

The Power of Money

Historic ballot measures confront a broken system.



A common assumption is that Oregon is relatively progressive compared to states such as Alabama and Mississippi. This perception, however, takes a direct hit when the issue comes to big money influence over elections. Our state is now one of only five in the entire country that have no limits whatsoever in regard to campaign spending. On Nov. 7, voters will have the chance to step out from a dark age of unlimited spending by special interests which has polluted the legislative process and stifled the will of its citizens. Two ballot measures – 46 and 47 – will be presenting this historic opportunity.

Oregon has a wonderful heritage related to protecting democracy. In the 1890s, there was a "people's movement" against the influence of big money. In 1902, our state helped pioneer the ballot initiative as a way of bringing government back under the control of "the people." What became known as the "Oregon System" was copied by surrounding states.

Unfortunately, special interests have utilized court rulings granting electoral "rights" to corporations to re-inject their wealth into the political arena. While other states have acted to curb this abuse in Oregon, it has become a perpetual "open season." It is why Enron chose to incorporate here. Corporations spent \$20 million on Oregon Legislature contests in the last two election cycles. The distribution of \$190,000 in Texas, for which former U.S. House Majority Leader Tom DeLay was indicted, would not even draw notice in Oregon. "No limits whatsoever" means what it says. Zero limits. \$50 million could be spent if deemed necessary.

Those who seek societal change stand at a critical crossroads. The restoration of democracy will only be achieved if public interest advocates recognize their common foe and truly unite in a collective effort.

Citizens of Oregon demonstrated strong support for reining in big money when they approved a campaign finance reform ballot measure in 1994 by a 72 percent majority. However, a legal challenge elicited a ruling from the state Supreme Court to invalidate the measure. An excellent slideshow illustrating the sorry decline of democracy in Oregon is available at www.fairelections.net/fe5_files/frame.htm

Now the good news. Measure 46 is a one sentence amendment to the state Constitution enabling campaign finance laws to be legally enacted. Measure 47 is the actual delineation of the contribution limits. Its language is based on a successful initiative passed in Colorado in 2002.

To withstand a legal challenge, Measure 47 must be even-handed in its spending controls. Some union advocates are objecting to such controls, but it is essential that all interests play by the same rules. Unions, as well as public interest groups, will be allowed to form small donor committees (SDCs) which can collect an unlimited number of contributions up to \$50. This places a premium on attracting many supporters rather than allowing a few wealthy individuals to "speak" with a disproportionately loud voice.

The enactment of misguided policies is not a process that occurs in a vacuum. Our entire political system has been tainted. The entrenched power of money will not give up without a battle. "People power" must be fully utilized against "money power." Voters must be warned to recognize the media blitz when it comes and see the big money that is cynically attempting to manipulate their perceptions.

One opposition group is actually targeting progressive groups with inaccurate information in order to sow confusion. A direct, point by point refutation of these distortions is available at www.fairelections.net Also offered on this site (and through the toll-free phone number, 800-939-8011) is the exact language of the two measures and a description of ways to help the campaign.

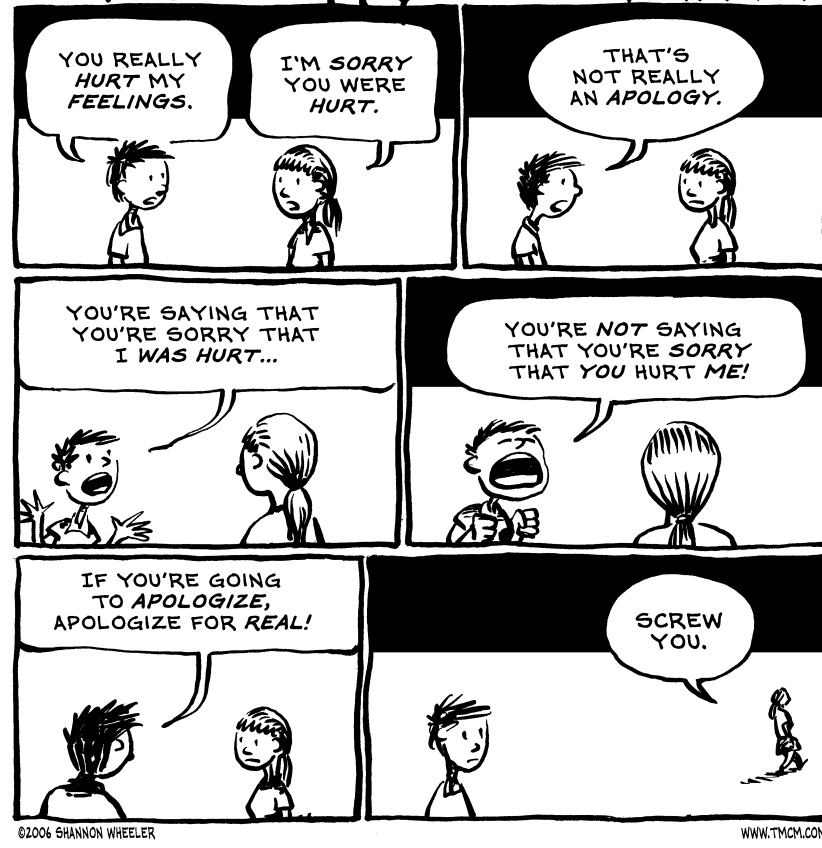
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It is claimed that American soldiers are dying in Iraq "to bring democracy to the Middle East," while right here in our own country that ideal is under direct assault. Voters of Oregon will have an historic chance to address the source in November. This state must not be conceded to the forces of wealth and greed.

Gary "Spruce" Houser has worked on the campaign finance issue for many years. Feedback can be sent to mountainmist8@yahoo.com

How to Be Happy

by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AN ADMIRABLE MAN

Though you printed an outstanding story (7/13) on the late great Eugenean Charles Gray, few Eugeneans have been fortunate enough to appreciate his remarkably humble, giving nature. Giving up a promising career as a university professor to live the life of Eugene's homeless and hungry, as well as life with the desperately poor and brutalized citizens of Central America, Charles caused many of us to admire and aspire to his principles.

I vividly remember when, while walking up a dark Eugene alley around midnight, Charles heard a noise in a Dumpster. When he opened the lid, a dirty-faced, homeless 12-year-old boy who had been sleeping in the Dumpster for a week stuck his head up through the trash. When the boy's mother failed to come home for a week in Oakridge, their landlord evicted them.

After working for years with the desperately poor, sick and brutalized in Central America, Charles returned home where, after years of working with Eugene area homeless and pleading with the City Council, the council agreed to stop fining and jailing the homeless for being homeless. Charles won permission for the homeless to sleep in their vehicles on civic and church parking lots.

Three months ago, Charles was told he had cancer and the cancer had eaten a hole in his pelvis. Declining an offer to take him to Salt Lake City's Huntsman Memorial Medical Center, now one of the world's leading cancer treatment centers, Charles, looking very tired, informed his wife and friends gathered around his bed, "I'll start a dry diet, and I'll be gone in 10 to 12 days."

On the last day I would see him alive, tears filled his eyes when we kissed each other on the cheek. Seeing my questioning look and continuing to think of others, Charles whispered sorrowfully, "El Mazote," remembering the small Salvadoran mountainside village where American-supported Contras murdered the entire population of more than 600 men, women and children.

Jerry Copeland
Florence

POOR TASTE

You've hit a new low with Dan Savage's column (10/5), inappropriately titled "Words of Pure Wisdom." While the f-word is certainly a part of my vocabulary and probably many *EW* readers, the use of the f-word 14 times in his response to a question was uncreative and in poor taste.

Kimberly Howard
Eugene

BRAVE GENERATION

As Congress legalizes the torture and indefinite detainment of suspected terrorists, my heart is breaking. I'm a child of the '60s — the brave generation that believed we would not stand for the kinds of injustices we knew had taken place throughout our history. But here we are, just like the people who couldn't change things while our government allowed slavery, enforced Jim Crow laws or interned Japanese Americans during WWII. I have always thought that if such a flagrant abuse of power happened on our watch, we would fight hard enough to make a difference. Today, we protest, write letters, make phone calls, and yet we have not moved our elected officials to protect the ideals of our Constitution.

We are still a nation run by greedy politicians who trade money for favors, steal from the poor and then preach moral values as if they are the arbiters of right or wrong.

I am writing this letter to remind myself not to give up. The upcoming election is one of the most important in our lives, not just because we have the chance to take back the state Legislature and Congress, but because it's our turn to push through discouragement or apathy and do the right thing.

Do we have the stomach to continue against all odds, like the Abolitionists, the Freedom Riders, the United Farm Workers? Can we stay in the fight even though we don't see the results we demand? Please stay in the fight. Vote!

Carol Horne
Eugene