



Legislator Occupations – Change or Status Quo After Clean Elections?

by Laura Renz

ISSUE

One of the main arguments in favor of taxpayer-funded political campaigns, sometimes called “clean elections,” is that they will lead to more diverse legislatures, and that a larger percentage of “average citizens” will be able to serve in state legislatures once the burden of collecting private, voluntary contributions from citizens is removed. Public Citizen, an organization that supports taxpayer-funded political campaigns, argues that “ordinary citizens who want to serve in government don’t have access to money and are locked out of the system.”¹

Advocates point to candidates with “non-traditional” backgrounds running for office as evidence that taxpayer-funded political campaigns are having their intended effect. Barbara Lubin, Executive Director of the Clean Elections Institute in Arizona, stated in 2004 that “Clean Elections is succeeding in one of its primary goals: opening up the political process to a greater diversity of candidates,” and also that “Clean Elections funding makes it possible for ordinary Arizonans to seek public office without going deeply in debt or becoming financially obligated to wealthy special interests.”²

If taxpayer-funded political campaigns do in fact diminish roadblocks for “average”

citizens running for office, we would expect to see changes in legislator occupations in Maine and Arizona, particularly a reduction in the “traditional” legislator backgrounds of law and business. This research examines legislator occupation in Arizona and Maine in an effort to determine whether taxpayer-funded political campaigns have in fact increased the number of legislators with “non-traditional” backgrounds.

ANALYSIS

State legislatures vary greatly in terms of compensation and time commitment, an important consideration in this research. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) designates three categories for state legislatures in terms of full and part time. NCSL places Arizona in the “hybrid” category – that is, elected officials report spending “more than two-thirds of a full time job being legislators,” and also that their compensation is “usually not enough to allow them to make a living without having other sources of income.”³ The annual salary of Arizona legislators in 2007 was \$24,000.⁴

Maine is characterized as a state where “average lawmakers spend the equivalent

1 Public Citizen. “Fair Elections Action Week!” available at http://action.citizen.org/t/5489/content.jsp?content_KEY=4050

2 “Women Make Big Gains at Legislature Through Clean Elections.” 2004. California Clean Money Campaign, available at http://www.caclean.org/problem/azclean_2004-12-13.php

3 “NCSL Backgrounder: Full and Part-Time Legislatures,” published by the National Conference of State Legislatures, available at http://www.ncsl.org/programs/press/2004/backgrounder_fullpart.htm

4 “Legislator Compensation 2007,” published by the National Conference of State Legislatures, available at http://www.ncsl.org/programs/legismgt/about/07_legislatorcomp.htm



Legislators in Arizona from traditional backgrounds increased from 49% to 52% after taxpayer-funded campaigns began

Legislator Occupations in Arizona, 1991 – 2008

Session/ Occupation	40th (91-92)	41st (93-94)	42nd (95-96)	43rd (97-98)	44th (99-00)	45th (01-02)	46th (03-04)	47th (05-06)	48th (07-08)
Agriculture	10%	6%	6%	6%	6%	3%	4%	4%	4%
Business	33%	38%	46%	40%	39%	39%	38%	45%	46%
Education	19%	19%	14%	13%	13%	14%	7%	4%	3%
Government	7%	5%	5%	8%	9%	8%	10%	9%	9%
Health Care	7%	9%	7%	6%	4%	6%	9%	6%	4%
Homemaker	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	1%	0%	1%	1%
Lawyer	8%	11%	11%	12%	9%	6%	9%	12%	11%
NonProfit/Volunteer	3%	4%	5%	7%	10%	11%	9%	8%	10%
Skilled Labor	7%	6%	4%	4%	6%	7%	10%	9%	7%
Other/ Retired	1%	0%	1%	2%	2%	4%	4%	3%	5%

This data was obtained with from the Arizona Capital Times feature “Everyone Who Ever Served in The Arizona Legislature.” 12 October 2007.

of half of a full-time job doing legislative work,” and the pay is “quite low and requires them to have other sources of income in order to make a living.”⁵ In Maine, lawmakers annual salary for 2007 was \$12,713.⁶

In part because most citizens require full-time incomes, and few occupations allow the flexibility needed in order to fulfill the time commitment that elected office requires, a disproportionate number of state legislators have traditionally come from the worlds of law and business.⁷

Both Maine and Arizona first implemented taxpayer-funded political campaigns in the 2000 election cycle. By examining trends in legislator occupations going back to 1991, we can determine whether these programs have had an impact on the diversity of legislator occupations.

Since the implementation of taxpayer-funded campaigns in 2000, Arizona legislatures have seen notable declines in the number

of lawmakers employed in agriculture or education. An average of 6.8% of legislators self-reported their occupation as agriculture before clean elections; that fell to 3.8% after 2000. An average of 15.6% of Arizona legislators were educators before 2000, however that number fell to only 7% after taxpayer-funded campaigns began.

Two fields saw a notable increase over the time frame studied. The rise in nonprofit/volunteer legislators occurred before the 2000 election cycle and has remained steady since then. Retirees saw increases, averaging 1.2% before the 2000 election cycle and 4% since. It should be noted that such small numbers are easily skewed by just a few legislators, and also that legislators self-identified as retired are drawn from the ranks of other occupational groups.

Of the “traditional” legislator occupations, law and business, very little changed. Lawyers averaged 10% of legislators before taxpayer-funded campaigns, and have remained at 10% since. Legislators with business backgrounds rose slightly, averaging 39% before the 2000 election and 42% in the sessions since.

5 See id at note 3.

6 See id at note 4.

7 “The Impact of Ethics Laws on Legislative Recruitment and the Occupational Composition of State Legislatures,” p. 623, published by Political Research Quarterly, Vol. 59 No. 4 by Beth A. Rosenson, University of Florida, 2006, available at <http://prq.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/59/4/619>

Legislator Occupations in Maine, 1991 – 2008

Session/ Occupation	115th (91-92)	116th (93-94)	117th (95-96)	118th (97-98)	119th (99-00)	120th (01-02)	121st (03-04)	122nd (05-06)	123rd (07-08)
Agriculture	2%	3%	-	4%	1%	3%	2%	2%	2%
Business	27%	28%	-	21%	20%	22%	23%	21%	22%
Education	15%	14%	-	19%	19%	19%	19%	23%	22%
Government	10%	7%	-	4%	3%	2%	2%	3%	6%
Health Care	4%	3%	-	4%	9%	9%	9%	10%	7%
Homemaker	2%	2%	-	3%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Lawyer	8%	9%	-	6%	9%	9%	9%	9%	11%
NonProfit/ Volunteer	4%	5%	-	3%	2%	1%	1%	0%	0%
Skilled Labor	11%	9%	-	9%	11%	7%	7%	8%	6%
Retired	17%	20%	-	27%	24%	28%	28%	24%	24%

“Maine House of Representatives: Historical Information,” available at <http://janus.state.me.us/house/history.htm>

Maine has seen modest increases in legislators identifying their occupations as education (+4.0%), health care (+3.8%), and retired persons (+4%) since they adopted taxpayer funding of political campaigns. At the same time, modest declines were seen in legislators from government (-2.7%), non-profit/volunteer (-3%), and skilled laborers (-3%). Changes in all occupations except skilled labor began before the 2000 election.

Homemakers, a small segment of the Maine legislature before taxpayer-funded campaigns, have vanished completely – no legislator since 2000 has identified themselves in this occupation.

The number of legislators coming from “traditional” occupations in Maine remained flat overall at 32%. A slight 2% reduction in the number of legislators with business backgrounds was offset by a 2% increase in legislators from legal occupations.

CONCLUSION

There is no evidence that taxpayer-funded political campaigns in Arizona or Maine have had any impact in the number of legislators from “non-traditional” backgrounds.

Neither state has seen a decline in legislators with “traditional” backgrounds.

Only legislators identified as retired increased in both states. In Maine, retired citizens continue to compose a sizeable number of legislators, so much so that perhaps this should be considered a “traditional” occupation as well. Retirees presumably lack the same job and income constraints of other citizens, perhaps making it easier for them to serve. The only other consistent finding was modest or slight reductions in legislators from agricultural occupations, and the near-complete elimination of the already-small number of homemakers serving in the legislature. In both cases, however, the numbers involved are too small to draw any supportable conclusions.

Maine and Arizona’s systems of taxpayer-funded political campaigns have been marketed to other states as a way to increase opportunities for “non-traditional” candidates to compete and win. To date, there is no reason to believe this claim is accurate, and policymakers considering “clean elections” should view skeptically the claims of anyone suggesting otherwise.

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