

Communities Convene to Take Up Historic Struggle

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Once held only by white male property owners, the right to vote has been continuously expanded as disenfranchised peoples have organized and struggled for an America that lives up to its legal and moral promise of democracy. Over time, the nation has seen the elimination of numerous barriers to voting rights — from property, race, gender, and age qualifications to exclusionary white primaries, poll taxes, high candidate filing fees, and vote dilution schemes.

Today, we must face up to the newest voting-rights barrier: the... exclusionary process, leading up to every party primary and every general election, in which those with money or access to money, by means of their campaign contributions, choose the candidates who almost invariably go on to govern. Those who do not raise enough money... almost always do not win office.

The rest of us, the vast majority of American people, are shut out of this process. Because we have, ultimately, little say in the outcome of elections, our right to vote is debased and undermined. Our system of financing electoral campaigns is constitutional no more.

The constitutional question... is not about the First Amendment rights of the well-financed candidates and wealthy contributors. It is about the Equal Protection rights of all candidates and voters who are left behind in the fundraising process because of their lack of money and access to money.

— National Voting Rights Institute, a Boston-based litigation group formed in 1994 to challenge the campaign finance system.



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Conference participants listen to William McNary, President, U.S. Action Project (top) and Sonya Rosario, United Vision for Idaho (middle).

On a beautiful spring day on April 1st in Portland, about 120 people gathered to examine how the influence of money in politics is the modern-day equivalent of the voting rights barriers faced by earlier generations. The conference, Money in Politics: A Modern Civil Rights Struggle, was organized by Western States Center and co-sponsored by CAUSA, the Rural Organizing Project, Oregon Action, and the Money in Politics Research

Action Project. Participants from communities of color across Oregon reflected on the historic efforts to counter disenfran-

chisement, including the movements which led to the 15th and 19th Amendments to the US Constitution and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Reactions were strong. “I always thought of campaign finance reform as a white issue. But this conference really made me understand how our current system destroys political accountability and helps corporate interests move their public policy agendas. And ultimately, I know big money interests sharply conflict with the interests of most communities of color,” said Nathan Thuan Nguyen with the Community Alliance of Tenants.

While public financing of campaigns will benefit all who are disadvantaged by the current system — the vast majority of the citizenry — conference participants recognized that efforts like the Oregon Political Accountability Campaign (see pages 12 - 13) present an effective avenue for increasing the engagement of communities of color in the democratic process.

“Public financing of elections could finally level the playing field,” said Arturo Anguiano of CAUSA. “It would mean we could identify our community leaders as viable candidates and not be hindered by lack of access to big money.”

