

In My Opinion -- Voter-Owned Elections: Campaign reforms that are working

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Picture, for a moment, this year's City Council races without Portland's campaign finance reform system of Voter-Owned Elections. We'd be seeing record spending (half a million plus per candidate) funded by large contributions (\$1,000, \$5,000 and beyond) from special-interest players backing a select group of candidates. Candidates would prove their viability by dialing for dollars. The election's short timeline would force them to target deep-pocketed donors rather than typical Portlanders. Time spent fundraising would take away from the time a candidate could spend engaging ordinary voters.

Under that scenario, should we be surprised if the concerns of big contributors take precedence over community priorities?

This primary season a record 10,000 Portland voters joined the Voter-Owned Elections process by supporting candidates with their signatures and their dollars. The individual campaigns began by talking to voters about their hopes and concerns. A diverse group of candidates, varied in gender and race, from backgrounds in business, nonprofit, government and activism, demonstrated their public support and qualified for public financing.

Voter-Owned Elections limit campaign spending by participating candidates. Many nonparticipating candidates are also voluntarily limiting their spending—and the size of contributions to their campaigns—to far less than the big-dollar donations that were common before the reforms were enacted. And special-interest influence at City Hall has been reduced to the benefit of all, regardless of their access to wealth.

As the campaigns gear up for the May primary, the politics have begun. Charges are flying. Nonissues and personalities have emerged. The biggest nonissue, attacked by some candidates and the media, is the Voter-Owned Elections system. Instead, it should be seen as part of the solution, by providing the money so that anyone who demonstrates extensive community support can receive adequate resources to mount a viable campaign. Are there still items that need to be addressed? Yes. But the system includes a volunteer Citizen Campaign Commission to advise city elections administrators about changes. The commission's work has been deliberative. For example, it recently completed guidelines for independent expenditures. Prior to the reforms these could occur without adequate opportunity for rebuttal.

This year's special election to replace city Commissioner Erik Sten, also part of the primary, has brought new twists to the system, which are being addressed, but with caution so that any new rules aren't made on the fly. But no one should be surprised when ongoing improvements are added to the system. That's exactly why the reform ordinance created the Citizens Campaign Commission.

Portlanders should look forward to 2010 when they'll have a chance to judge the reform program. I believe they'll approve Voter-Owned Elections because they create campaigns run

more on people power than on dollar power. They increase both voter choices and options for candidates. They level the political playing field, put the brakes on campaign spending and remove even the perception of special interests calling the shots at City Hall.

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