and time based deadlines to make targets of these communications feel like they have to donate now or else, you know, really bad stuff will happen.

ADS!!!!: Crisis. Trump intends to declare an emergency and cancel the election.

ADS!!!!: Urgent. Red alert.

ADS!!!!: Honestly, panicking a little bit.

ADS!!!!: I didn't want to write this email, but here's the truth we missed our weekly fundraising deadlines.

ADS!!!!: Response requested in the next 30 minutes. How many times do I have to repeat myself?

ADS!!!!: Is your phone off? John, we've been trying to contact you for hours. We need to talk right now. We only have until midnight.

ADS!!!!: Crypto is coming after me. I have nowhere else to turn. Please don't look away.

KETTLER: Good Lord. And if crypto is involved, I really would prefer to look away.

HUNT: Yeah. Same. Unfortunately, Jaci, this is just the tip of the iceberg. Campaigns also use other more technical tricks to make it seem like even small amounts donated to campaigns can lead to big rewards.

ADS!!!!: 800% emergency match unlocked.

ADS!!!!: Today, only a generous group of donors is offering to match every dollar up to $200,000.

ADS!!!!: I am authorizing our Maga gold members. That's you to take advantage of a 5000 X impact before midnight tonight.

ADS!!!!: Activate your 38 million X impact now.

KETTLER: I'm sorry. 38 million.

HUNT: For those who aren't math whizzes, that means that if Jaci decides to pony up 100 bucks to this campaign, the person matching her donation has to donate $3.8 billion.

KETTLER: That is very generous. I guess it's time to get out my checkbook.

HUNT: Yeah. Obviously, this is a tremendous pile of BS. That one was from an email promising to use your donation to reach, quote, every Republican in America. I, of course, googled how many registered Republicans were in America, and the AI overview spat out 38 million, which I am 100% sure this is how this number was arrived at. Derek told us that this is a distressingly common tactic.

WILLIS: I mean, it's also in almost every respect, like an actual lie. Like there is no matching donations. If you look at those messages, they do not actually refer to money. When they say 500 times impact, what they say is like your money will reach 500,000 voters. And so it has 500,000 times impact, which is also, again, a lie. I mean, that's the pernicious and effective part is that people do respond to that, even if in this case, like it is just patently untrue almost all the time.

HUNT: So whoever is writing these emails, maybe it's also AI is just playing a kind of wire fraud jazz, pulling unverified numbers from across the internet and throwing them randomly into fake matching fund schemes.

KETTLER: Charlie, as an alto sax player, I won't have you insulting jazz like that.

HUNT: Sorry.

KETTLER: In fact, we should say that these kind of matches can be common tactics for all kinds of fundraisers, including for public radio and charities. But in this case, the promises of a multiplying match nearly always range from really misleading to downright fiction.

HUNT: Yeah, for most regular candidate campaigns, the math just doesn't work for these matches, since most individuals who might do the matching end up maxing out their donations at $3,500, which is the federal limit for donations to candidates and similar limits exist for party committees.

KETTLER: Superpacs are different since they can raise unlimited amounts from individuals in other groups. So high matches like these could theoretically happen. But in most cases, there's no evidence that these PACs aren't just totally making these promises up. Instead, these matches work as a kind of urgency inducing social cue the idea that others are in. So you should act now.

HUNT: Okay, well, if matching funds aren't enough to get you to donate, Jaci, how about some super exclusive upgrades to your lifestyle?

ADS!!!!: I'm upgrading you to Diamond Trump status.

ADS!!!!: You qualified as top 1% of Maga Patriot, so I had to ask my cabinet. Should I choose you to be my next press secretary?

HUNT: Sounds like a pretty good gig, Jaci.

KETTLER: Uh, yeah. Not interested. I like my job just fine. And I hate to be cynical, but I'm slightly skeptical that donating just a few bucks is gonna put me in the running to be the president's press secretary.

HUNT: Okay, so you don't want to be press secretary, though. I think you do a great job. But I know you still follow the news pretty closely, so maybe you'll be motivated by current events.

ADS!!!!: Massive news that could change everything.

ADS!!!!: Did you see this? Jon Ossoff needs our help.

ADS!!!!: Stunning incompetence from the secdef.

ADS!!!!: Pete Buttigieg just dropped the hammer.

KETTLER: I like Pete just fine, but we don't need anybody dropping hammers on anybody else.

HUNT: In addition to these kinds of newsy pitches, you get even worse, more scammy ones in this category that Derek says really play on people's desire to be a good, loyal member of their partisan team.

WILLIS: Just using the flimsiest of ideas to hang a fundraising pitch on. Right? So like, I got a text last week and literally it says, would you watch Stephen Colbert if he had a new show on MS Now? And it gave me an option. Click this for yes, I would. And then the no option was no. But I support him. And but it was the same link for both of them goes to a fundraising page. And the fundraising page was like a generic sort of political action committee was not a candidate. And you think.

HUNT: Stephen Colbert.

WILLIS: It wasn't Stephen Colbert either. And so it's like the pitch here is that I might be predisposed to Stephen Colbert, and therefore I'm going to give money to an organization that has nothing to do with him, but also isn't tied to a candidate like it is a scam in the sense that, like, people want to believe that they are involved or connected or part of the tribe.

KETTLER: Well that's lovely. Even the ones trying to appeal to positivity can be scammy. Charlie, I have an even better idea. How about we make voters feel super guilty and singled out for even thinking about not donating?

ADS!!!!: This can't be right. The midterms are 94 days away and you still haven't submitted your priority survey.

ADS!!!!: I was going through our June grassroots supporter list and I couldn't find your name. Put it in writing.

ADS!!!!: I launched a must reach $75,000 mid-month goal to support our battleground Democrats, but it looks like no one has cared.

ADS!!!!: I'm going to lose sleep over this. Your name is still not on my Maga roster.

ADS!!!!: Did you block Trump? The thought of losing you makes my head hurt. My messages are not getting through. This is my good friend, right?

ADS!!!!: We've reached out. One. Two. Three. Four. Five times.

HUNT: Good God, nobody is a bigger fan of New England style Catholic guilt than I am. But this is a little too much even for me.

KETTLER: I've also seen quite a few that seem designed to make the reader really, really angry.

ADS!!!!: Donald Trump just called me a lunatic.

ADS!!!!: This should make your blood boil.

ADS!!!!: George Soros latest move.

ADS!!!!: Please make sure you're alone when you read this and that. No leftists can see over your shoulder.

HUNT: Not exactly going for clear headed, middle of the road voters, are they?

KETTLER: No. One thing we've learned from digging through these emails is that they're really clearly marketed towards hardcore partisans. These are the voters that political science tells us, for better or worse, are most likely to be super engaged in elections and therefore most likely to donate.

HUNT: And I guess when you see the other side as a clear and present danger, it might not be surprising that some candidates are also turning to increasingly militaristic language to target the other side, which Derek helpfully pointed out to us.

WILLIS: There's increasingly like a, and this is mostly on the right, security and intel language that is just really weird. This is an op basically secret messages and like security protocols. And this message will self-destruct. That is basically conspiracy stuff, right? That is basically you're. I'm inviting you to the conspiracy. We're all in on it. Well, you're now in on it. And because you're in on it, like we can now talk frankly.

ADS!!!!: I prepared a top secret briefing about Obama. This is for your eyes only. Read your top secret briefing before the link expires in ten minutes.

ADS!!!!: I can never let you take advantage of this offer ever again. And honestly, you should delete this email right after you read it because this is top secret.

ADS!!!!: We are currently facing a mission critical threat that requires immediate tactical action.

ADS!!!!: I have just finalized a confidential memorandum detailing the exact situation, the threat we face, and the battlefield commander we must send to Washington to win this fight.

HUNT: Oh, okay. So maybe somehow you don't buy that. You random voter, are the key to a top secret CIA operation to retake control of Congress. At least I hope you don't. How about we get even more desperate, clingy, and not very believable.

ADS!!!!: Trying to get in touch with you?

ADS!!!!: Your name came across my desk.

Speaker 14: I hate interrupting your day, but I'm running out of options.

ADS!!!!: You have a secret admirer?

ADS!!!!: You missed my email.

ADS!!!!: Did you get my email about our golden ticket to retake the Senate majority in battleground states?

ADS!!!!: This isn't coming from my team or campaign committee. It's me, Kirsten Gillibrand, reaching out for my personal computer.

ADS!!!!: Right after I boarded Air Force One, I knew I had to get in contact with you.

KETTLER: While this is quickly going from pretty cringey to really, really creepy, I have to wonder whether people getting these emails really believe that the president of the United States is emailing them from Air Force One.

HUNT: I'm not sure we want to know the answer to that question, but at some point, Jaci, these emails go from cringey, impersonal, to downright sad.

ADS!!!!: Please read don't delete.

ADS!!!!: I'm officially freaking out, John.

ADS!!!!: I am begging, I'm pleading. Will you give $18 to retake the Senate?

HUNT: And when this truly embarrassing and dehumanizing begging doesn't work, some candidates, including the most powerful politicians in the country, even turn to threats.

ADS!!!!: President Trump checked your file and found something concerning. You haven't pledged to vote for Maga Republicans during the midterm elections.

ADS!!!!: Your file has officially been flagged for action required. Trump has been left with no other choice. Clear your file before we have to escalate this.

KETTLER: Okay, this is getting a little crazy, especially in this case. This guy's the president of the United States, and he's threatening to escalate against some random small donor.

HUNT: Yeah, we're getting pretty unhinged here. So much so that we have to make something extra clear to our listeners. Every single clip you've heard in this episode from a fundraising email or text message was one we adapted pretty much verbatim from real fundraising emails, from real political campaigns. We promise that we did not also cherry pick only the most psychotic ones. A shocking percentage of campaigns from candidates on both sides of the aisle, including ones listeners would probably think are pretty normal use tactics like this. But beyond how insane these fundraising emails sound on their face, there's a deeper problem here. A lot of these types of wild communications, Derek told us, have really dark undertones and are pretty sad reflection of the current state of political campaigns.

WILLIS: The underlying tone of that is, yes, like you're special because we're all in this little group. It also has, I think, tones of you can't trust anything except what I tell you, what I would call like sort of civic erosion kind of language. That's a long way from I hope you like dogs.

HUNT: Jaci. It sounds like all of these strategies are exactly that. They're strategic efforts to get people to donate to their campaigns, no matter the cost, the humiliation, or the embarrassment to which these messages seem to sink more and more. These emails and texts seem more like internet scamming and phishing schemes than they are earnest requests for campaign support, which I hate to say you have some personal experience with, don't you, Jaci?

KETTLER: Ah. All right. I've been called out. Yes, I've fallen victim to an email phishing scam or two, even if they are mostly the fake ones of the state of Idaho sends to us to test how resilient our state employees are against potential cybersecurity attacks.

HUNT: Not that resilient, apparently. Happy Cybersecurity Awareness Month, by the way.

KETTLER: Okay, but the links they sent seemed real. Yeah, I'm not proud of it.

HUNT: Okay. Obviously, Jaci, it's hilarious that you're such a clear mark for these phishing emails, especially since you haven't been too badly scammed yet. But especially considering what you do for a living, I feel pretty confident that a lot of these kinds of political fundraising tactics hopefully would not work on you.

KETTLER: I really hope they wouldn't. But with these kinds of emails and the types of people who are most easily persuaded by their messaging, the outcome is a lot more troubling than just having to take a brush up course on cybersecurity. A few in-depth investigations over the last few years, including some by our fellow political scientist Doctor Adam Bonica over at Stanford, have revealed a striking and distressing pattern in these fundraising asks from both sides of the aisle.

HUNT: Bonica's research uncovered dozens of what he calls scam PACs, the political action committees we mentioned earlier that aren't officially affiliated with either party or any one campaign. These packs have state of the art methods for identifying donors who are most likely to be susceptible to the kinds of scammy, horrendous messaging we've been talking about. These scam PACs appear to be tailor made to prey not on young, energetic grassroots activists, but on the elderly.

KETTLER: And it's really sad, but not necessarily surprising why elderly folks are seen as easy targets for these scam PACs. Lots of extra time, plus a lack of familiarity with the internet and the kinds of scams that come with it, plus the potential for cognitive decline that can make these folks at risk of falling for the kinds of deceptive messaging we've seen so far.

HUNT: Jaci, this is the part of the episode where I go from really annoyed to completely apoplectic. Because not only are these scams targeting the most vulnerable set of donors, they are doing it on a bipartisan basis. You and I spent a distressing amount of time over the past few weeks trading these political emails back and forth, with each one more ridiculous than the last, and over and over, the worst offenders, yes, were Donald Trump and his PACs, but they were also the official Democratic campaign committees and PACs associated with Democratic Party leaders. We identified some pretty heinous actions by President Trump on the campaign finance side in the first segment of this episode. But as Doctor Bonica lays out, this is hardly just a Republican problem. One bad offender here appears to be the Democratic majority leader and potentially next speaker of the House, Representative Hakeem Jeffries of New York. According to Bonica, in the 2026 election cycle, Jeffries average donor was 73 years old and 86% of his donors were 65 or older. He also found that 93% of all of Jeffreys's donations came from donors, who have also given to scam PACs, and nearly 40% are from what Bonica calls captive scam donors, Americans whose donation history shows 100 or more charges from scam PACs.

KETTLER: Jeez. So these are, in many cases, seniors that have already been ensnared in one of these scams they had no intention of being a part of.

HUNT: That sure seems to be the case. And unfortunately, the scam PACs are not the only ones engaging in these scams. The Democratic campaign committees also are among the worst offenders in terms of exactly the kinds of shady tactics we see deployed towards older Americans.

ADS!!!!: Final notice number 33716980. You have 17 missed messages to renew your Democratic membership. This is your final notice to renew your membership before tonight's end of month deadline.

HUNT: The use of language that implies consequences and penalties. A completely made up final notice number to go along with it. Another, I'm sure, also completely made up. Accusation of 17 missed messages. A threat to end the recipient's Democratic membership. Even though no such thing exists to me. Clearly, they're trying to imply that a voter registration could be canceled here, which parties cannot do? And the cherry on top. The totally fictional end of month deadline, which means absolutely nothing.

KETTLER: I'll be honest with you, Charlie. For all that Jeff Reeves and other Democrats like to separate themselves from Donald Trump, their leader's fundraising tactics don't sound all that different. And I don't mean that as a compliment.

HUNT: Yeah, really, this is a pox on just about everybody's house at this point. The New York Times has reported on similarly troubling fundraising schemes run by both parties, especially those that, like so many. We've looked at today, capitalize on their targets outrage at major figures in the opposing party. Take, for example, the millions of texts sent out in 2022 by the Nrsc, which is the Republican Party's official committee to help their candidates for the U.S. Senate. These texts asked provocative questions like Should Biden resign? These questions were followed by a cash request that read reply yes to donate. Those who replied yes, the New York Times reported, had their donation processed immediately, even though the text did not reveal in advance where the money was going. In many cases, these deceptive texts also included the kinds of pre-checked boxes for recurring donations like we talked about the Trump campaign using in 2020. These recurring options were often obscured with a ton of extraneous fine print text, which ended up causing, quote, a multi-million dollar cascade of refunds and a surge of fraud complaints.

KETTLER: We discussed earlier how the Trump campaign refunded a fair number of online donations. So what do we know about whether these folks who got scammed were able to get their money back?

HUNT: Some were able to get refunded, but even this data tells a familiar and troubling story. This New York Times exposé by Shane Goldmacher, who deserves a ton of credit for being ahead of the curve on this issue, analyzed the ages of donors who had their donations refunded, and these refunds skewed heavily towards older Americans. Well over half of the refunds were issued to Americans 70 or older, and three quarters of these refunds were issued to folks older than 60. Unfortunately, these refunds are a pittance compared to the dollars these campaigns have scammed so many older Americans out of. Goldmacher told the story of William W Vaughan Jr, who was a senior atmospheric scientist at NASA during the space race and an accomplished academic. After William died, his son, Stephen Vaughan, found a massive credit card debt that needed to be dealt with. The vast majority of it, over $11,000, was from more than 400 recurring donations to Donald Trump, Mitch McConnell, Tim Scott and many others. William's son, Steve found among these bills handwritten notes from William chronicling his disputes with the credit card companies of these repeated charges. Winred charges to be refunded, the note said. Federal records show that a little over $1,000 was refunded on the day that note was written. Only about 10% of the total charges Steve

uncovered from his father's records. Steve, whose father again was a senior NASA scientist and academic, was clear about his concern to The New York Times. If it happened to him, I have to figure it happened to other people. It certainly did. Jaci. We cover some scandals that are pretty wild and salacious and even sometimes really pretty funny. But I can't say I'm laughing as we close out this episode, even after we've scripted and written out and recorded all these details. I have to say, I'm absolutely furious with what we've uncovered here.

KETTLER: Yeah. I mean, we had some fun with the ridiculousness of the language and these fundraising emails, but at the end of the day, there's nothing here that's all that fun. It's really distressing that so many of our elected officials are resorting to these techniques, and that they feel like they have to in order to stay competitive.

HUNT: And I think one reason this really probably bothers both of us is that, you know, something we referenced earlier, which is that this is such a breach of trust that, you know, we both study elections and representation, and we can probably cite like ten findings off the top of our head that talk about how strong bonds of trust between the public and the people who are representing them is really important to a functioning democracy. And so the flip of that is that violations like this feel really, really damaging to that entire idea.

KETTLER: Right? Because if people now, if this further lowers trust in candidates and elected officials, it lowers trust in government as a whole. Also, I think it's going to add to how frustrated people are with the entire system when they're getting scammed by elected officials for their fundraising.

HUNT: Yeah. And we like we know we've done research on this, that so few Americans comparatively choose to donate to political campaigns, choose to use their hard earned money to donate to a cause that they believe in. And maybe it's no wonder when they're sort of being scammed in this way by people that they clearly made a decision at some point to put their trust in. And so it's really sad to see that, you know, obviously, Jaci, one of the most distressing things to me about all this is the toll that these tactics seem to be taking on the elderly in particular.

KETTLER: You know, Charlie, I'm also wondering about what the signifies when candidates are willing to use these techniques, these fundraising techniques, while they're campaigning for office. Does it raise questions for what they might do while in office?

HUNT: I think it should. It certainly does for me. You know, we often talk about campaigns like these are folks running for office. They are essentially interviewing with us, the voters, for a job that they want. And if they are behaving this way towards the people who are interviewing them for the job, then why should we have any expectation that they're not going to behave this way and try to scam us again when they actually get into office. And so it's really no wonder that, you know, Americans levels of trust both in the campaign and election process, but also in the governing process, are at a really deep historical lows.

KETTLER: Well, I mean, unfortunately, some of these techniques are successful at raising money. But Charlie, what difference does this money make? Is it making an impact in how they're spending it during an election?

HUNT: It's kind of hard to say. This is one of the most commonly debated questions among political scientists who study campaign finance. Uh, a couple ways to answer this question. One is that we know that an increasing percentage of these donations that are coming in, and again, like we just we're talking about like hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars per cycle, a huge proportion of these donations are going right back into fundraising costs.

KETTLER: So they're fundraising to pay for fundraising?

HUNT: Yes. Yes. It's very much a snake eating its own tail kind of situation. That in and of itself does not inspire a ton of confidence as we see the costs of these elections going way up. But presumably these candidates are trying to raise all this money because they think it will help them win these elections. But in the political science, we know it's kind of a little bit of a chicken and egg situation where, you know, the the races that are the biggest blowouts tend to have very little spending, whereas donations tend to go mostly to races that are really competitive already. And so tight races are attracting lots of donations because of more media coverage, more presence by the candidates, and maybe more of a sense that their extra donation can make the difference. But then these races just end up being really close anyway.

KETTLER: This just makes the whole story even sadder, right? Voters are making these donations believing they're going to have an impact and affect outcomes, election outcomes, but instead their dollars are going to pay for fundraising or for legal fees, or it just getting lit on fire in these fundraising scams. And who cares if the donor is bankrupted?

HUNT: Yeah, we can think about these donations as kind of an agreement between the donor and the candidate they're donating to that I'm going to give you my money, and in return, you're going to win this election and then deliver on the promises you made during the campaign. And it really seems like pretty much all of these tactics we've discussed in this episode are just a really big insult to that agreement. And so amidst all this, you might also be wondering from a campaign perspective, if they want to win, how can these tactics possibly be a winning strategy? Derek actually spoke to this in our conversation.

WILLIS: I think this is the case across Party across across the board, where the practice of burning out donors in the sense of if everything is a crisis, if everything is existential, well then eventually nothing is. You get to a place where as a donor, where you're like, I can't do this anymore because I cannot be this activator to this angry or this motivated, you know, this sort of like negative partisanship motivated all the time.

HUNT: So on the one hand, Derek told us that these firms really do seem to have evidence that these kinds of tactics work, at least in the short term. But on the other hand, it sure seems like it'd be better in the long term to build up actual solid relationships with donors rather than treating them like ATMs.

KETTLER: Well, Charlie, that was kind of a rough go. Do you have any party favors to help bring us out? On a slightly nicer note?

HUNT: I have exactly one that hopefully we can all agree on and can maybe service a little bit of a palate cleanser before we go, there's one last clip from a fundraising email that I want to share, not from Donald Trump or Hakeem Jeffries, but from a truly trusted source.

ADS!!!!: Hey, Ginger here, the official campaign dog for Jenna Nelson for Congress. My dog. Oh, dad says that every dollar we raise today helps us reach more Oklahoma voters before they make their decision.

KETTLER: This episode was written by me, Jaci Kettler, and my co-host, Charlie Hunt. It was produced and edited by Charlie Hunt, with additional production and editing support from Sydney Snyder. Special thanks to Derek Willis for speaking with us about those wild emails and to some of our key sources for this episode, including Adam Bonica's analysis on a Substack on Data and Democracy, and Shane Goldmacher reporting for The New York Times on these campaign finance issues. We should also thank political emails.org for their data collection efforts and for giving Charlie and I

hours of really depressing entertainment. And finally, many thanks to our wonderful students, Jackson Holmes and Adam Pendergrass, whose voices you heard reenacting those ridiculous fundraising emails. We promise they're much more normal in real life.

HUNT: Next time on scandalized. Our political campaigns getting more artificially intelligent or more authentically stupid.

TEASE: So far this year, more than $137 million spent on AI generated ads, a massive jump from less than $50,000 just two years ago.

HUNT: And how campaign ads find ways to be dishonest even without the help of technology.

TEASE: The Romney campaign has seized on a line from a speech the president made in Virginia earlier this month. But as is often the case, this ad takes the president out of context.