A Brief History of Clean Elections Victories

The idea of publicly financed elections dates back to the early 20th century, when Progressive Era reformers sought to curb the political influence wielded by multimillionaires created during the nineteenth century’s industrial revolution.

It was not until the late 1990s, however, that a successful movement emerged for full public financing of elections. Since then, the movement has continued to grow vigorously. Some form of Clean Money, Clean Elections has passed in eight states—Maine, Vermont, Arizona, Massachusetts, North Carolina, New Mexico, New Jersey, and Connecticut and most recently West Virginia—and two municipalities—Portland, Oregon and Albuquerque, New Mexico. Wisconsin is not far behind. Clean Elections remains law in all these places except Massachusetts:

1996 By a vote of 56% to 44%, Maine voters approve the Clean Election Act, which provides public funding for candidates running for all state offices.

1997 The Vermont legislature approves public financing for candidates running for lieutenant governor and governor. The law does not, however, provide for matching funds for a candidate who is outspent by an opponent who is not participating in the program, and the courts eventually struck down the provision placing caps on all candidates’ spending. This issue is ultimately decided by the Supreme Court.

1998 Arizona voters pass the Arizona Citizens Clean Elections Act, establishing a system of public funding for candidates for statewide and state legislative offices. Massachusetts voters approve, by a 2–1 margin, The Clean Elections Law, which provides public financing for statewide candidates.

2000 Maine and Arizona Clean Elections laws go into effect; in Missouri and Oregon, initiatives to establish Clean Money, Clean Elections are defeated.

2002 The North Carolina General Assembly approves the North Carolina Judicial Campaign Reform Act, which provides full voluntary public financing for candidates for the state Supreme Court and Court of Appeals.

2003 The New Mexico Legislature approves the “Voter Action Act,” which establishes public funding for candidates running for the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission, a five-member elected board that regulates public utilities telecommunications companies, and insurance companies as well as the registration of corporations and compliance with applicable laws. The Massachusetts Legislature repeals the state’s citizen-passed Clean Money, Clean Elections law after the measure is added to the budget in committee—there is no roll call vote on the repeal.

2004 In New Jersey, the state legislature becomes the first in the country to enact full public financing for legislative races in passing the “Fair and Clean Elections Pilot Program.” The pilot program is to be in place in two legislative districts for the November 2005 general election for Assembly. Each major party is to be able to choose from a set of three districts in which it currently holds both Assembly seats, but where unaffiliated voter registration is higher than average. The program is slated to expand in 2007 to include at least four districts, primary contests and candidates for both the Senate and the General Assembly.
2005  In May, the **Portland, Oregon** City Council approves a new system of Voter Owned Elections by a vote of 4–1, making the city the first in the nation in which a legislative body has approved full public financing for its own elections. The ordinance provides full public financing for City Council and mayoral races. In October, **Albuquerque, New Mexico**, voters approve the Open and Ethical Elections Code Referendum by a vote of 69 to 31 percent. The new law provides public funding to qualifying candidates who agree not to accept contributions from individuals or special interests. The program is slated to go into effect in 2007. In December, the **Connecticut** legislature and governor approved legislation establishing full public financing of statewide and legislative races. The legislation also bans contributions from lobbyists and state contractors. The new law went into effect for the 2008 elections.

2007  In February, the **New Jersey** legislature reauthorizes the pilot “Fair and Clean Elections” program for three legislative districts. In November, publicly financed candidates win all nine seats. In March, for the first time, bipartisan bicameral public financing legislation is introduced at the federal level. In the Senate, Assistant Majority Leader Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA) introduce the **Fair Elections Now Act**. In the House, Reps. John Tierney (D-MA), Raul Grijalva (D-AZ) and Todd Platts (R-PA) re-introduce the Clean Money, Clean Elections Act. Also in March, at the urging of Governor Bill Richardson (D-NM), the **New Mexico** legislature passes legislation authorizing full public financing for the state’s judicial races. In August, **North Carolina** Governor Mike Easley signs the Voter Owned Elections Pilot Act into law, creating a public financing system for three offices of the Council of State: Commissioner of Insurance, State Auditor, and Superintendent of Public Instruction. And in October, **Connecticut’s** Citizens’ Election Program gets its first test with a special election to replace a legislator who died while in office. Both Republican and Democratic candidates use the system.

2008  A Clean Elections bill, the California Fair Elections Act (AB583) passes the California Assembly and Senate and is signed by Governor Schwarzenegger. To take effect, however, the law has to be approved by voters in an initiative in June 2010. On June 8, 2010, California voters defeat the measure by 57% to 43%. In Alaska, a Clean Elections ballot initiative fails by 64% to 35%.

2009  In March, the **Fair Elections Now Act** is reintroduced to Congress by lead sponsors Sens. Dick Durbin (D-III.) and Arlen Specter (D-Pa.) and Reps. John Larson (D-Conn.) and Walter Jones (R-N.C.).

Source: Public Campaign (www.publiccampaign.org)

2010  The West Virginia Public Financing Bill for state Supreme Court races goes into effect on June 11, 2010. In Wisconsin, the 100% Clean Money Clean Elections bill is being drafted by sponsors Rep. Mark Pocan and Sen. Fred Risser.

2011  **Why not Texas?**

* In June 2008, U.S. Supreme Court decided the **Davis v. Federal Elections Commission** case. The section of the McCain-Feingold Act known as the “millionaire’s amendment” had attempted to “equalize” campaigns by providing that the legal limit on contributions would increase for a candidate who was substantially outspent by an opponent using personal wealth. The Supreme Court basically found that the law discriminated against candidates spending their own money to advocate their own elections, in violation of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

** In order to comply with **Buckley v. Valeo**, participation by candidates in Clean elections is optional.