

Clean Money Op-Ed submitted to the Akron

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by Nick Nyhart

Executive Director of Public Campaign, a non-partisan, non-profit organization based in Washington, DC devoted to comprehensive campaign finance reform. For more information, go to www.publiccampaign.org.

The attacks of September 11 have brought on a patriotic fervor, and appreciation for American ideals, that has not been seen in most of our lifetimes. This enthusiasm goes beyond the plain desire to exact retribution. Our leaders speak not just in terms of protecting our nation's physical integrity, but eloquently and forcefully about protecting "freedom," "civilization," and "democracy." Although those fights now have a life and death aspect that didn't exist before, it is vital that we appreciate that challenges to these ideals come in many forms and must be protected in many ways. This November 6, the people of Akron will have the opportunity to make a statement about the future of their piece of American democracy.

The November ballot in Akron includes a "Clean Elections" proposal addressing a fundamental problem with our democracy—the power of money in politics. For too long, big campaign contributors have been able to shape our government's decision-making to suit their interests. As we watch Congress debate new security measures, defense spending, energy policies, economic stimulus packages and various bailout requests, wouldn't it be better if we knew that elected officials had only to answer to the people who vote and who they seek to protect, and not to campaign donors whose profit or failure may depend on how those new initiatives are carried out? And don't we want this for municipal government as well as in the halls of Congress?

For these reasons, we believe it is imperative to keep working for comprehensive campaign finance reform, even as we all address other more pressing threats to our nation's security and well-being. While reform at the federal level is currently stalled, the citizens of Akron have a chance to join the growing number of states and cities that have chosen to remove big money from politics. The "Clean Elections" initiative will give good people an opportunity to run for elected office without relying on wealthy donors and lobbyists to fund their political campaigns. Clean Elections is already law in four states -- Arizona, Maine, Massachusetts and Vermont – and the track record emerging from those states shows that the system is producing real changes.

Under the Clean Elections system, candidates who agree to strict spending limits and agree to raise no private money can qualify for full public financing for their campaigns. First they have to collect a large number of very small contributions. A candidate for Mayor of Akron, for example, would need 400 \$5 contributions. Once they are certified, they are completely freed from the private money chase. A candidate's ability to excite voters becomes more important than their ability to raise cash.

Most important, Clean Elections works. In Maine and Arizona, where about one-quarter of all the state legislators got elected running 'clean' in 2000, the system lowered overall campaign spending, reduced the influence of outside money, leveled the playing field, freed candidates' time and encouraged a larger and more diverse array of people to run for office. The requirements for receiving public funding worked well—fringe candidates weren't able to take advantage of the system, but legitimate contenders with a real base of public support were able to qualify.

Clean Election incumbents report a greater feeling of independence from special interests and more freedom to speak their minds. "While the process of collecting \$5 qualifying contributions was somewhat labor-intensive, I enjoyed the fact that it caused me to spend more time in people's living rooms rather than on the phone, chasing down checks from lobbyists," says Democratic state Rep. Glenn Cummings of Maine, a director of an education non-profit who ran 'clean' and won his first race for office. His Republican colleague, state Sen. Ed Youngblood, a banker who was another Clean Elections first-timer, adds, "Public service changes when representatives don't have to worry about whether a decision they make will be viewed as a payoff to a big contributor. We Clean Elections pioneers are a more independent bunch, especially because we're not worrying about how we're going to raise the big bucks to win our next race."

The Clean Elections initiative that the citizens of Akron will vote on November 6 may seem like a small matter compared to the events that have been appearing on this newspaper's front pages over the last few weeks.

But American democracy operates at many levels, and any endeavor to bring government closer to its citizens is, indeed, a victory for American ideals.