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## *You Get What You Pay For:* The Case for Public Financing of Elections

We hold these truths to be self-evident:

- The corrosive and dominating influence of wealthy economic interests in privately-financed elections inevitably undercuts progressive issue agendas, guaranteeing that government is neither responsive nor accountable to its citizens;
- The requirements of fundraising on candidates and elected officials prevent our constituencies from generating sufficient numbers either of candidates from their own ranks to be adequately represented in the political process, or of allies among existing elected officials;
- At a fundamental level, the organizations and constituencies we work with will never be fully competitive in the political process so long as that process so drastically favors wealthy interests; and
- Large numbers of people within the voting-age population, including many of our members who belong to traditionally underrepresented constituencies, reject participation in elections and the public policy process due to cynicism stemming from the role of money in politics and its unfair advantage over the public interest.

Progressive grassroots movements in our states will not achieve and sustain broad public policy agendas addressing the distribution of wealth and power without fundamental campaign finance reform. In this issue's special Election Section (pages 11 - 18), learn how organizers in the West are leading the charge to restore democracy to the political process.

# Undermining Democracy: Research Demonstrates Unfair Influence of Money in Politics

The 1999 Oregon Action report, *Undermining Democracy: Money in Oregon Politics*, documents what most of us already know intuitively — that our current campaign finance system keeps power in the hands of a very few people and works for their interests.

Analyzing information from the National Institute on Money in State Politics ([www.followthemoney.org](http://www.followthemoney.org)) and the Oregon Secretary of State, the report found that:

1. Participation by the majority of Oregonians through voting and small contributions is at an all time low.

- In the 1998 general election a record low 59% of registered voters went to the polls.
- Since many people don't register to vote, turn-out represented only 47% of eligible voters in the state.

2. A small web of people and interests underwrite Oregon politics.

- The majority of \$12.5 million in 1998 campaign contributions came from people who gave \$10,000 or more. That means less than 1% of contributors gave two-thirds of all contributions.
- The candidate with the most money wins the election over 80% of the time.

3. The terms of debate surrounding legislative battles about the environment, utilities, land use, taxes and health care in the 1999 legislative session favored those individuals and corporations who contributed large sums of money in the 1998 election cycle.

- Electric and phone utilities and their allies invested \$900,000 in the 1998 elections and received over \$700 million from the 1999 legislature.

- Interests opposing land use planning contributed \$941,879, then saw the legislature pass most of their bills (though some fell to the governor's veto). Virtually every progressive land use planning bill died in committee.

- *"In the same week, the Senate voted to give a tax break to poor multi-national companies like Nike and Intel...and the House passed a bill that would give a property tax rebate of \$40 a year to low income senior citizens. As if \$40 a year would keep anyone from losing their home."*

— Representative Jo Ann Bowman



Proving that you get what you pay for, real political reform didn't have a prayer. The Oregon Political Accountability Act, seeking to change the corrupt system described above, never got out of committee. (It's headed now for the ballot as a people-powered initiative, see pages 12 - 13.)

Research and reporting on the influence of money in politics will continue to be a key element of organizing for equal access to democracy. The Money in Politics Research Action Project is always seeking new angles on the issue. Please contact us to help make the connections between campaign finance and consumer issues, health care and other concerns of interest to your community or constituency.

***Undermining Democracy is available for \$5/copy from Oregon Action, (503) 282-6588.***

***Contact the Money in Politics Research Action Project at (503) 283-1922.***

by Moira Bowman  
Research & Outreach,  
Money in Politics  
Action Research  
Project



# Oregon's Political Accountability Act

by *Moira Bowman*  
*Research & Outreach,*  
*Money in Politics Action*  
*Research Project*

*"The Oregon Political Accountability Act will do more than make politicians responsible to voters. By reducing the influence of money in politics, it will open up the field to new people and new ideas. It will bring life to the democratic process again."*

— *Paula Krane, President*  
*The League of Women*  
*Voters of Oregon*

**M**artha Coronado, statewide coordinator for CAUSA, a grassroots immigrants rights coalition, describes the impact of the current campaign finance system: "Those who are not economically stable are hit hardest by money in politics. This system works just for the rich, not for the people who live, work and give in our communities."

While progressives have long recognized that the influence of money in politics is a barrier to full participation in the democratic system, most reform efforts have run afoul of free speech protections. Recently a new, constitutionally sound strategy has begun to take hold. The answer to the corrupting influence of private funds is the introduction of public funds.

Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts and Arizona have adopted public financing of legislative and statewide elections. In Maine, 121 candidates are campaigning under this new system. Organizers in over 35 states, including Oregon and Idaho, are currently working to win public financing of elections. As more states adopt this reform, the tide will begin to turn toward campaign finance reform on the federal level.

Oregon voters have already signaled their interest in reform. In 1994, Oregon voters passed a ballot measure that created \$100 contribution limits. The 1996 elections were conducted under this limitation, which reduced large direct contributions to candidates. However, a dramatic increase in independent expenditure campaigns and other loopholes underscored the need for further reform. In February, 1997, the

Oregon Supreme Court struck down key provisions of the spending limit law as a violation of free speech.

Seeking solutions that would pass constitutional muster, the Oregon Working Group for Campaign Finance Reform spent two years conducting research and outreach to develop workable, effective, and constitutional campaign finance reform strategies. Legislative allies introduced legislation in the 1999 session based on this policy package. No committee hearings were held on either the Senate or House versions of the bills. This inaction led organizers to file the Political Accountability Initiative.

## Building a Movement

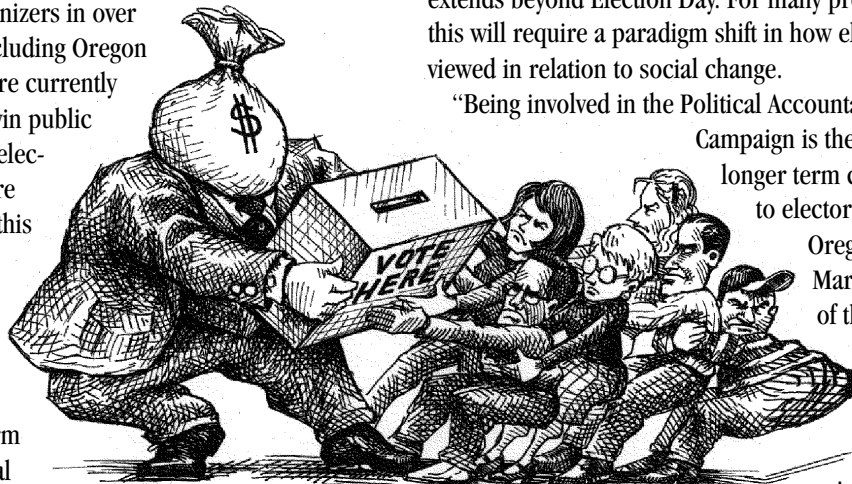
While the Political Accountability Act, if approved by voters this November, will be a strong step toward reining in the influence of money in state elections, the struggle goes beyond one initiative victory.

The difference between building a movement and winning an initiative is the organizing that precedes and extends beyond Election Day. For many progressives, this will require a paradigm shift in how elections are viewed in relation to social change.

"Being involved in the Political Accountability Campaign is the start of a longer term commitment to electoral politics in Oregon", says Marcy Westerling of the Rural Organizing Project. "This initiative is just another tool in the movement toward democracy.

Organizations must begin to think about how we will utilize this tool. The Political Accountability Act means little for progressives if we are not starting now to find folks to run for office and committing resources to educate and support them in being effective representatives of our communities."

Already, grassroots strategies are converging in



Matt Weurker