

Campaign Finance Reform: Opening New Doors for Environmental Advocacy

BY MARC CAPLAN AND AMBER FRENCH, PIPER FUND

In the past year, advocates in half the US states have significantly advanced efforts to secure comprehensive public-financing programs in what is proving to be an unprecedented groundswell for electoral reform.

Substantial activity is under way to enact new, comprehensive public-financing programs or to implement or significantly improve existing campaign finance reform laws. Additionally, a serious and long-awaited campaign to win public financing for congressional elections has been launched this year with bipartisan support. Fueled by scandals that have rocked federal and state governments, public demand for reform is at an all-time high, and at least three governors have demonstrated strong leadership on public financing for the first time in recent months.

With this momentum, an unprecedented number of new states are poised to win comprehensive reforms of their own, and advocates on a range of social, economic, and environmental issues find themselves at a turning point. If successful, the movement will help loosen the powerful hold of major corporations and other special interests on lawmakers and, in so doing, present new opportunities to advance policy in the public interest. Public-financing programs may also help level the playing field among pro-environment and social-justice-minded candidates and their opponents, and encourage those interested in public service to run for office, free of the obstacle of raising enormous sums of money from special interests.

Current Programs

Comprehensive, statewide programs for publicly financed elections have been in place in Arizona and Maine since the late 1990s. Forty-two percent and 84 percent, respectively, of the two states' legislatures have been elected under this system—along with nine

of 11 Arizona state officeholders, including Governor Janet Napolitano herself. A pilot program in the New Jersey Legislature was expanded to three districts this year. Public-financing programs have also been enacted in several municipalities, including Portland (Oregon), Albuquerque, and New York City. Judicial public-financing programs have been established in North Carolina and New Mexico, the latter backed by strong leadership from Governor Bill Richardson.

The Role of Environmental Groups

In many states moving reform efforts, environmental groups are participating or even leading coalition efforts to advance public financing as part of a larger effort to address the power of moneyed special interests over the political process—an undue influence that weakens or even eliminates environmental laws and policies in the public interest.

🌱 In West Virginia, the 20-year-old Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC) is working to end mountaintop-removal mining, which not only eradicates some of the most biologically diverse temperate hardwood forest habitat in the world, but also destroys and displaces entire human communities, eroding the unique mountain culture of the state. People who remain face numerous problems including contamination of drinking water, coal waste and sludge impoundment leaks or failures, and blasting-related breathing problems. Many of these social and environmental problems can be traced to the heavy-handed and disproportionate influence the coal industry exerts over politicians through its enormous campaign contributions.

To combat this effect, OVEC leads both the People's Election Reform Coalition, which tracks, analyzes, and publicizes special-interest contributions, and Citizens for Clean Elections, a diverse coalition of 23 organizations that promotes public funding for state legislative races.

🌱 In North Carolina, advocates for campaign finance reform and environmental issues have collaborated

for the past 10 years. In the mid-1990s, reports about the influence of election contributions by the hog industry spurred a successful effort to impose a moratorium on new hog farms. Later efforts resulted in limiting the power of political appointees (often major campaign donors) on the state Board of Transportation. Now, these groups are working to expose the political money behind the electric utilities' manipulation of renewable-energy legislation.

- In Connecticut, several environmental groups, particularly ConnPIRG and Sierra Club, joined the Clean Up Connecticut Campaign to help pass comprehensive public financing in 2005. Their involvement in the campaign stemmed from a long, arduous fight to close several coal-burning power plants known as the Sooty Six, which led environmental groups to recognize that public financing of political campaigns not only eliminates the influence of deep-pocketed contributors who want to weaken environmental regulations but also enables them to help field candidates who want to strengthen such rules. With the reform bill scheduled to become law in 2008, activists from Common Cause are now working with environmental groups to engage pro-environment candidates to run for office.

Funding Opportunities

In addition to the examples above, a number of near-term opportunities exist to advance new public-financing programs for statewide, legislative, judicial, and/or municipal elections. Judicial public-financing efforts in Wisconsin and Illinois may advance as early as this year, while Iowa, Maryland, New Mexico, and Colorado are poised to move various comprehensive public-financing programs in 2008. New York state and some major cities, including Los Angeles, have a real chance at winning comprehensive reform in 2009. State and regional funders should watch for synergy or points of connection between environmental-advocacy efforts in these areas and public-financing campaigns.

Foundations also have an important role to play in supporting the extensive public education and research required for any strong public-interest advocacy work, including campaign finance reform. Environmental funders in particular should encourage grantees to think deeply and strategically about the obstacles to achieving their long-term goals and to include systems-level problems, such as those associated with money



Photo courtesy of Piper Fund

“King Coal,” who doles out campaign cash to influence West Virginia politicians, crashes a rally opposing mountain-top coal removal.

in politics, in any strategic plan. In addition, funders should consider supporting nonpartisan public education, outreach, and training efforts that can engage environmental organizations and civic leaders in tapping public-financing programs in states and municipalities where they already exist.

Opening Up the Democratic Process

Funders and advocates face a range of exciting and challenging new opportunities to open up the democratic process, lessen the influence of moneyed special interests, and more deeply engage environmental leaders in civic life. While responsibility and credit for the ultimate success of this work rests with the advocates, researchers, and organizers who move the issue, funders can help them shape a more democratic future. ■