



Fair Elections

Leveling the playing field

Elections have become contests of campaign bank accounts and financial connections. The cost of running for office, from city council to the White House, continues to rise, forcing candidates to spend more time calling potential donors and attending high-priced fundraisers and less time in their community talking with voters about issues. Well qualified candidates are deciding not to run for office because they lack connections to wealth or political insiders. However, states across the country have shown that there is a solution to our pay-to-play political system: full public financing of elections.

Fair Elections Campaign Reform

Modeled on the successful Clean Elections systems in Arizona, Connecticut, and Maine, the Fair Elections Now Act (FENA), S. 1285, would bring full public financing of elections to the U.S. Senate. The bill was introduced in March 2007 by Assistant Senate Majority Leader Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.).

Fair Elections works by allowing everyone to participate equally in the political process. In most instances, candidates can receive a grant to run their campaign once they show a broad base of community support by collecting a set number of small contributions—usually \$5. Once qualified, Fair Elections candidates can take no private contributions and must abide by strict spending limits. With Fair Elections, elected officials are no longer just well-connected insiders or career politicians, but average people from diverse backgrounds as well.

Participants would also receive vouchers for purchasing broadcast airtime and receive a 20 percent discount below the lowest unit cost on all advertising purchased near the end of the primary and general campaigns. If a candidate runs under the Fair Elections system and is outspent by a privately financed opponent, Fair Fight Funds are available to the candidate, up to a limit, to level the playing field. The Fair Fight Funds are also available if there is independent

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- Sen. Leah Landrum Taylor (D-Phoenix, Ariz.)

spending against a candidate by an outside group or individual.

In the 110th Congress, 108 members have either signed a pledge or shown their support in the past for full public financing of elections, including members of the U.S. House and Senate leadership.

Fair Elections is Law in Seven States and Two Cities

In Maine, 84 percent of the legislature was elected using a Fair Elections modeled program. In Arizona, nine of 11 statewide officials were Fair Elections candidates, including Gov. Janet Napolitano (D-Ariz.). Connecticut is in its first cycle with their Fair Elections modeled program and nearly 80 percent of candidates are participating.

School board members, small business owners, farmers, and waitresses are now able to run for elected office without having to spend time dialing for dollars or attending high-priced fundraisers.

Just a few years ago, Rep. Deborah Simpson (D-Auburn, ME) was a waitress in a diner, going to college, and raising a young child by herself. She was politically involved but never considered running for office. Then Maine's new campaign finance program came along.

"The tipping point for me was that I could see that with Clean Elections it was doable," said Simpson. "I could manage to get the qualifying contributions and the budget

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- Hilary O. Shelton, Director,
NAACP Washington Bureau

to campaign. I'd have the resources without having to figure out how to ask for money from donors when I really didn't live in that world."

Arizona Rep. David Lujan (D-Phoenix) had years of policy experience from his service on the Phoenix Union School Board to his work for the attorney general's office, but he just didn't have the access to big money donors.

"Clean Elections in Arizona definitely made it possible because I knew I would have the ability to raise the funds through Clean Elections that would put me on a competitive level with any of the other opponents," he said.

The chair of the Arizona legislative black caucus, Sen. Leah Landrum Taylor (D-Phoenix), has run traditionally and with Arizona's program—and prefers the latter. "When you think about Clean Elections, the first word that comes to my mind is 'fairness' because it brings about inclusiveness, it also brings about a good amount of competitiveness and it opens it up in diversity, as well," Taylor said.

Aside from allowing candidates from more diverse backgrounds to run for office, Fair Elections also engages more voters in the electoral process.

In the two gubernatorial campaigns since public financing became available in Arizona, the \$5 qualifying donors come from neighborhoods that are more economically, geographically, and ethnically and racially diverse than big donors to private campaigns, according to an April 2008 report by Public Campaign. In every category Public Campaign studied, from female-headed households to districts with high levels of ethnic and racial minorities, Fair

Elections \$5 donors more accurately represent the diversity of the state than the private system.

Fair Elections for Washington

The cost of running for Congress is unsustainable. As candidates require more and more money to win a seat in the U.S. House or Senate, they must spend more of their time raising money from well-heeled donors and less time talking with their constituents. Over the past 10 years, the percentage of contributions coming from small donors (under \$200) has decreased by 30 percent.

Politicians are increasingly relying on wealthy, predominately white ZIP codes in such areas as the Upper East Side of New York City and Beverly Hills, Calif. to finance their campaigns. If money is the currency of our democracy, than voters from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds are being left out of the process.

"As long as donors are more important than voters in determining who gets elected in this country, then African Americans are prevented from fully participating in the benefits of our democracy," said Hilary Shelton, director of the Washington Bureau of the NAACP.

"It is an indisputable fact of our political system that those candidates and laws favored by wealthy contributors usually prevail over those would-be backers who cannot afford to give such large sums of money," said Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.).

Fair Elections would help level the political playing field in Washington, D.C. and across the country by making elections about voters instead of big money campaign donors.



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