

# 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.***

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