

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

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:

- Thanks to millions of dollars in campaign contributions to Maryland politicians over the past decade, **the gambling industry** has made steady progress in its long-term effort to legalize slots and casinos in our state. In the 2002 election alone, big casinos and racetrack owners donated at least \$1 million to politicians and spent more than \$1 million on lobbying.
- **Tobacco** companies contribute tens of thousands of dollars to politicians each election to block efforts to cut smoking.
- In the 1998 election, the **liquor** industry gave a whopping \$250,000 to defend its many privileges. No wonder the General Assembly has refused to raise taxes on alcohol since 1972. Even in 2003, 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**. While it is impossible to trace the income of individual contributors, one gets an idea of the socio-economic profile of donors through zip-code analysis. The average resident in zip code 20747 in District Heights, a working-class area of Prince George's County, gave a scant \$0.14 to candidates for Maryland state government office in the 1998 election cycle. By contrast, the average resident of wealthy zip code 20854 in Potomac gave \$11.10. **That's a 79:1 differential.** *Guess whose voice is louder in Annapolis?*

No wonder that – even before the election of Bob Ehrlich as Governor – Maryland ranked 44th out of 50 states in spending on schools and libraries and 47th on health and social services when measured as a percentage of state income. No wonder that Gov. Ehrlich slashed state spending by more than \$500 million this year – cutting funds for childcare and afterschool for poor kids. No wonder the General Assembly not only agreed to these cuts, but even compounded them by slashing health care for poor children. And no wonder that Ehrlich – as he cut programs for the poor – vetoed a bill to close the tax loopholes by which his big corporate campaign contributors cheat Maryland out of hundreds of millions of dollars in state taxes each year.

Nobody disputes that closing Maryland's budget deficit requires tough choices. *But cutting programs for poor kids while allowing big corporations to cheat on their taxes?* Few faith communities in Maryland share those values. What can people of faith do to ensure that the voices of the poor get a better hearing in Annapolis?

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 – interests that contributed approximately \$75 million in the 2002 election, double what they spent in 1998.

Strict limits on fundraising and expenditures would accomplish this goal. But the Supreme Court refuses to countenance mandatory campaign expenditure limits, calling them a violation of free speech.

It is futile to tinker around the edges of a campaign finance system whose main features the courts declare sacrosanct. We need to adopt a proven alternative to that system. That alternative is Clean Elections campaign finance reform as practiced in Arizona and Maine. 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.
- By encouraging electoral competition, public funding widens debate.
- 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 2002, 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.
- Clean Elections candidates who win owe nothing to fat cat contributors, reducing the latter’s privileged access in Annapolis. With lawmakers free from the undue influence of Big Money special interests, they are much more likely to support an anti-poverty agenda.
- Maryland’s Clean Elections system would cost less than \$2 per resident per year – a small price to pay for real democracy and significantly less than the current system, which lavishes pork on special interest contributors.
- *Clean Elections reform has already been implemented in Maine and Arizona, where it is accomplishing all the benefits described above. Indeed, Maine just became the first state in the country to enact universal health care. Does anybody believe that could have happened without first reducing the influence of the HMOs and pharmaceutical companies?*

In 2004, We Have an Unprecedented Opportunity To Enact Clean Elections Reform in Maryland

In 2002, the General Assembly passed a bill to create an official task force to examine Clean Elections reform and make recommendations for Maryland. This distinguished study commission, chaired by the Dean of Liberal Arts at the University of Baltimore, Carl Stenberg, will issue its final report in the autumn of 2003. The Stenberg Commission has already decided to recommend in favor of Clean Elections reform. Now it is finalizing a detailed draft statute, which it will submit shortly to the General Assembly.

Considering its distinguished membership, exhaustive deliberations, and what will surely be a persuasive report, the Stenberg Commission could do for campaign finance reform what the Thornton Commission did for public schools. The Stenberg report comes at the perfect time to enact major reform:

- **Everybody Agrees That Maryland Suffers from a Campaign Finance Problem.** The 2002 election cycle was by far the most expensive in Maryland's history. Special interests pumped \$75 million into Maryland's 2002 election, double what they spent in 1998. Since 1990, the gubernatorial inflation rate has skyrocketed 726%. During the 2002 campaign, the media reported incessantly on the unprecedented sums of money spent. At least \$1 million in contributions from the gambling industry alone – timed to influence the high profile fight over legalization of slot machines -- has reinforced the general consensus that Maryland suffers from a campaign finance problem. Even the FBI is investigating the campaign finance mess in Annapolis.
- **Strong Support from the Media.** The *Washington Post* and *Baltimore Sun* both support Clean Elections reform, so editorials and newspaper stories will create a pro-Stenberg climate that lawmakers will find difficult to ignore.
- **Key Lawmakers Either Support Clean Elections or are Persuadable.** Gov. Ehrlich says he supports public funding of campaigns. The two committee chairs who will consider the bill (Del. Hixson and Sen. Hollinger) are sympathetically inclined. Senate President Mike Miller has not ruled out support for the Stenberg recommendation (and, because of the FBI investigation, can not simply torpedo it). Speaker Mike Busch is a progressive Democrat who will give this issue a fair-minded hearing.
- **Clean Elections Will Help Close the Budget Deficit.** Over the past year, Progressive Maryland and allies have demanded closure of hundreds of millions of dollars in corporate tax loopholes as the best way to balance the state's budget. 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 Clean Elections one of our strongest arguments in favor of reform: tax loopholes are payola to deep-pocket campaign contributors. If Maryland wants to climb out of this budget deficit and achieve more fiscal discipline in the future, the single best step we can take is to enact Maine-style campaign finance reform.
- **Clean Elections is Incumbent-Friendly.** When incumbent lawmakers learn how the system works in Maine and Arizona, they will see 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 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 lobbyists demand.

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 Stenberg recommendation a top priority in the 2004 session of the General Assembly. Join the growing movement in Maryland to bring Clean Elections to our state, a movement that 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. **To get involved, contact Sean Dobson of Progressive Maryland at sean@progressivemaryland.org or 301.495.7004.**

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