The Fight for Clean Campaigns

Recent news stories confirm how money dominates our political process. Lawmaking has been for sale at every level. Large sums flow in; political favors flow out – drowning the voices of ordinary citizens, and allowing fat cats to set public policy in their private interest.

When donors give big bucks, they expect a huge Return-On-Investment – and they get it. Consider pharmaceutical contributions to Congress, which doubled during the years 2000-2002, to both political parties, during the prescription drug debate. Drug makers got a windfall; consumers got the Medicare Part-D debacle.

The financial arms race in campaigns has become a senseless hurdle, at every level. Fewer candidates can afford to run, limiting choice of candidates and restricting diversity of views - the very bedrock of democracy.

We have to change the system! Elections should be about issues and voters, not who can raise the most money!

When campaigns are funded publicly, lawmakers are no longer indebted to private special interest. They don't have to worry about courting or losing big campaign donations, and they are free to vote their constituent's needs and the public interest.

Clean Campaigns programs are working.

Maine created a Clean Elections program in 1996, by citizen initiative. Last year (2006), eighty-three percent of Maine's state legislators ran using only Clean Money. With over four-fifths of their legislators free of special interest, they have begun to make real progress on issues of public concern. In Arizona, nine of eleven state officials were elected last year, running Clean – including Governor Janet Napolitano, who has run and been elected twice using that state's Clean Elections program.

Other states are getting on the bandwagon – Connecticut, and selected districts in New Jersey. North Carolina and New Mexico have public financing for judicial races. Some cities have established programs: Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Portland, Oregon.

These programs prove that voter-owned campaigns are successful, and popular. Candidates can run for office without being wealthy – and win on the strength of their ideas. They are indebted only to the voters in their district. Public financing brings diversity of candidates and views, eliminates "dialing for dollars" and allows more time discussing issues with constituents.

Here is how it works: The state creates a public fund, financed in various ways. It's optional; candidates choose whether to use public financing. They qualify for public funds by gathering a set number of $5 donations with signatures from voters in their district. Then they receive funds sufficient to run a campaign, on the promise they will accept no further private contributions and will not use their own money – running their campaigns solely on the public funds provided and according to rules set by law and a state commission.

Additional matching or "fair fight" funds are provided dollar-for-dollar up to a set limit if an opponent using private money spends more than the Clean Elections candidate, and to counter ads or spending by any independent group. In states with Clean Campaigns programs, data shows that independent ads and spending actually decline over time if matching funds are sufficiently robust (usually 3 to 5 times the initial campaign allotment), and voters often prefer the candidates who run "Clean".

Public financing is affordable. In Washington State, a program for all state executive offices, all legislative races, and all upper-level judicial races (supreme and appellate court), would cost less than $4 per person, per year – less than a coffee mocha or 4 quarts of milk!

Don't fall for the line that we can't afford it, or that it's welfare-for-candidates, or that it diverts money we need to fix potholes. The truth is: When lawmakers reward today's big campaign donors for their "investment", it costs more NOT to have voter-owned public campaign financing.

Public financing of campaigns will not be handed to us on a silver platter. Most people are disgusted by the legal bribery of private campaign financing, but they don't know there is an alternative. We must tell them. Public financing for campaigns needs to become a familiar concept, with people knowing how it works and why it's necessary.

We need to launch the conversation – with friends in living rooms, information tables at events, distributing brochures, op-ed pieces in newsletters and the media, calls to radio talk shows, door-to-door canvassing with petitions, and more – all supported by trained speakers and volunteer neighborhood organizers.

With an informed public and a grassroots groundswell, we can effectively fight for public financing of campaigns in Washington State – and in Congress. It is the most important change we can make – fundamental to progress on nearly every other issue we care about. It is how we will restore government "of, by and for the people."

Washington Public Campaigns exists to educate the public and organize for public funding of campaigns – a grassroots organization, with a mission as large as democracy itself.

Please join this effort! Sign up on our emailing list, at our website: washclean.org. Support this effort financially, on-line, or with checks to:

Washington Public Campaigns, P.O. Box 45088, Seattle, WA 98145-0088

Talk with friends and neighbors. Become an advocate, an outreach volunteer or a trained speaker. Call us: 206-784-9695.

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