



Do “Clean Elections” Reduce Lobbyist and Special Interest Influence?

by Laura Renz & Sean Parnell

Maine and Arizona are currently the only two states that have statewide programs of taxpayer-funded political campaigns for state legislative campaigns, sometimes called “clean election” programs. Seeking to replace voluntary, private contributions from citizens to candidates of their choice, taxpayer-funded political campaigns programs instead provide government grants to candidates who qualify.

Candidates typically must obtain several hundred signatures and small contributions of \$5 or \$10 each from registered voters in the district in which they are running. Other than these small contributions and a limited amount of “seed money” candidates are allowed to raise at the beginning of their campaign, they are prohibited from raising or spending funds outside of their government grant¹.

Proponents of such programs claim that one of the benefits of replacing private contributions with taxpayer dollars is a decrease in the influence and effectiveness of lobbyists and so-called “special interests.”

The Web site of Public Campaign, a leading advocate of taxpayer-funded political campaigns, states on its home page that such programs make “... elections about voters

and not lobbyists and campaign donors.”² Maine Senate President Beth Edmonds states that “When I’m walking the halls of the legislature and I see lobbyists from major corporations or even small organizations, I know that I get to make decisions that think about all the people in my constituencies, all the people in my district and not just specific interest groups.”³

This research examines the reality of these claims by analyzing the number of lobbyist registrations in these states since the adoption of taxpayer-funded political campaigns. If such programs do indeed diminish the influence and effectiveness of lobbyists (thereby reducing their value to those who hire lobbyists), then we would expect to see either a reduction in or a stable number of lobbyist registrations in both states since the implementation of taxpayer-funded political campaigns.

Analysis

The two states with taxpayer-funded political campaigns have had strikingly different experiences with regard to the number of lobbyist registrations. In Maine, the number of registered lobbyists increased, while Arizona saw a decline.

¹ ME. REV. STAT. ANN. Title 21-A, § 1125 available at: <http://janus.state.me.us/legis/statutes/21-a/title21-Ach14.pdf>

² Public Campaign, <http://www.publiccampaign.org/> on January 17, 2008

³ Public Campaign, <http://www.publiccampaign.org/node/39242>, quoted from The Road To Clean Elections video, on January 17, 2008.



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In Maine, the number of registrations over time shows a significant increase in the number of lobbyist registrations after implementation of the Maine Clean Elections Act (MCEA).

In 1991, there were 351 lobbyist registrations in Maine⁴. In 2000, the last legislative session before the MCEA began doling out taxpayer funds to candidates, there were 398 lobbyist registrations⁵.

Between 1991 and 2000, lobbyist registrations grew by 13%, with an average of 359 lobbyist registrations each year⁶.

Since Maine’s program of taxpayer-funded political campaigns began, the number of lobbyist registrations had grown to 477⁷, an increase of 20% since 2000. The average number of registrations each year was 417, an increase of 16% over pre-MCEA registrations⁸.

Arizona’s Clean Election Act went into ef-

4 The yearly totals for registered lobbyists in Maine were obtained from the Maine Ethics Commission, and are available for public inspection if requested.

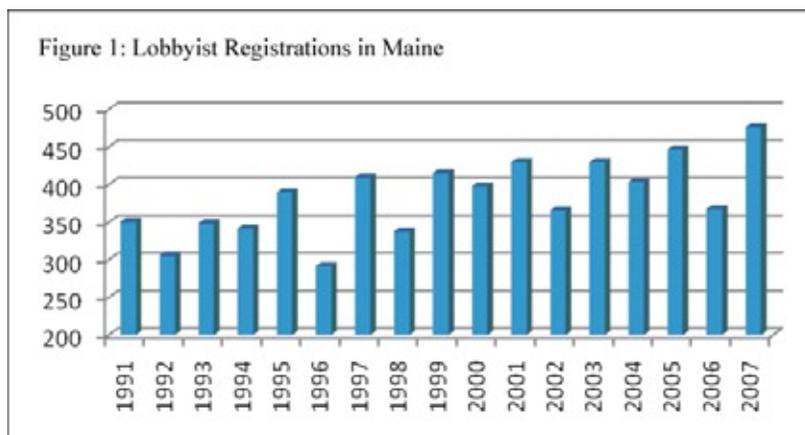
5 See id.

6 See id., based on author’s calculations

7 See id.

8 See id., based on author’s calculations

fect in the 2000 election cycle. Information available on the number of individual lobbyist registrations in Arizona is incomplete, but shows a clear decline in the number of registrations.



In 1995, the number of lobbyist registrations was 752, rising to 898 registrations by 2000⁹. Accurate information was not available for 1997-98, but for the available years

between 1995 and 2000 the average number of registered lobbyists was 864¹⁰.

By 2007, the number of registered lobbyists had declined to 691, a 30% decrease¹¹. The average number of registrations between 2001 and 2007 was 767, representing a drop of approximately 13%¹² from the period before adoption of taxpayer-funded political campaigns.

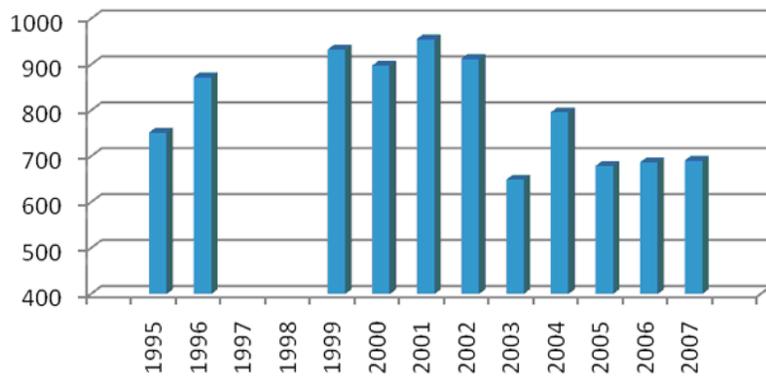
9 Compiled from Arizona Secretary of State Annual Reports, 1995 – 2007, available at http://www.azsos.gov/public_services/annual_report/sos_annual_reports.htm, and The Impact of State Legislative Term Limits on Lobbyists and Interest Groups, presented at the 5th Annual State Politics and Policy Conference on May 5, 2005 by Christopher Mooney, Director of the Illinois Legislative Studies Center at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

10 See id., based on author’s calculations

11 See id., based on author’s calculations

12 See id., based on author’s calculations

Figure 2: Lobbyist Registrations in Arizona



Conclusion

At this point several legislative sessions have passed since Arizona and Maine enacted their system of taxpayer-funded political campaigns. Presumably, if the influence and effectiveness of lobbyists were somehow diminished by these programs, we would by now be able to see some evidence of this.

Because the Arizona and Maine results are so dramatically different, with one state experiencing significant growth in the number of lobbyist registrations while the other saw significant declines, there appears to be no relationship between taxpayer-funded political campaigns and changes in the number of lobbyists.

Using the number of lobbyist registrations as a proxy for the effectiveness and influence of lobbyists and interest groups, the evidence presented here does not support claims that taxpayer-funded political campaigns have reduced the influence and effectiveness of lobbyists and “special interests” in Arizona or Maine.

This reality has apparently not diminished belief in the ability of taxpayer-funded political campaigns to reduce the influence and effectiveness of lobbyists and interests groups.

The Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Elections Practices published a study in 2007 explor-

ing the impact of their system of taxpayer funded political campaigns. Candidates and legislators who have participated in this program consistently reported their reason for doing so as a way to “reduce the influence of lobbyists” and not be “ beholden to anyone.”

These conclusions are doubtful at best when contrasted with the continually rising number of state lobbyists in Maine since the adoption of taxpayer-funded political campaigns in 2000. The increase of state lobbyists in Maine makes it clear that despite implementation of MCEA, there is still an abundance of work for lobbyists within the Maine legislature.

Taxpayer-funded political campaigns have failed to reduce the effectiveness and influence of lobbyists in Arizona or Maine, and elected officials and policymakers seeking to curb their effectiveness and influence should not consider such programs as a remedy.

There is no evidence to suggest taxpayer-funded political campaigns have had any impact on the influence and effectiveness of lobbyists in Arizona or Maine



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