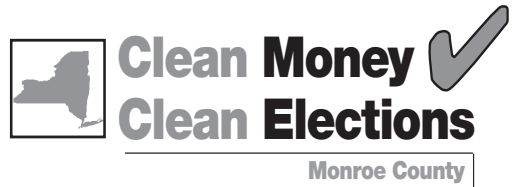


Public Election Money Levels the Field



By Edgar Bronfman Sr.
and Deborah L. Simpson

One of us is the retired CEO of a Fortune 500 company who has contributed generously to political campaigns. The other is a single mother, a former waitress, and current legislator from Maine. It wouldn't seem as if we have much in common, but we are both passionate about the need for publicly-financed elections.

In 2004, the cost of winning a U.S. Senate seat averaged more than \$7 million; the price of a House seat was more than \$1 million. Candidates spend huge amounts of time calling affluent donors (like one of the authors of this essay) or special-interest groups. The time spent "dialing for dollars" is time candidates don't spend talking to ordinary constituents. Most candidates hate this trade-off, but it is one they have to make to win.

Fortunately, that's not the way the system works in Maine, where one of us has successfully run three races for the Legislature and is campaigning again this year. As a waitress and part-time college student, in that first election there were no deep pockets to draw on, or even an idea of how to find

them. All that candidate Simpson had were a lot of neighbors and friends. They provide many of the \$5 contributions that Maine's Clean Elections program requires to qualify for public funding to run her campaigns. In exchange, she has agreed to abide by strict spending limits and not raise any more private money. Under the law, if a privately funded candidate outspends a publicly funded one, more funds are given to the Clean Elections candidate to ensure a level playing field.

By taking much of the private money out of politics, Maine took the focus off big donors and shifted it to all voters. This means that people like Edgar Bronfman are constituents like everybody else, with an idea to share or a problem that needs solving. The volume of people's voices is not dependent on the size of their wallets. In Maine, a waitress and a millionaire may shop at different stores

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and stand on different sides of the counter, but when it comes to our elected officials, they are equals.

Clean Elections is a practical, proven reform that has been in place in Maine and Arizona since 2000 and for judicial races in North Carolina since 2004. Five other states, including New Jersey, and two cities have adopted it for all or some of their races. Getting Clean Elections in place can be tough, since the lawmakers often prefer to deal with the fund-raising devil they know. In Maine and Arizona, voters approved these systems via initiative. However, scandal can provide a push.

Last year, after months of revelations of pay-to-play schemes (continued, page 10)

What's the Price tag?

One way to calculate the cost is to look at how much CMCE is already costing in Maine and Massachusetts. The Public Policy and Education Fund of New York calculated the total cost of public financing in Maine and Arizona over the last four-year cycle. As the chart below shows, the Maine and Arizona costs, applied to New York, are almost exactly the same, \$81 million over four years.

	Maine	Arizona	New York based on Maine	New York based on Arizona	New York based on ME & AZ Avg.
Four-year cost					
Per voter	\$10.45	\$12.34	\$77,831,600	\$91,908,320	84,869,960
Per registered voter	\$6.35	\$7.55	\$75,164,950	\$89,369,350	\$82,267,150
Per capita	\$4.80	\$3.08	\$92,289,600	\$59,219,160	\$75,754,380
New York costs			\$81,762,050	\$80,165,610	\$80,963,830

New York has far fewer legislative districts per capita than the other two states. The cost of Clean Money, Clean Elections in New York is likely to be about \$20 million a year. That's \$1.07 per New Yorker, amounting to less than 2 hundredths of a percent of New York's \$112 billion state budget.