



Portland's voter-owned elections: Do they help or add to voter frustration?

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Anna Griffin, The Oregonian

A researcher from the **City Club of Portland** called recently, seeking thoughts on public campaign financing.

I've covered "**voter owned elections**" since the program was just a glimmer in former **Commissioner Erik Sten's eye**, but I didn't tell my caller whether Portland voters should keep or kill it when ballots arrive next month. Frankly, I'm still not sure how I'll vote.

Public financing was meant to reduce the influence of big money and open up elections to political outsiders. Candidates who demonstrate a modicum of grassroots support -- in races for city commissioner, that means collecting \$5 donations and signatures from 1,000 people -- get everything they need to run a serious campaign. Five years in, public financing reminds me of the death penalty: a great idea, except for the part where it's used and regulated by human beings.

So far, Portlanders have spent almost \$2 million on 10 candidates and seen the same number of winners -- two -- as scandals. **Emilie Boyles** qualified for taxpayer aid in 2006 by using fraudulent signatures and lying about her contributions, then went on a spending spree that included paying her 16-year-old daughter \$12,500, well over the market rate, for "campaign work."

Two years ago, travel agency owner Sho Dozono collected enough John Hancocks and Abraham Lincolns for public help with his mayoral campaign, but lost the money when a state judge decided a \$27,000 poll he accepted before officially declaring his candidacy counted as a campaign contribution, bumping him over the amount publicly financed candidates can accept.

Dozono wouldn't have beaten Sam Adams with public cash. He wasn't a good candidate, and one problem with public financing is that the city code does not require candidates to prove they know how to formulate a soundbite with substance, let alone a coherent campaign strategy, before running. (Case in point: This spring, former PSU lobbyist Jesse Cornett spent \$145,000 to garner 7,822 votes. A huge disappointment, but not quite a scandal. The only good news for public financing fans is that few Portlanders noticed his meandering campaign enough to be annoyed that they bankrolled it.)

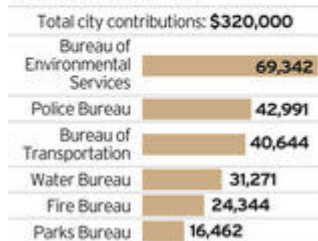
Still, what supporters like to call "**clean money**" has changed campaigns for the better. Candidates, even those opting for private money, spend less. The program has attracted more high-quality candidates than cranks. **Amanda Fritz**, the only non-incumbent elected using the system, hasn't reinvented the office but has been a voice for

common sense and compassion, traits often taken for granted in politics.

Voter owned elections

Where does the money for publicly funded campaigns come from?

Some allocations of campaign financing from 2010-2011 budget



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Proponents point out that public financing costs a negligible amount when you consider the grand sweep of city budgeting. Each year, Portland's number crunchers estimate how much they need to support candidates, and city departments pony up a percentage based on their size. This year, bureaus will put in \$320,000, barely the cost of a Pearl District condo. The police bureau will contribute \$42,991, about \$1,000 less than the starting salary for a rookie cop. The parks bureau will hand over \$16,462, the cost of a few new benches. Water ratepayers will pay \$31,271, nowhere near enough to dent anyone's quarterly bill.

That kind of spare change adds up, though. \$42,991 won't pay another cop, but it could cover overtime for a gang-prevention officer. \$16,462 wouldn't buy a new park, but it could put in a swing set or replace aging playground equipment in Cully or Lents. \$31,271 won't lower your water rates, but it could help a few more poor and elderly Portlanders stop worrying about how they're going to juggle utility bills with rising health-care costs and property taxes.

Since Sten and former Auditor Gary Blackmer hatched the idea of public financing, the conversation has been dominated by people already engaged in the process. The city's progressive establishment -- the League of Women Voters, labor unions, the Oregon Bus Project and other do-gooder groups -- lobbied to create the system and have raised more than \$91,000 for the campaign to keep it. The Portland Business Alliance and the downtown business types who make up its top ranks have opposed public financing -- which, coincidentally, directly undercuts their ability to use campaign donations to buy access.

But what about everybody else? Voter participation in Multnomah County hasn't risen noticeably in the five years since public financing began. Frustration about how government functions has. What about the people who are disinclined to vote, the ones who live outside the zip codes where candidates usually go hunting for contributions, either \$5 or \$500? Will keeping public financing give people outside the circle of civic engagement a greater voice, or just leave them even more confused and angry about where their tax money goes?

That's the question I'll ponder when ballots arrive: Does public financing help allay voter frustration, or unwittingly contribute to it?

-- **Anna Griffin**