

The Reform Letter

The Newsletter of the
North Carolina Center for Voter Education

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Spring 2001



Visitors from Maine Testify to Success of Reform

Left to right: Center's Chris Heagarty, Maine Reps. Bill Norbert and Tina Baker. Photo by David Spratte.

Some people think state lawmakers speak a different language than the rest of us. On April 17 and 18, the NC Center for Voter Education brought in three "translators" who could explain, in legislative terms and in plain English, how campaign finance reform has worked in their state. They were state legislators and candidates from Maine, who were on a two-day visit to familiarize members of the NC General Assembly with the nuts and bolts of publicly funded campaigns.

Maine and Arizona are the first two states in the nation to offer a public funding alternative to legislative candidates. Both states used reformed systems in the 2000 elections, after voters in those states had used the ballot initiative process to mandate a change in how candidates could choose to run for office.

One third of Maine's legislature was elected under this "voter owned elections" system, which eliminates the need for big-money campaign contributors, reduces the influence of money over politics, lets average citizens run for office and permits candidates to spend more time problem solving and less time fundraising.

Representatives Bill Norbert and Tina Baker both won their elections in November using Maine's new public funding system.

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Poll: Demand for Change is Strong

A poll conducted in late March for the NC Center for Voter Education shows that there is considerable cynicism and concern across the state about the expanding role of money in politics, and that support for campaign finance reform exists across all major demographic groups. The survey also reveals that Democrats, Republicans and Independents alike would support a public funding alternative.

The survey of 600 likely voters was conducted by a nationally recognized firm, Public Opinion Strategies, between March 27 and 29, and has a margin of error of +/- 4%. Public Opinion Strategies has worked with high profile Republican clients such as Gov. Jeb Bush (Fl.), Gov. Tom Ridge (Pa.), Sen. John McCain (Az.) and US Reps. Richard Burr and Robin Hayes, both of North Carolina.

Chief among its findings, the survey reveals that more than nine in ten—91% of respondents—think that campaign contributors have a definite impact on the public policy decisions their elected officials make. Similarly, an overwhelming majority of 72% feels that candidates for public office spend more time raising money for their campaigns than they do solving the problems of average North Carolinians. Both of these figures indicate that, increasingly, North Carolinians are losing faith in the ability of their elected officials to represent the public interest.

Disputing the conventional wisdom that people do not feel campaign finance reform is a priority issue, 62% of respondents said they feel that the influence of large campaign contributions makes campaign finance reform a key issue the Governor and the legislature need to address before the next election. Only 36% feel the issue should be sidelined until other more pressing problems are dealt with.

Voters would also rather see candidates using tax dollars than special interest dollars in their campaigns. If the only difference between two candidates for office was one used taxpayer money to fund his or her campaign and the other used special interest money, more people (47%) said they would vote for the candidate using taxpayer money than for the candidate using special interest money (35%).

There is sound support for public financing and spending limits in North Carolina. A full 60% of respondents would like to see a voluntary system of public funding enacted on the condition that participating candidates agree to limit their spending. Only 37% oppose the idea. The support for public funding extends across party lines. Among Democrats and Independents, 64% favor the proposal; among Republicans, 56% are for it.

Soft money, which is raised in unlimited amounts by political parties from wealthy individuals, businesses and labor unions, is dangerous to democracy because it drowns out the voices of average citizens and gives clout to big-dollar contributors from outside North Carolina. Furthermore, it is difficult if not impossible to trace who is giving how much to whom. These dangers are so evident to North [continued on page 3]

did you know...

What's in this issue?

- **Campaign Costs Soar in 2000**
- **McCain-Feingold Passes US Senate**
- **Update from the Legislature**

72% of North Carolinians favor new federal laws limiting the amount of soft money that any individual or group can contribute to the national political parties.

—Center for Voter Education Spring 2001 poll

Executive Notes

Having served in the United States Senate, I've had plenty of exposure to ideas and innovations from other states. Our strength as a country is, in many ways, based on the premise that with fifty states solving problems, we can all learn from each other's experiences. With that in mind, it was exciting to welcome a delegation from Maine a few short weeks ago to hear about how that state has grappled with a major problem now before our organization and our state: campaign reform and the effort to reduce the influence that money has in the political process.

While in North Carolina, Bill Norbert, Tina Baker, and Jolene Lovejoy spoke about how the public funding alternative enacted by Maine voters worked in the 2000 elections. Praising how the system changed politics in Maine for the better, they said the candidates loved not spending so much time raising money. According to the delegation, Maine voters felt more connected to the political process than ever before—all for a \$5 qualifying contribution.

Of course, North Carolina is not Maine. We're a much larger state, in both geography and population. And we're less inclined to rely on government-supported solutions than many states to our north.

A public funding system isn't welfare for politicians, or any of the other absurd names that critics (usually the beneficiaries of the current system) try to label it. It's a system where voters invest in candidates they trust to run credible and competitive campaigns. It's a system where citizens, not special interests, call the shots. Since it's voluntary, it's just about the only way we'll be able to rein in campaign spending.

Think about how many people would feel better about running for office if they could spend more time meeting voters and solving their concerns, and less time "dialing for dollars," as Maine's Rep. Norbert put it. Public funding wouldn't solve all of North Carolina's campaign problems, but it would be a step in the right direction.

Sincerely,



Robert B. Morgan
Chairman, NC Center for Voter Education

Maine Candidates

[continued from front page]

"Our new system resonated with the voters because they know that our elections have gotten financially out of hand," said Rep. Baker, a native of Gastonia. In North Carolina, the cost of running for office has increased dramatically in the past decade.

Rep. Norbert, a member of the leadership in the Maine House, stressed that the new system made candidate recruitment much easier. He also noted that the number of competitive races increased, while the amount of private money raised and spent was cut almost in half.

Jolene Lovejoy was a Republican candidate who employed the voluntary system of campaign funding in her bid for the Maine House. Ms. Lovejoy lost her legislative bid but remains a strong supporter of the "clean elections" established by public funding.

Lovejoy pointed out that, under this kind of system, constituents are the only special interest group. She noted that as someone who is financially secure, she could have financed her own campaign, or because she is well connected in her community she could have had others pay her campaign bills. She rejected that approach and ran as a "clean elections" candidate because she did not want any suspicion clouding her decisions or votes as a result of accepting private money.

The Maine delegation made a presentation before the Senate's Judiciary committee, held a press conference, met one-on-one with numerous legislators (including House Speaker Jim Black and Senate President Pro Tem Marc Basnight), were the guests of honor at a dinner with North Carolina elected officials, addressed grassroots campaign reformers who were conducting a lobby day at the Legislature, and taped a 30-minute public affairs radio show for statewide broadcast. They were also recognized in both the NC House and the NC Senate.

The Maine delegation's visit made news in the state's leading political insider's column, "Under the Dome," in the *Raleigh News & Observer*, and in the *Winston-Salem Journal* and *The Independent* weekly as well as on the radio with *wptf* and *ncnn*, and was the subject of two major editorial columns. A half-hour public affairs radio show featuring Norbert and Baker was broadcast statewide on *ncnn* on April 29. ★

did you know. . .

If the only difference between two political candidates was the source of their campaign funding, 47% of North Carolinians would support the one using taxpayer dollars while 35% would support the one using money raised from special interests.

—Center for Voter Education Spring 2001 poll

Voter Owned Elections Act

Support for campaign spending limits and public funding appears to be growing in the North Carolina legislature. The Voter Owned Elections Act, which is modeled after working reformed systems in other states, has been introduced in both houses of the General Assembly.

Sen. Wib Gulley (D-Durham) was the lead sponsor of Senate Bill 1054, while four House members were the primary sponsors of the companion House Bill 1410. The four House members are Rep. Martha Alexander (D-Mecklenburg), Rep. Beverly Earle (D-Mecklenburg), Rep. Wayne Goodwin (D-Richmond) and Rep. Martin Nesbitt (D-Buncombe).

Key components of the bill are:

- establishment of a voluntary program that candidates can choose as an alternative to the current fundraising system.
- exchange of reasonable amounts of public funding for reasonable spending limits and the rejection of special interest contributions by candidates.
- planned phase-in of the program, starting in 2004, so that all implementation issues can be studied and addressed.
- creation of a "relief fund" designed to aid participating candidates who are outspent by non-participating opponents.

Demand for Change
[continued from front page]

Carolinians that nearly three in four (72%) would like to see McCain-Feingold style legislation adopted.

The polling data provides indisputable evidence that there is a growing statewide concern that campaigns and elections are increasingly an abstract concept for most citizens, and that state government is primarily responsive to campaign contributors rather than constituents. A copy of the poll report was sent to every legislator for their review.

This polling information made news statewide with an Associated Press story, with stories in the *News & Observer*, *Asheville Citizen-Times*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Winston-Salem Journal*, *Rocky Mount Telegram*, on the radio with wptf in Raleigh, wunc in Chapel Hill and wfdd in Winston-Salem and statewide on the NC News Network, and on the evening news with wtvd in Raleigh. ★

ncvoter.com
Full details of the poll, including a fact sheet and more graphs, are available on our website, www.ncvoter.com.

News About the Center

The Center is pleased to welcome two new members to its board of directors.

Ed Wilson, Jr. is a native of Winston-Salem and practices law in Eden, North Carolina. Among the many North Carolina boards on which he currently serves are Save our State and BoysCamp. Wilson is a graduate of the University of Virginia and the Wake Forest School of Law.

Leslie Winner is a native of Asheville and currently serves as vice president and general council to the University of North Carolina. She served six years as a member of the NC Senate representing a portion of Mecklenburg county. Winner holds degrees from Brown University and Northeastern University School of Law.

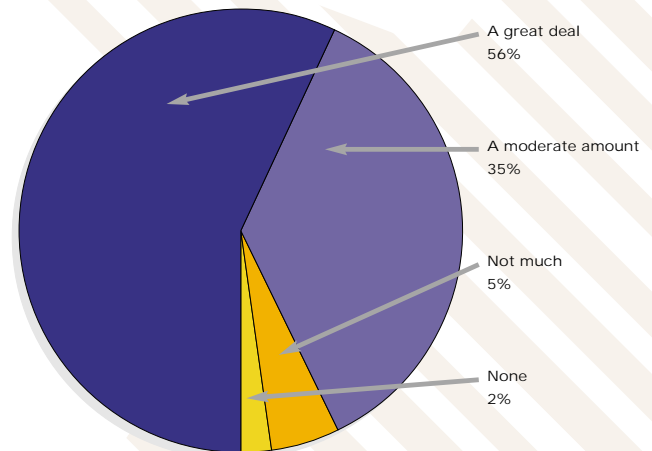
The Center extends its thanks to the following organizations for recent grants: The Stern Family Fund, the Piper Fund, the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation and the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina. The Center's undertakings would not be possible without the support of these organizations.

Jeff Nieman has been hired as the Center's Project Coordinator. Nieman is a former member of the NC Association of Student Governments and former member of the UNC Board of Governors.

Our online site has a fresh face and lots of new content. Renovations to the Center's website, www.ncvoter.com, were completed in mid-February. We hope you find the new site easy to navigate and informative. ★

Public Perception: Campaign Contributors Hold Influence

When asked, 91% of voters say campaign contributors influence the decisions made by elected officials.



[1% of voters surveyed didn't know.]

72% of voters think that candidates for public office spend more time raising money for their campaigns. Only 24% thought that candidates spent more time solving the problems of average North Carolinians.

Cost of Campaigns Soar in Election 2000

Average Cost to Win a Council of State Seat Doubles

Office	1996	2000	Change
Governor	\$10,430,657	\$11,050,029	+6%
Lt. Governor	\$1,395,090	\$2,466,353	+77%
Agriculture Comm.	\$173,232	\$1,111,265	+54%
Attorney General	\$745,051	\$2,175,316	+292%
Auditor	\$114,148	\$329,839	+189%
Insurance Comm.	\$455,461	\$316,762	-31%
Labor Comm.	\$97,291	\$224,072	+130%
Public Instruction	\$105,578	\$141,181	+34%
Secretary of State	\$341,953	\$321,864	-6%
Treasurer	\$409,849	\$1,218,128	+197%
Total (Gov. excl.)	\$3,837,653	\$8,304,780	+116%

Source: ncfree & Board of Elections reports.

Record Spending on Legislative Races Highlights Pressing Need for Reform

Though legislators struggle to find cash to balance the state budget, they were the recipients of record sums of campaign donations in the 2000 elections. The cost of winning a seat in the NC House has jumped to an average of \$69,000, almost tripling since 1994. The average cost of winning a seat in the NC Senate climbed to \$134,500, approaching four times the cost since 1994. Total spending on legislative races climbed from \$7.2 million in 1994 to \$19.4 million in 2000, and 87% of top spending candidates won their races. Of the \$19.4 million, \$15 million was spent by the 170 winning candidates.

The results from the 2000 Election also indicate that incumbents enjoyed an extraordinary success rate in seeking re-election— only 6 of 157 incumbents were defeated. Two major factors played into this. First, 35% of candidates faced no major party opposition in their election, meaning more than 1 in 3 incumbents didn't even face a real challenge at the ballot box. Second, incumbents who did face major party opposition, on average, raised \$2.70 to every dollar their opposition raised. In general, candidates who achieved a 2:1 fundraising advantage won 91% of the time.

The considerable fundraising advantage held by incumbents ensured a reelection rate of 96%. These figures indicate that most challengers are hindered by an inability to raise a reasonable sum of money to mount an effective campaign, because big donors and special interest groups see incumbents as a sure win. The creation of a public funding system would allow qualified, credible candidates, including both challengers and incumbents, to access a reasonable amount of money to conduct a com-

petitive campaign. Such a system would prohibit participating candidates from raising special interest money and force them to abide by strict campaign spending limits.

Data collection and statistical analysis by Bob Hall, Democracy South

Race for Chief Justice Follows Other Political Offices in Rising Cost

Henry Frye and I. Beverly Lake spent a combined total of well over \$1 million in their race for Chief Justice of the NC Supreme Court in the 2000 Election. Frye spent close to \$950,000, while Lake spent around \$230,000. The fundraising efforts of both men were the subject of critical front-page stories in North Carolina newspapers during the campaign.

Many analysts believe there is an inherent contradiction in the current system of judicial elections. As judicial races have become more partisan and politicized, and as the cost of running a statewide campaign has skyrocketed in recent years, many feel that the pressure to raise increasing sums of money presents ethical dilemmas. After all, unlike politicians who are elected to uphold the will of the majority, judges swear to take an oath to uphold the law, regardless of popular opinion.

[Fundraising is] the most distasteful aspect of politics to me. I like getting out and meeting people, but I do not like having to raise money . . .
It's not something I think is good for the judiciary.
—NC Supreme Court Chief Justice I. Beverly Lake, Jr.,
NC Lawyer's Weekly, 04/02/01

Those running for judgeships, especially statewide seats, often must turn to the attorneys who practice law in their courtrooms in order run effective campaigns. To many, this can create an appearance of impropriety than can undermine public faith in the courts.

Numerous bills have been filed at the Legislature seeking reform, but agreement on which course to pursue remains elusive. These various proposed solutions include: nonpartisan judicial elections, a system of gubernatorial appointments, or gubernatorial appointments with so-called "retention" elections. Another possible solution is to follow the lead of Wisconsin and adopt a public funding program, which gives voters the right to elect judges but removes the unseemly problem of private money in judicial campaigns. ★

did you know. . .

A record 31 legislative winners spent in excess of \$150,000 to win election. In 1994, only two had to spent that much.

Source: Board of Elections disclosure reports

McCain-Feingold Passes Senate, Moves to House

In what is roundly considered a major step forward to comprehensive campaign finance reform in Washington, on April 2 the United States Senate completed more than two weeks of extensive debate and passed the McCain-Feingold bill. It now goes to the House of Representatives, where opponents of reform promise to fight tooth and nail to kill the proposal. However, a similar bill has passed the US House twice in recent years despite strong opposition from House leadership.

The bill contains a number of major provisions that would change the face—and voice—of political campaigns.

The cornerstone of McCain-Feingold is the banning of “soft money.” Soft money refers to unlimited, loosely regulated contributions raised by political parties from labor unions, corporations and wealthy individuals. Such contributions are destructive to our system of government for a number of reasons.

In North Carolina, this creates a loophole by which big political donors can effectively evade the contribution limits mandated by state law, further removing control from average voters and small dollar contributors. Candidates can accept massive contributions from out-of-state donors, freeing them from the responsibility of soliciting support from within their own constituencies. Soft money undermines candidates' accountability by denying the voters the right to know who is paying for a candidate's campaign expenses. Because these funds go into a national party fund, from where they are redistributed, it is practically impossible to know who is giving what to whom.

The second key component of the legislation would control phony pre-election TV and radio “issue” ads (defined as ads purported to be promoting an issue, but which in fact advocate for the election or defeat of specific candidates). McCain-Feingold places these ads under the contribution limits and disclosure requirements of federal election law in the 30 days before a primary or 60 days before a general election.

A series of amendments were offered to the bill through the two weeks of debate. The Senate approved raising the hard money limit from \$1,000 to \$2,000 per individual in a federal election. A separate amendment, strenuously opposed by the National Association of Broadcasters, enforces a long-standing law that candidates for political office be guaranteed the lowest available advertising rate for political commercials. A third change, called the “millionaires amendment”, allows candidates facing self-financed opponents to accept campaign contributions that exceed standard federal limits.

In an important final vote, the Senate rejected the “non-severability” clause proposed by anti-reformers. Passage of “non-severability” would have forced the courts to consider all separate sections of the act as one, so that in the event a portion were to be struck down as unconstitutional, the entire act would be voided.

McCain-Feingold: Constitutional?

Before and after the passage of the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform bill through the US Senate, debate over the constitutionality of some of its provisions has been extensive. Critics of the bill see it as restricting the First Amendment right to Freedom of Speech. Supporters of the bill see it entirely differently.

Most experts agree that a ban on “soft money” would be constitutional. The landmark Buckley v. Valeo Supreme Court decision supported the limiting of campaign contributions in order to prevent corruption or the appearance of corruption. The case also established the principle that spending political money is akin to political speech, and therefore has some basic constitutional protections. Since that time, soft money contributions have largely served to evade federal laws on contribution limits. Furthermore, the vast majority of soft money contributions come from the treasuries of corporations and unions, which have been barred from contributing money in connection with federal elections since 1907 and 1947 respectively.

The area of “issue” ads is considerably more complex and the outcome of potential constitutional challenges are uncertain. The McCain-Feingold bill would have had stronger footing constitutionally without the Wellstone Amendment. The original language barred only those ads financed by corporations and unions. However, Wellstone's amendment brought 501(c)(4) organizations under the ban (i.e. National Right to Life Committee, Sierra Club, etc). These organizations finance ads with contributions from individuals. This stronger language resembles other state and federal laws that have been struck down in previous Supreme Court decisions and is not likely to pass muster with the current court either.

In the area of freedom of the media, the National Association of Broadcasters (nab) opposes a provision that broadcasters make available the lowest published rate to political candidates. But as the non-profit organization Alliance for Better Campaigns has observed: “the Supreme Court has consistently ruled that the government can impose specific, enforceable public interest obligations on broadcasters in return for the free grant of licenses giving them exclusive use of the public airwaves.”

McCain-Feingold is expected to receive the full attention of the House of Representatives in July. If the bill passes, attention will be focused on whether President Bush, who has expressed reservations about the bill, will sign it into law. ★

ncvoter.com
Confused by soft money? See the Soft Money Questions & Answers fact sheet in the Citizen Resources section of www.ncvoter.com.

“Crossover” Sharpens Legislative Focus

For a bill to become law in North Carolina, it must be passed by both the House and Senate chambers of the General Assembly and then signed by the Governor. Among the many stumbling blocks legislation must overcome on this path is a requirement known as the “crossover deadline.” This refers to the date by which a bill must pass final reading in one chamber to be reported to the other. For example, if Senate Bill 1 (SB 1) is still in a Senate committee at the time of the deadline, the bill dies despite the fact that it has not been formally voted down.

This crossover deadline does not apply to bills that have a fiscal impact on the state’s budget. That is, bills that require a monetary appropriation may be considered after the deadline even if they haven’t “crossed over” from one chamber to another. Such bills are marked with an asterisk below. Several bills pertinent to campaign reform did, in fact, meet this deadline, which fell on April 26 this year. The following are a few of the most salient pieces of legislation.

House Bills (these bills have passed the House and are eligible for consideration by the Senate):

House Bill 34—An Act to Ban Butterfly and Punch Card Ballots. Introduced by Rep. Wayne Goodwin. Currently, eight counties use punch card ballots—the same type responsible for much of the controversy surrounding the elections in Florida in 2000.

***House Bill 1171—Judicial Public Financing:** An act to establish a system of public financing of campaigns for the NC Court of Appeals. Introduced by Rep. Wayne Goodwin. This bill would allow for allocation of public funds for qualifying candidates for appellate court judgeships.

House Bill 1187—Push Poll Disclosure: An act to require the disclosure of a candidate or person paying for a persuasive poll. Introduced by Rep. Dan Blue. Currently, candidates or their agents can conduct a poll that is intended to influence voters’ opinion on an election without following normal campaign expenditure disclosure regulations. This bill intends to close that apparent loophole.

***House Bill 1410—Voter-Owned Elections Act (companion bill to Senate Bill 1054):** An act to phase in a voluntary system of public financing for certain elective offices. Introduced by Rep. Martha Alexander. Depending on the office, a candidate is required to raise a certain number of small-dollar donations. If the candidate reaches this threshold number of donations, he/she can choose to accept public funds provided that the candidate agrees to specific spending limits. This bill is intended to take some of the influence over NC elections away from special interests and allow candidates more time to address the concerns of average citizens.

Senate Bills (conversely, these bills have passed the Senate and been sent to the House):

Senate Bill 8—Soft Money Control (Companion bill to House Bill 258): An act to control the flow of national party political contributions directly to state candidates. Introduced by Sen. Wib Gulley. National soft money

Legislature Considers Bill to Better Enforce Existing Campaign Laws

Most people acknowledge that there are problems with our campaign finance laws and are supportive of comprehensive reforms. However, few know the serious problems that exist in simply trying to enforce our current election laws.

For example, four donors each gave \$100,000 or more to a 1988 candidate for Lieutenant Governor (well in excess of the \$4,000 contribution limit). Because of the two-year statute of limitations, nothing could be done when the illegal acts were finally discovered several years later in 1991.

Another example is the owner of a rest home chain who illegally funneled over \$100,000 into campaigns in 1996 to statewide officials and legislators that reviewed or regulated rest home laws. Even though he was caught in a timely fashion, the District Attorney could only slap his wrist with a \$6,000 fine and community service.

Senate Bill 1002, introduced by Sen. Wib Gulley (D-Durham) and currently being debated by the General Assembly, would strengthen the enforcement powers available to the State Board of Elections and to District Attorneys. Some legislators are supportive while others fear getting ensnared unfairly for “innocent mistakes.”

can still be filtered to campaigns via the state political parties, under this bill.

Senate Bill 787—Judicial Appointment and Voter Retention (Companion bill to House Bill 989): An act to amend the NC Constitution to provide for gubernatorial appointment of Supreme Court justices and Appellate Court judges with confirmation by the General Assembly and a vote of retention by the people. Introduced by Sen. Fountain Odom. This bill would essentially eliminate popular elections for statewide judicial positions. However, these positions would be up for regular retention votes of the people. If the justice or judge does not receive a majority in this vote, he/she would step down and a replacement would be named.

Though these bills have survived “crossover” there are several hurdles remaining before they become law. The opposite chamber must pass the legislation. If any amendments are made, a conference committee comprised of House and Senate members will attempt to come to a compromise to be reported back to both chamber floors. If both sides pass an identical bill, the Governor’s signature will pass the legislation into law. ★

Money in politics: Time for the Maine event?

By **Steve Ford**

If those recommendations to tighten security at the Legislative Building go through, it will become harder for regular members of the public—not to mention us gadflies of the press—to buzz in and out. I might even have to curtail my lunchtime visits to the basement cafeteria. (A place that good, friendly and cheap is probably too good to be true anyway—at least, for us Joe Schmoes who aren't entitled to the grand perquisites of elective office.)

But when it comes to access to the General Assembly, there are larger issues in play these days than where I'll get my weekly fix of clam chowder. It's more a matter of who has the privilege of parking down there in the oh-so-convenient garage, and then of taking a seat upstairs in the House or Senate chamber.

Let's put a finer point on this. Will members of our legislature and other high officials continue to be elected on the strength of campaigns financed by private contributions, often from people who have a financial stake in decisions those officeholders make? Or will North Carolina decide that when it comes to the financing of campaigns, Maine is as cool as a moose?

Maine last year became the first state to go live with a system of legislative campaigns financed by its taxpayers. A key point - one it shares with the public financing plan for which Durham's Sen. Wib Gulley has been quietly building support hereabouts - is that the system would be optional. But candidates who met certain qualifications (they'd have to raise a certain amount of "seed money") would receive a reasonable sum from the treasury with which to spread their message. They couldn't spend more unless a rival, using money raised privately or perhaps from his or her own pocket, was outspending them.

Last week, as it happens, a delegation of Maine lawmakers showed up in Raleigh to brag on their handiwork. The state's House majority whip, Portland Democrat Bill Norbert, told reporters, "We found that Maine's Clean Elections Act resulted in more candidates, less private money, more competitive races." Candidates, he said, were "thinking about issues and not dialing for dollars." (I lifted those quotes from an article by David Rice of the Winston-Salem Journal.)

Rice gave one of our heavyweights, Sen. David Hoyle of Gaston County, a chance to rain on the reformers' parade, and Hoyle didn't miss a beat. "I'll never vote for that," he was quoted as saying. "I don't think taxpayers want their money used for politicians."

Some don't, that's for sure. Why, if the taxpayers were responsible for financing campaigns, people with the ability and motive to give thousands of bucks on their own would lose some of their hard-won leverage. Bad news for them.

Yet it's by no means clear that financing campaigns a la Maine is the public-opinion dog Hoyle evidently thinks it to be. Just a few days ago, the

non-partisan NC Center for Voter Education, whose board is chaired by former US Sen. Robert Morgan, announced results of a poll that suggest a high level of support for the public financing concept.

If you're the type who thinks polls can be manipulated to show just about anything the sponsors want them to show, I can't say I'm entirely unsympathetic. Still, the methodology used here looks respectable. And the results are attention-grabbing: 60 percent of those surveyed (with an error margin of plus or minus 4 percentage points) said they were either strongly or somewhat in favor of switching to public financing in state campaigns if candidates also agreed to accept spending limits. Only 37 percent were strongly or somewhat opposed (leaving 3 percent undecided).

In light of another finding, that level of support is no surprise. Asked to rate the influence of campaign contributors on decisions made by Tar Heel elected officials, 56 percent of the respondents went with "a great deal," and 35 percent said there was a moderate amount. Of course, it's the rare politician who concedes that his decisions can be influenced in that fashion at all; state Senate President Pro Tem Marc Basnight of Manteo allowed recently that he doesn't even know who gave to his campaign last year, in which he raised a pace-setting \$1.1 million. "I don't know that I've ever looked at that," he told *The N&O's* Lynn Bonner.

But the "clean elections" advocates take a more nuanced view of how contributors' influence plays out. They see big money, often identified with certain industries or professional groups, helping to elect candidates who can be counted upon to be generally sympathetic to their benefactors. At the same time, candidates who don't have access to all that cash tend to be frozen out of the action. The uncontrolled flow of so-called soft money—channeled through the national parties, but meant to assist state candidates—just makes matters worse.

Wib Gulley, the one-time Durham mayor who has carved out a role in the Senate as a champion of election reform, is once again trying to make headway on public financing—which he estimates would cost the state in the range of \$15 million a year. His current bill would phase in the system starting with the elections of 2004 for Council of State offices, 2006 for the legislature, and 2008 for governor and lieutenant governor.

Here's how the bill's purpose is stated: ". . .to ensure the vitality and fairness of democratic elections in North Carolina, to the end that any eligible citizen of this State can realistically choose to seek and run for public office." And, ". . .to protect the constitutional rights of voters and candidates from the detrimental effects of increasingly large amounts of money being raised and spent in North Carolina to influence the outcome of elections." Put it that way, and it's hard to see why it should take missionaries from Maine to convert us.

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Feedback

If you'd like to help, indicate what you would like to do, fill in your name and address, then clip and mail this Feedback panel to the address indicated below. Thanks for your support!

- 1 I would like to assist the Center in raising awareness about our election system by lending my name as a supporter of the Center.
- I would like to assist the Center with a tax deductible gift of \$_____ (enclosed) or in-kind contribution.
- I would like to help promote the Center by hosting or co-hosting an event about our election system in my area.
- I would like to help the Center by volunteering to participate in any studies or research on campaign finance issues.
- I would like to volunteer at the Center or for Center functions.
- I want to help share information about our elections and would be willing to write a letter to my newspaper or my associates.
- I want to be added to the Center's Internet mailing list. (My e-mail address is below.)


2 name _____

address _____

city _____ state _____ zip _____

e-mail _____ phone _____

3 cut along this line

4 mail to:
**North Carolina Center
for Voter Education** 
19 W. Hargett Street, Suite 310
Raleigh, nc 27601

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Raleigh, nc 27601

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