

March 13, 2019

TO: House Committee on Rules
FR: Charlie Fisher, State Director, Oregon State Public Interest Research Group (OSPIRG)
RE: HJR 13, SJR 13, SJR 18

OSPIRG supports a constitutional referral granting the legislature and voters authority to set campaign contribution limits.

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: Call it 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.ⁱ Closer to home, ballot measures in Portland and Multnomah County to limit campaign contributions passed with more than 85% of the vote. 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.ⁱⁱ In this landscape, you can understand why an individual might become cynical about the political process entirely and you could certainly understand why they would decide not to make a contribution to a candidate at all because they rightly determine it will be a drop in the bucket when compared to big money.

With all of this being said it's important to note that while contribution limits are a critical component in balancing the scales between regular Oregonians and large donors, they are insufficient by themselves. Given the urgency and widespread support for action on this issue, we also urge you to include increased transparency as well as small donor public financing in any comprehensive campaign finance reform package. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

ⁱ Americans Evaluate Campaign Finance Reform, Voice for the People & University of Maryland, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Big Money in Oregon State Elections, OSPIRG Foundation, 2018.