

WHY SENIORS SHOULD SUPPORT CLEAN ELECTIONS PUBLIC FUNDING OF CAMPAIGNS

Dorothy Preston, 86, of Parkville suffered a stroke a few years ago and now has to use a walker. The stroke also requires her to take expensive prescription drugs. Pricier and pricier drugs.

"Most seniors talk about the same damn thing, and nothing is being done about it," her husband Maurice told the *Baltimore Sun*. "Prescription drugs just keep going up."

Over 600,000 uninsured Marylanders, 200,000 seniors whose health insurance lacks a prescription drug benefit, and millions of Marylanders with stingy health insurance can face excruciating choices between prescription drugs or car payments. Drugs or rent. Even drugs or food.

Our elected officials in Annapolis took modest steps forward in 2001 and 2005, passing laws to give a discount to some Marylanders. But these efforts have not done enough to slow the increase in the cost of drugs, which according to AARP has risen 40% since 2000.

Maryland lawmakers have so far resisted calls to emulate the much more comprehensive "Maine Rx Plan". In Maine, the state – which of course has much more bargaining leverage than do individual consumers vis-à-vis the giant pharmaceutical companies – negotiates lower group prices on behalf of residents who lack prescription drug coverage. And if Big Pharma refuses to cooperate? The state of Maine gets tough by requiring rebates.

Why doesn't Maryland get tough with Big Pharma the way Maine does?

Follow the Money Trail

Because Maryland lawmakers don't want to offend their deep-pocket campaign contributors. Multinational drug companies such as Pfizer, Bayer, and Eli Lilly contributed thousands and thousands of dollars each election, directing the lion's share to the most powerful incumbents. How much has Dorothy Preston contributed to politicians in the past two elections? \$0. Whose voice is louder in Annapolis?

And Big Pharma is only one of many special interests gouging seniors. Happy with your HMO? Why doesn't Maryland require HMOs to guarantee access to specialists, eliminate restrictions on doctor-patient communications, and ban limitations on prescription drugs that doctors consider necessary? Might lawmakers' reluctance to get tough with HMOs have something to do with the hundreds of thousands of dollars HMOs and insurance companies contribute to elected officials each election?

Towards a Solution: Clean Elections Public Funding of Campaigns

Public funding of campaigns makes it possible to pass laws to benefit all the voters, not just the HMOs, pharmaceutical companies, and other special interests that fund the campaigns of elected officials.

Public funding of campaigns is already law in Maine and Arizona, where it has worked well through three election cycles. And Connecticut just enacted it in 2005. It is a proven, sensible way to change the status quo so that voters can take back control of politics and make elected officials accountable.

Here's how it works:

- To participate in the voluntary, publicly funded system, a candidate must demonstrate broad community support by collecting several hundred small contributions in the district he wishes to represent.
- If successful, he receives enough money from the public Treasury to wage a competitive campaign and agrees to accept no private, special-interest donations.
- If a privately financed opponent outspends him, he receives offsetting funds to keep pace, up to a certain limit.

Advantages of Public Funding of Campaigns

- It enables citizens with community support but ordinary financial means to run for office.
- It frees candidates and lawmakers from incessant fundraising, giving them more time to listen to regular voters.
- Participation in the publicly funded system is voluntary; by leaving the private campaign finance system alone, the Act is immune to judicial challenge.
- Publicly funded candidates who win owe nothing to the insurance companies, energy companies, and other special interests that fund campaigns under the current system. In this way, public funding of campaigns reduces the undue influence of the special interests in Annapolis.
- The system would be financed not by taxdollars, but instead by revenue from unclaimed property that reverts to the state, such as abandoned vehicles and ownerless bank accounts.
- *Public funding of campaigns has already been implemented in Maine and Arizona, where it is accomplishing all the benefits described above.*

In Arizona, for example, the first act of newly elected Gov. Janet Napolitano was to cap the skyrocketing cost of prescription drugs by ordering the state to purchase drugs in bulk. Maine instituted a similar program, described above, and also became the first state in the country to enact universal health care. Can you imagine these reforms happening without first weaning elected officials from their financial dependence on the HMOs, pharmaceuticals, and insurance companies?

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In 2008, Seniors Have an Unprecedented Opportunity To Help Enact Public Funding of Campaigns in Maryland

In 2002, the General Assembly passed a bill to create an official task force to examine public funding of campaigns and make recommendations for Maryland. This distinguished, bipartisan study commission, whose members included several former and current lawmakers, recommended in favor of public funding of campaigns for General Assembly races. Sen. Paul Pinsky and Del. Jon Cardin are sponsoring legislation in the 2008 session of the General Assembly based on the study commission plan. This legislation comes at the perfect time to enact major reform:

- **The Special Interests Are Pumping More and More Money into Maryland Politics.** The banking industry, energy monopolies, and other special interests pumped \$94 million into Maryland's 2006 election -- a 69% increase over the 2002 election. Only 2.7% of Marylanders gave a contribution of any kind; corporate entities gave 22 times more than non-profit entities; and the average size of contributions increased dramatically.
- **Strong Support Statewide for Public Funding of Campaigns.** An October 2007 statewide poll shows 72% of Marylanders support Arizona-style public funding of campaigns. Progressive Maryland, the League of Women Voters, Common Cause, NAACP, Sierra Club, AFL-CIO, League of Conservation Voters, NOW, and other organizations endorse the bill. The *Washington Post* and *Baltimore Sun* both support public funding of campaigns. The House of Delegates passed this legislation in 2006; but it fell just one vote short of passage on the Senate floor in 2007. We are very close to passing this bill.
- **Fiscally Responsible.** The modest, \$8 million approximate annual cost of the system would be financed not with taxdollars, but instead mainly from revenue from the sale of unclaimed property that reverts to the state each year, such as abandoned vehicles and ownerless bank accounts. Moreover, once in place, the system will save taxpayer dollars. That's because once lawmakers no longer owe favors to deep-pocket contributors, there will be less incentive to reward special interests with tax loophole, porkbarrel spending, and multibillion giveaways such as electricity deregulation.
- **Public Funding is Incumbent-Friendly.** As incumbent lawmakers learn how the system works in Maine and Arizona (and now also Connecticut), they understand that this reform is in their self-interest. That's why more and more say they will vote for the Pinsky/Cardin bill. Already in Maine and Arizona, almost half of incumbents use the publicly funded system. And in both states 90% of incumbents still win re-election (as they do in Maryland). Why? Because incumbents enjoy plenty of other advantages over challengers besides a fundraising edge. They have superior name-recognition, more contacts among activists, better campaign skills, more experience, a proven track record, etc. Incumbents in both states like the system because it eliminates the worst aspect of their job (fundraising) and frees them after the election to vote their conscience (not as contributors and corporate lobbyists demand). That's why incumbents in Connecticut voted overwhelmingly in 2005 to enact this reform into law.

The Pinsky-Cardin bill could do for voter empowerment what the Thornton commission did for public schools. The growing movement in Maryland to bring public funding of campaigns to our state includes Progressive Maryland, Alliance of Retired Americans, AARP, National Association of Retired Federal Employees, NAACP, AFL-CIO, League of Women Voters, Common Cause/Maryland, Sierra Club, League of Conservation Voters, NOW, and many other groups.