



Do Taxpayer-Funded Campaigns Increase Voter Turnout?

By Luke Wachob

Issue

Advocates of taxpayer-funded political campaigns frequently argue that these systems improve government by increasing political participation and voter turnout. Common Cause, an organization that supports taxpayer-funded campaigns, claims that “full public financing can help bring disengaged citizens back into the political process” and “reinvigorates our democracy by helping to reengage voters and increasing voter turnout.”¹ If the claims of Common Cause and like-minded advocates are true, we would expect to find increased voter turnout in the two states that have had taxpayer-funded campaigns for all legislative races since 2000, Arizona and Maine.

Analysis

To study the impact of taxpayer-funded campaigns on citizen participation in politics, we analyze voter turnout rates across all general elections from 1990 through 2012.² In order to capture an equal number of presidential election years before and after Arizona and Maine implemented their tax-funded campaign programs, we also consider turnout data from the 1988 and 1984 presidential elections.³ If taxpayer-funded

campaigns increase voter participation as proponents claim, we would expect to see turnout rates in Arizona and Maine rise after their programs began in 2000. Further, we would expect to see turnout in these states rising much faster than the nationwide turnout rate, because the overwhelming majority of campaigns outside of those in Arizona and Maine are privately funded. We assess these hypotheses by examining Arizona and Maine’s voter turnout rates before and after the implementation of so-called “clean elections” programs in 2000, and compare their experiences with the nationwide turnout rate.

Voter turnout is influenced by many factors, one of the strongest of which is whether or not there is a presidential election. Turnout is always considerably higher in presidential election years, so we analyze ‘presidential election years’ and ‘non-presidential election years’ separately to account for this effect.

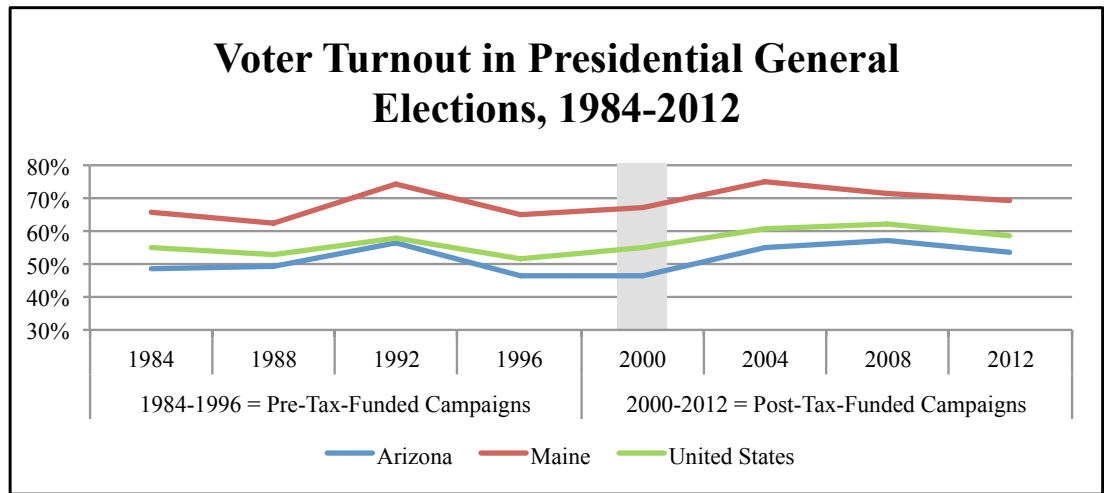
Nationwide, voter turnout has increased since 1984.⁴ Voter turnout in the U.S. averaged

1 “The Benefits of Fair Elections,” Common Cause. Retrieved on August 20, 2013. Available at: <http://www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLTK1MQIwG&b=4773849> (2013).

2 1984-2012 general election voter turnout data from: Michael McDonald, “VEP Total Ballots Counted Turnout Rate” or “VEP Highest Office Turnout Rate,” UnitedStatesElectionProject. Retrieved on September 5, 2013. Available at: <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B0bHdAFS4MgqWmdKdEdWTHRzbUE/edit> (2013).

3 *Ibid.*

4 Voter turnout is commonly measured in several different ways. In order to be as accurate as possible, we measure turnout as the percentage of the voting eligible population that cast ballots in the general election (“VEP Total Ballots Counted Turnout Rate”). The “voting eligible population” statistic accounts for all the citizens who are legally able to vote, meaning it excludes minors, immigrants, and convicted felons. In cases where this data is not available, we use the next best option, which is the percentage of ballots cast for the highest office on the ballot by the voting eligible population, meaning that ballots which leave blank the highest office, typically President, Governor, or a high-ranking legislative office, are excluded (“VEP Highest Office Turnout Rate”). This statistic is more commonly reported than the total number of ballots cast in a general election, and makes an acceptable substitute because



This chart compares national voter turnout rates in presidential elections before the implementation of tax-funded campaigns (1984, 1988, 1992, 1996) and after (2000, 2004, 2008, 2012) in Arizona (blue), Maine (red), and nationally (green).

54.4% in presidential election years from 1984-1996 and 39.6% in non-presidential election years from 1990-1998. By contrast, national turnout averaged 59.2% for presidential election years from 2000-2012 and 41.2% for non-presidential election years from 2002-2010, increases of 4.8 percentage points and 1.6 percentage points, respectively. Whereas nationwide voter turnout increased 4.8 points (an 8.1% increase) in presidential election years from 1984-1996 to 2000-2012, in Arizona it increased only 2.7 points (a 5.1% increase) across the same period, and in Maine it increased only 3.9 points (a 5.4% increase).

While proponents of taxpayer-funded campaigns claim these systems would result in increased turnout, Arizona and Maine actually witnessed turnout rates grow markedly slower than the national rate in presidential election years. As the increase in voter turnout in both states was smaller than the increase in turnout nationally, it cannot be concluded that taxpayer-funded campaigns contributed to the increase.

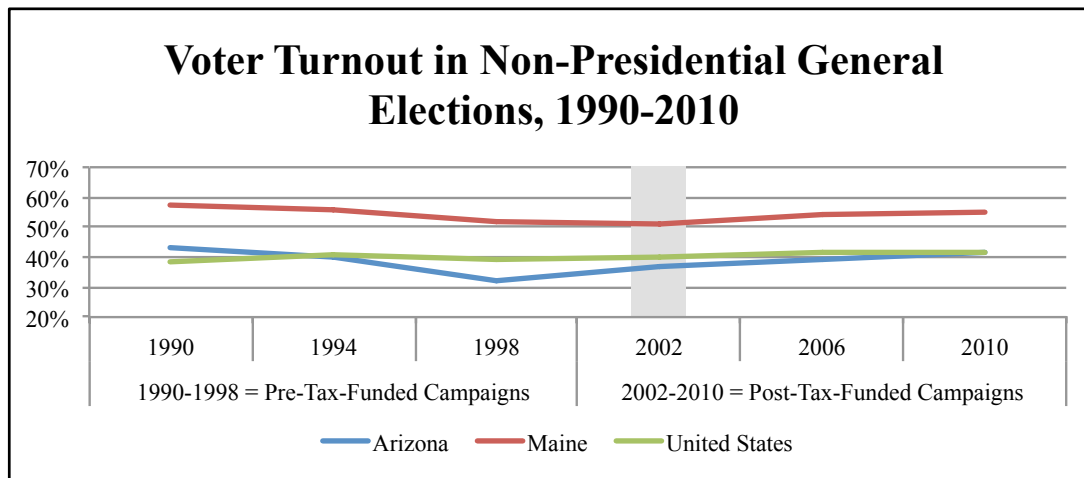
More appropriate data for analyzing the impact of taxpayer-funded campaign programs may be found in non-presidential election years, because the data should provide a better test of the claim. In presidential election years, the major parties deploy turnout strategies in the states that may swing the Electoral College vote, boosting turnout in these targeted states. Since Arizona and Maine generally have not been swing

states, an analysis of only presidential election years might create a bias in the data. Maine does award its Electoral College votes by congressional district, plus two Electoral College votes for the winner of the state, but there were no split electoral votes since Maine adopted this method of awarding its votes.

In these non-presidential year elections, Arizona's voter turnout rate was 38.5% from 1990-1998 and 39.3% from 2002-2010. This means that since implementing taxpayer-funded elections in 2000, Arizona's turnout in non-presidential election years has risen a meager 0.8 points (a 2.1% increase), compared to the 1.6 point increase (3.8%) in turnout that occurred nationally over the same period. In Maine, turnout in non-Presidential years actually decreased under taxpayer-funded campaigns. Maine had 54.9% voter turnout in non-presidential elections from 1990-1998. That has fallen to 53.4% for 2002-2010, a 1.5 point (-2.8%) decrease.

Taken together, the states with taxpayer-funded campaign programs from 2002 to 2010 saw their average voter turnout decline in non-Presidential elections, while states with traditionally funded campaigns from 2002 to 2010 saw their average voter turnout rise in the same elections. The claim that taxpayer-funded campaigns increase turnout is false. In fact, the evidence strongly suggests that taxpayer-funded campaigns have little or no effect as a technique to increase voter turnout and may actually impede efforts to increase turnout.

the vast majority of voters will vote for the highest office on the ballot.



This chart compares voter turnout rates in non-presidential elections before the implementation of tax-funded campaigns (1990, 1994, 1998) and after (2002, 2006, 2010) in Arizona (blue), Maine (red), and nationally (green).

This analysis is not extensive enough to uncover all of the forces that could affect voter turnout rates in these two states, but other research may shine some light on why taxpayer-funded campaigns don't increase turn-

Conclusion

There is no evidence from the experiences of Arizona and Maine to support the claim that taxpayer-funded

campaigns increase voter turnout. Taken together, since implementing taxpayer-funded campaigns, Arizona and Maine have experienced an average decrease in turnout for non-Presidential elections while the national rate has risen. In presidential elections, both Arizona and

Average Voter Turnout			
Presidential Elections	Arizona	Maine	United States
Pre-Tax-Financing: 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996	50.3%	66.9%	54.4%
Post-Tax-Financing: 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012	53.0%	70.8%	59.2%
Change (Percentage Point Increase):	2.7	3.9	4.8
Change (% Increase in Turnout Rate):	5.1%	5.4%	8.1%
Non-Presidential Elections	Arizona	Maine	United States
Pre-Tax-Financing: 1990, 1994, 1998	38.5%	54.9%	39.6%
Post-Tax-Financing: 2002, 2006, 2010	39.3%	53.4%	41.2%
Change (Percentage Point Increase):	0.8	-1.5	1.6
Change (% Increase in Turnout Rate):	2.1%	-2.8%	3.8%

out. For example, studies show that elections with higher levels of political spending are correlated with higher voter turnout,⁵ yet one of the major goals of taxpayer-funded campaign programs is to eliminate, or reduce, the influence of money in politics. Because these programs are designed in part to lower levels of political spending, they may reduce voter turnout as a result. Notably, if this is the case, depressing voter participation and turnout rates is not merely a “bug” of taxpayer-funded campaigns, but a feature.

Maine have experienced a significantly slower rate of increase in voter turnout than the national average since 2000. This suggests that the effect of taxpayer-funded campaigns on turnout may actually be negative. This relationship could be explained by the fact that these programs are intended to reduce the amount of money in politics, and one of the effects of greater political spending is higher voter turnout and citizen participation. Nevertheless, based on the empirical evidence, we can conclude that taxpayer-funded campaigns do not increase voter turnout. Accordingly, policymakers should be highly skeptical of claims that taxpayer-funded campaigns will increase voter turnout and improve civic participation in the democratic process.

5 Robert E. Hogan, “Campaign Spending and Voter Participation in State Legislative Elections,” *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 94:3. Retrieved on September 5, 2013. Available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2012.00897.x/abstract> (August 27, 2012).



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