

WHY ENVIRONMENTALISTS SHOULD SUPPORT “CLEAN ELECTIONS” PUBLIC FUNDING OF CAMPAIGNS

THE EHRLICH ADMINISTRATION, THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE DOMINANCE OF CORPORATE INTERESTS IN ANNAPOLIS

Despite being massively outspent in campaign contributions by their corporate opponents throughout the 1990s, environmentalists in Maryland, thanks to their skill and tenacity, succeeded in enacting some of the strongest environmental laws in the nation. The fact that Maryland had the most pro-environmental Governor in the nation, Parris Glendening, also helps explain passage of landmark policies such as Smart Growth and more aggressive cleanup of the Chesapeake Bay.

Many of these gains were reversed during the brief but destructive Ehrlich interlude. Ehrlich weakened enforcement of environmental laws, cut funds for environmental programs, dumbed down Smart Growth, and evinced at best a mixed record on Bay cleanup. The Democratic General Assembly did not do enough to resist Ehrlich's anti-environmental agenda, for example agreeing to his budget cuts all too often.

With the election of Gov. Martin O'Malley, many environmentalists believed environmental progress would resume again. Not so fast! [Despite tenacious and effective lobbying by environmental advocates during the 2007 regular session, the state Senate refused to enact the environmental community's top priority of... In the 2007 Special Session, (see Balt Sun summary).]

The result of decades of Democratic control of state government and one term of Republican control of the Governor's office? Year after year, the Bay's health either deteriorates or languishes, according to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. And because Smart Growth was never adequately funded, the rate of sprawl in our state has barely slowed since the late 1990s.[footnote] [check other top priorities on LCV and 1000 Friends websites]

Why are these key environmental indicators getting worse in a state like Maryland, with its progressive electorate and talented environmental advocates?

There are plenty of reasons. But by far the biggest is because the enemies of the environment bankroll the careers of our elected officials.

Estimates vary, but nobody could dispute that developers, energy companies, oil companies, etc. outspend pro-environment contributors many times over. These corporate interests bankrolled Ehrlich's successful campaign for Governor: of the \$11 million he raised in 2002, corporate interests donated approximately 92 percent. And they give enough to Democratic lawmakers to disincline all too many of them from fighting hard for the environment. Overall in the 2006 election – which shattered the 2002 record in total campaign contributions by 69% - corporate special interests gave 22 times more in campaign contributions to candidates for state office than did non-profit organizations.

Guess whose voice is louder in Annapolis?

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Towards a Solution: “Clean Elections” Public Funding of Campaigns

Public funding of campaigns changes this status quo, making it possible to pass laws to benefit all the voters, not just the energy companies, HMOs, and other special interests that fund the campaigns of elected officials. It is already law in Maine and Arizona, where it has worked well through three election cycles (Connecticut just enacted the reform in 2005 and will use it for the first time in the 2008 election).

Here's how it works:

- To participate, a candidate must demonstrate broad community support by collecting a large number of small contributions in the district he wishes to represent. For example, in Arizona, where Clean Elections is already law, candidates must collect several hundred \$5 contributions from voters in the district they wish to represent.
- If successful, the candidate receives enough money from the public Treasury to wage a competitive campaign.
- If a privately financed opponent outspends him, he receives offsetting funds to keep pace, up to a certain limit.

Advantages of Clean Elections:

- It enables citizens with community support but ordinary financial means to run for office.
- It frees candidates and lawmakers from incessant fundraising, removing the appearance and reality of corruption.
- Participation in the publicly funded system is voluntary; by leaving the private campaign finance system alone, the Act is immune to judicial challenge.
- In Maine and Arizona, the number of candidates who participate in the system doubles with each election cycle. In 2006, a majority of candidates in both states financed their campaigns solely with public funds; both incumbents and challengers used the system; and participation cut across party lines.
- Member-rich organizations, such as environmental groups, benefit disproportionately from Clean Elections. That's because they can mobilize their members on behalf of pro-environment candidates to collect the \$5 contributions that qualify a candidate to participate in the system.
- Clean Elections candidates who win owe nothing to fat cat contributors, reducing the latter's privileged access in Annapolis. With lawmakers free from undue corporate influence, they are much more likely to support an environmental agenda.
- Maryland's Clean Elections system would cost less \$1.30 per resident per year – a reasonable price to pay so that voters can take back control of politics from special interests and make public officials accountable. The system would be financed not with taxdollars, but instead with revenue from unclaimed property reverting to the state, such as abandoned vehicles and ownerless bank accounts.
- Clean Elections reform has already been implemented in Maine and Arizona, where it is accomplishing all the benefits described above. That's why environmentalists in both states strongly support the law, including the Maine Sierra Club, Natural Resources Council of Maine, Arizona Sierra Club, Arizona League of Conservation Voters, Grand Canyon Trust, Sonora Trust, Nature Conservancy of Arizona, Center for Biological Diversity, and Don't Waste Arizona.

IN 2006, ENVIRONMENTALISTS 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, issued its report in 2004, recommending in favor of public funding of campaigns for General Assembly races. Sen. Paul Pinsky and Del. Jon Cardin will submit legislation in the 2006 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 industry, and other special interests pumped \$75 million into Maryland's 2002 election, doubling what they had spent in 1998 and making 2002 by far the most expensive election in the state's history. And the 2006 election will surely break that record. Since 1990, the gubernatorial inflation rate has skyrocketed 726%. No wonder a recent poll of Marylanders found that 75% believe that fundraising is a major source of corruption.
- **Strong Support Statewide for Public Funding of Campaigns.** An October 2005 statewide poll shows 73% 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.
- **Key Lawmakers Support Public Funding of Campaigns.** More than 50 lawmakers cosponsored the bill in 2005. Speaker Mike Busch supports the reform, as does Chairwoman Sheila Hixson, whose Ways & Means committee voted for the bill 14-5 last year. Sen. Paula Hollinger and a majority of her colleagues on the Education, Health & Environmental Affairs committee – which has jurisdiction on this issue -- support the reform.
- **Public Funding of Campaigns Will Help Save the State Money.** Over the past three years, Progressive Maryland has demanded closure of hundreds of millions of dollars in corporate tax loopholes as the best way to balance the state's budget and pay for schools and health care. A focus on loopholes, in turn, has prompted the natural question: "How did they get there?" And this question, in turn, is giving advocates of public funding of campaigns one of our strongest arguments: tax loopholes are payola to corporate campaign contributors. If Maryland wants to close its long-term budget deficit and achieve more fiscal discipline in the future, the single best step we can take is to enact Maine-style public funding of campaigns.
- **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. 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.