

Voter-Owned Elections: “A Level Playing Field”

by Holly Pruett
Views editor

Portland’s Voter Owned Elections

Candidates who demonstrate community support by collecting large numbers of \$5 contributions (1,500 for mayoral candidates, 1,000 for auditor and city commissioner races) will qualify for public funding, giving Portland a wider pool of candidates with diverse values and a real shot at winning a campaign.



For more information:

www.oregonfollowthemoney.org
www.oregonaction.org

Johnnie Gage has spent his life working with folks who fall outside the system. “The folks we’re working with traditionally saw politics as something that didn’t have much to do with them,” says Gage, “except the effects. But the process, they never felt a part of.”

Yet in the months before the 2004 Election, Gage and Jo Ann Bowman of Oregon Action recruited 110 new leaders — primarily African American, primarily low-income residents, including a good number of ex-felons — to engage others in the political process (see page 4).

Now, over three months after the Election, more than half of these new leaders are still active. Every Wednesday night they congregate at OA’s northeast Portland office. They organize postcard drives, rehearse for speaking engagements, learn to write letters to the editor — even confront visiting City Council members. They show up after a full day of work or between shifts, some with kids in tow, some venturing out from residential recovery programs. Shannon Olive, a single mom, says: “We show up because for the first time, we believe we will make a difference.”

What issue has them all fired up? Voter Owned Elections: a new name for an old issue — campaign finance reform — reframed as a doorway to access, accountability, and participation.

Changing the Political Status Quo

This spring, Portland’s City Council is expected to enact the very first system in the country to provide full public financing for municipal elections. Over the last eighteen

months, the Money in Politics Research Action Project (MIPRAP) has worked with Western States Center and Public Campaign to shape and build support for a plan being advanced by Portland City Commissioner Erik Sten and Auditor Gary Blackmer.

These advocates point to Maine and Arizona where for three election cycles, Voter Owned



Photos: Oregon Action

Elections have changed “business as usual”. A fair and sensible reform, Voter Owned Elections save taxpayer money by keeping elected officials accountable to voters and not big money contributors.

The cost of Voter Owned Elections in Portland will be 0.143% of the city budget, the equivalent of \$2.45 a year per Portland resident. The bottom line, says MIPRAP’s Janice Thompson, is this: “The cost of status quo politics — elected officials beholden to lobbyists and private special interests, high voter cynicism, limitations on who can run and win — is far higher.”

A Level Playing Field

With votes lining up on the City Council, Oregon Action is continuing to organize with a massive signature-gathering effort aimed at achieving a unanimous vote. Perhaps more important, this outreach is meant to spark the imagination of their constituents.

“Our people are thinking seriously,” says Gage. “Is there one amongst us who we could get behind to run?” This issue is hot for Oregon Action, according to new leader Shannon Olive, because it means “people without access to wealth, like our members, can run for office on a level playing field.”

By shifting the focus from the depressing corruption of campaign contributions to the more inspiring prospect of increased access and participation, the Voter Owned Election movement is gaining ground. As *Willamette Week* noted, “The real benefit of publicly funded elections isn’t who it keeps out of the process; it’s who it lets in.”