

WHY COMMUNITIES OF FAITH SHOULD SUPPORT CLEAN ELECTIONS PUBLIC FUNDING OF CAMPAIGNS

*For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins:
they afflict the just, they take a bribe, and they turn aside the
poor in the gate from their right.
--Amos 5:12*

For years, faith communities in Maryland have had good reason to view Maryland's campaign finance system as a major obstacle to policies for a more moral and compassionate society:

In election after election, the **liquor** industry gives hundreds of thousands of dollars to lawmakers, concentrating the money on leadership and key committee members. No wonder the General Assembly has refused to raise taxes on alcohol since 1972. Even now, during Maryland's biggest budget deficit ever, the General Assembly ruled out new taxes on alcohol.

But most troubling to faith communities, Maryland's campaign finance system **drowns out the voices of the poor**. Wealthy individuals and 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. Considering who bankrolls the careers of Maryland lawmakers, it's small wonder they fail to do enough to fight poverty.

Defenders of the status quo could rightly point out that between 2002 and 2007, lawmakers did indeed raise the state's minimum wage, institute a living wage for workers employed on a state service contract, and extend health care coverage to 100,000 uninsured. But these policies still fall short of the mark. For over this same period median wages stagnated, the poverty rate grew, and the percentage of Marylanders lacking health care coverage increased. Clearly, the status quo in Annapolis is not reducing poverty.

If the nation's richest state is going to get serious about tackling poverty, we need to end a campaign finance system that ensures wealthy campaign contributors get a megaphone in Annapolis after the election.

Towards a Solution: "Clean Elections" Public Funding of Campaigns

To ensure that the poor get a fairer hearing in Annapolis, we need to reduce the power of the Big Money special interests in Maryland politics. Public funding of campaigns accomplishes that goal. It 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.
- Maryland's publicly funded system would cost about \$1.30 per resident per year – a reasonable price to pay so that voters can take back control of politics and make elected officials more accountable.
- 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 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?

In 2008, Faith Communities 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 tax dollars, 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, pork-barrel spending, and multibillion-dollar 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 the poor what the Thornton law did for public schools. In the upcoming session of the General Assembly, Maryland has a once-in-a-decade opportunity to enact a major reform to help the poor and promote a more moral society.

That's why faith leaders should make enactment of the Pinsky-Cardin bill a top priority in the 2006 session of the General Assembly. The growing movement in Maryland to bring Clean Elections to our state includes the United Methodist Church, American Jewish Congress, League of Women Voters, NAACP, AARP, Sierra Club, Progressive Maryland, AFL-CIO, the Alliance of Retired Americans, Common Cause/Maryland, and many other groups.

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