

December 16, 2020

TO: House Committee on Rules  
FR: Charlie Fisher, State Director, Oregon State Public Interest Research Group (OSPIRG)  
RE: Campaign Finance Reform Informational Hearing

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I'm here to encourage you to be ambitious and comprehensive when thinking about campaign finance reform in the upcoming session.

One person, one vote: That's how we're taught elections in our democracy are supposed to work. Candidates should compete to win our votes by revealing their vision, credentials and capabilities. We, the people, then get to decide who should represent us.

The problem is that these days there's another election that we call the money election. In the money election, most people don't have any say at all. Instead, a small number of super-wealthy individuals and corporations decide which candidates will raise enough money to run the kind of high-priced campaign it takes to win. This money election starts long before most voters cast their ballots, and its consequences are felt long after. We recently looked at campaign contribution data from Oregon's 2016 statewide and legislative races and what we found was a stark disparity between large and small donors. For the purposes of the study we defined small donor as someone who gave \$250 or less and we defined large donor as someone who gave \$5,000 or more. In statewide and legislative races, 424 large donors gave a total of nearly \$9 million dollars, or on average, \$21,142 per donor. In contrast, approximately 30,000 small donors gave \$2.4 million. So just a small set of wealthy donors out gave all small donors to candidates by almost 4 to 1.

Because of this disparity, it's no surprise that the vast majority of Oregonians and Americans think that big money is a problem in our politics and it's one that urgently needs to be addressed. A recent national study found that 88% of Americans supported reducing the influence of big campaign donors in elections.<sup>1</sup> Closer to home, Measure 107, amending Oregon's constitution to allow contribution limits, passed with 78% of the vote, and with at least 60% of the vote in every single county in Oregon. And a statewide poll from 2015 found that 75% of Oregonians believe that those without access to networks of wealthy donors face significant barriers to running for office.<sup>2</sup>

With all of this being said, I would again encourage you to look broadly at money in politics reforms. That includes three main categories:

- **Contribution Limits:** Limits should be set low enough that a regular Oregonian would perceive them to be something they might be able to give. Avoiding loopholes that allow big donors and special interests to simply route their giving through other entities is also critical.
- **Public Financing:** People with good ideas and connections to their community should be able to access the resources needed to run a viable campaign without having to rely on big donors and special

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<sup>1</sup> Americans Evaluate Campaign Finance Reform, Voice for the People & University of Maryland, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Big Money in Oregon State Elections, OSPIRG Foundation, 2018.

interests. A small donor matching system similar to the one in Portland as well as many other jurisdictions from around the country is the gold standard.

- **Increased Transparency:** We know that contribution limits will likely push some spending into independent expenditures. Strengthening required disclosures of top donors on political communications is even more important once we've enacted contribution limits so that voters have clear information about who is funding campaigns. This also creates a disincentive towards independent expenditures in the first place because it doesn't allow special interests to hide their money behind vague political action committees.