

*Publicly Financed Campaigns:*

## Election Results Illustrate Benefits & Challenges

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**S**ince 1996, voters have approved Clean Money initiatives in three states, but now they've turned down two. At the same time, the recent elections in Maine, Arizona and Vermont proved that public financing of campaigns delivers a quantifiable boost to the democratic process. It brings new players to the field, and increases the number of elected officials who are accountable only to voters, not to donors. Lessons from Oregon (below) discusses the challenges of establishing a public financing system, and Participation Boosted (page 7) demonstrates the reasons to keep on trying.

### *Lessons From Oregon's Loss*

A "clean elections" ballot initiative effort in Oregon was defeated by voters in November, along with a similar measure in Missouri. Though clearly a setback, valuable lessons came from the loss that will inform future organizing.

As the first in the region to move a "clean elections" initiative to the ballot, Oregon had strengths and weaknesses. Oregon does not have an established multi-issue progressive coalition like those that Western States Center has built in other states that could serve as a vehicle for such a campaign. However, while it lacked this kind of institutional base, Oregon voters and media have historically supported campaign finance reform.

The measure's opposition read like an industry Who's Who (especially the timber industry). The loss, however, was due more to the prevailing climate of the elections and the very crowded ballot than to the opposition itself.

Organizers knew early in 2000 that the ballot would feature some high profile, hot button initiatives — but no one imagined voters would face 26 complex measures on the ballot. Some felt that the crowded ballot might be an advantage. Clean money organizers around the country touted the virtues of "coming in under the radar." However, this did not prove to be advantageous in Oregon, and lacking resources adequate for a deeper media buy or an aggressive voter identification program, the "clean elections" message never got through to voters.

The message was similarly obscured in Missouri. Both states were key turf in the presidential battle; Missouri also had closely fought gubernatorial and senate races. There, in the final weeks before the election, media was dominated by the fatal plane crash of Mel Carnahan (Governor, at the time, and Senate candidate) along with his son and an aide.

Voter attention was riveted on the question of whether Carnahan's wife, Jean, would take her husband's place in the Senate if he were, posthumously, to defeat his incumbent opponent: the notorious John Ashcroft. (After voters selected her deceased husband over Ashcroft, Jean Carnahan was appointed to Ashcroft's former Senate seat. His consolation prize: being named Attorney General.)

A radical change in our system of campaign financing assumes a prevailing climate of insurgency — or at least a modest "throw the bums out" mentality. Despite Ashcroft's ejection by Missouri voters, dissatisfaction was rarely registered in the 2000 elections. Although the number of people in Oregon who felt the system needed a "complete overhaul" remained constant from a year before (around 18%), when the campaign polled again in August, the number of people who felt it needed "major changes" had dropped by 20%. Similar drops in support for core messages around the influence of big money in elections reflected the overall status quo mood of the electorate this year.

Organizers learned several things, then, from this campaign. Given the newness and potential complexity of the issue for many voters, a longer educational period and a more methodical field organizing program are necessary to build the base needed to win. Explaining this model of reform takes time, and the Oregon campaign simply did not have the time to conduct the kinds of conversations needed with voters across the state to develop a broad understanding of public financing. Western States Center is keeping these lessons in mind as it provides support to allies in Idaho, who have been building towards a 2002 ballot initiative. (A fuller analysis of the campaign is available from Western States Center.)

### **Big Money Opposed Oregon's Campaign Finance Reform Measure**

R.J. Reynolds

Oregon Auto Dealers  
Association

Grocery Industry

Oregon Restaurant  
Association

Oregon Affordable  
Housing PAC  
[Homebuilders]

Oregon Association of  
Realtors

Associated Oregon  
Industries Citizen  
Leadership PAC

Boise Cascade

Columbia Timber

Georgia Pacific

Hampton Lumber

Seneca Timber

Swanson Forest  
Products

## Democratic Participation Boosted by Clean Money

The results are in on the first big test of "clean elections." Voters in Maine, Arizona and Vermont had the opportunity to select candidates running with public financing, beholden to no private special interest donors. Here's what happened:


**MAINE:** One-third of all candidates for the state Legislature ran "clean money" races; 54% of them won their races. Almost half of the State Senate (17 out of 35 total members) were elected as "clean money" candidates, as were 30% of those elected to the State House (45 out of 151 members). Overall, 46% percent of Democrats and 16% of Republicans in the legislature have no ties to private special interest donors.

Public financing also broadened participation in Maine. Contested primaries rose by 40%, and the number of female candidates saw a marked increase.

**ARIZONA:** A political newcomer running a "clean money" campaign defeated the speaker of the State House of Representatives in a contest for a State Senate seat that cost the Republicans control of the chamber. While his opponent's entanglement in a scandal helped boost underdog Jay Blanchard to victory, he told the New York Times "It couldn't have happened without the clean-elections law to get on the playing field. It doesn't level the playing field, but it does put you on the field."

In addition to Blanchard (a Democrat), a "clean money" Republican was elected to the State Senate and twelve members of the State House (20%) got elected running "clean." Of the six people who ran for the Corporations Commission, a statewide regulatory body, three ran "clean;" two of them were elected. Overall, 36% of Arizona "clean money" candidates won their races.

**VERMONT:** Statewide candidates were eligible for "clean money" for the first time. There were two candidates running "clean" this year. Lieutenant Governor Douglas Racine won reelection without private money and Anthony Pollina, the Progressive Party candidate for governor (who qualified for nearly \$300,000 in public financing), got 10% of the vote. A third candidate, incumbent Governor Howard Dean, had planned to run with only "clean money," until hit by a nationally-funded, homophobic attack on his support for Vermont's new gay civil union law. (Dean and his Republican opponent ended up setting a new state record by spending over \$1 million each; Dean won with 50% of the vote.)

A strong case can be made that the availability of full public financing substantially broadened the issues discussed this year in Vermont, as Pollina was included in all the debates and given equal coverage by the press. 

### Candidates Who Spent the Most Money Won Their Races in 2000

- For the U.S. Senate 85%
- For the U.S. House 94%
- For Open Seats in Congress (no incumbent running) 75%

Source: Center for Responsive Politics, 2000

### "Reforming Reform"

#### The National Perspective

"Real campaign finance reform requires a massive power shift based on class. The test of whether it's any good will be whether or not it brings about a palpable and lasting transfer of raw political power away from affluent donors and the corporate elite to, well, the people.

"To win in Missouri and Oregon, not to mention in mega-states like Michigan and California and (eventually) in the U.S. Congress, will require money, organization, and grass-roots support, at far greater levels than currently envisioned.

"The central paradox of campaign reform is that any reform Congress might pass is probably one we don't want. But if progressives can't use Congress to fix the system, the only alternative is to use the public's awareness of how bad the system is to fix Congress. If reformers try to adapt reform to an increasingly conservative, business-oriented Congress, they can win only changes that, while ultimately meaningless, help to stabilize the system.

"It's a money-dominated system that keeps substantive policy reforms out of reach. Progressives can succeed only if they help people understand that what's at stake is not whether America has an equitable system of election financing, but whether or not America will have a progressive tax structure, universal health care, public preschool and day care, fair labor laws, a guaranteed living wage, and much more."

—reprinted with permission from Robert Dreyfuss, "Reforming Reform," *The American Prospect*, December 18, 2000.