



Fair Elections: Empowering Voters, Supercharging Small Donors

Sponsored by Congresswoman Barbara Lee (CA-9th), Public Campaign, National Black Caucus of States Institute, and the Fair Elections Now Coalition

While many barriers to higher office are falling during this election cycle, many prospective candidates – at all levels of government – continue to face a daunting one: the ability, or lack thereof, to raise sufficient money to mount a competitive campaign for elected office. This dilemma will be directly addressed in a “brain trust” at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s (CBCF) 38th Annual Legislative Conference, “*Embracing the Promise, Realizing the Vision.*” The “brain trust,” hosted by Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA), Public Campaign, the National Black Caucus of States Institute, and the Fair Elections Now Coalition will feature panelists who are either participating in or working on behalf of cutting edge campaign finance systems around the country.

The CBCF’s annual legislative conference brings together lawmakers, activists, and legislative staffs from across the country to discuss pressing legislative and policy issues of critical concern to the African American community. The Congressional Black Caucus’s role in protecting the rights of all Americans to participate equally in the democratic process is unrivaled. Participating in this conference and engaging these important leaders and activists will only serve to further public education of public financing and strengthen Public Campaign as a leading organization for campaign reform throughout the halls of Congress.

The “Empowering Voters, Supercharging Small Donors” brain trust will be moderated by the Chicago-based William McNary, who has been involved in organizing communities building national coalitions, and engaging citizens in the electoral process for over thirty years. Other panelists will include Assemblyperson Karen Bass, the first Democratic woman ever named as Speaker of the California State Assembly and first African-American woman in the country to lead a state legislative body, the Honorable Wanda G. Bryant of the North Carolina Court of Appeals; Gary Holder-Winfield, candidate for the Connecticut State Assembly; Dolores Huerta, co-founder of the United Farm Workers and president of the Dolores Huerta Foundation, and Hillary Shelton, NAACP Washington Bureau director. These panelists will discuss the need to dramatically overhaul our current campaign finance system for legislative and judicial races as well as their practical experiences in using public financing to run for office.

Brain Trust: Fair Elections: Empowering Voters, Supercharging Small Donors

In the 1964 case *Reynolds v. Sims*, the U.S. Supreme Court established the principle of “one person, one vote” as fundamental to equal representation without regard to race, sex, or economic status. The plaintiffs may not have envisioned the explosive injection of

private money into our public elections and its attendant steady and insidious erosion of this right to equal representation. Citizens may have the right to vote, but the ability to seek elected office is out of reach for most Americans. The cost of campaigning has skyrocketed and only the wealthy, or those with access to wealth, have the ability to mount competitive campaigns. Money has become the entry ticket into the political process, obstructing our ability to craft fair and sound public policy.

The surge of private money in our political process deeply affects African Americans, Latinos, and other disenfranchised citizens. The under representation of these communities in a big money-driven political system excludes most citizens from democratic participation. Because they cannot afford to give maxed out contributions, they are neither sought out by candidates to be major funders nor are they pursued for the intellectual capital they provide. We tell children that they can grow up to be anything they want, even the President of the United States. But in today's political climate, experience and community support take second seat to a candidate's ability to raise campaign money. We need candidates for public office who come from all walks of life and are free of worrying about where their next campaign check is coming from.

Clean Elections and the Fair Elections Now Act

Clean Elections is a common sense solution that refocuses elections on voters and volunteers instead of big money bundlers. Under Clean Elections, candidates qualify for a grant to pay for their campaign by collecting a set number of small contributions—usually \$5—from people in their community. Once qualified, candidates receive funds to run a competitive campaign, agree to adhere to strict spending limits and forgo all private fundraising.

Clean Elections is law in seven states—Arizona, Connecticut, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Maine, and Vermont—and two cities—Albuquerque, New Mexico and Portland, Oregon. Hundreds and hundreds of elected officials have used Clean Elections to run their campaign. In Maine, 84 percent of state based elected officials are occupied by Clean Elections candidates. In Arizona, nine of 11 statewide officials, including Gov. Janet Napolitano (D), were elected using Clean Elections.

Clean Elections is changing the faces of democracy by giving community leaders a chance to run for office. In Maine, for example, Deborah Simpson, a low wage worker, single mom, and grassroots activist used Clean Elections to run for a seat in the state legislature. Her issues of interest are policies that affect children living in poverty. She credits the Clean Elections system as her entry ticket into the political arena.

In Congress, the Fair Elections Now Act would bring Clean Elections-modeled legislation to federal races. Sponsored by Sens. Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Arlen Specter (R-PA), the Fair Elections Now Act would allow candidates for U.S. Senate a chance to qualify for a public grant to pay for their campaign by collecting a set number of small contributions based on the size of a state's population. For example, in California a Senate candidate would need close to 30,000 qualifying contributions to receive a grant

of about \$20 million. Candidates who qualify would also agree to strict spending limits and forgoing all private contributions. If a Fair Elections candidate is outspent by a privately financed opponent, dollar for dollar "Fair Fight Funds" kick in, up to a limit, to maintain a level playing field. Fair Fight Funds are also distributed if a candidate is a target of outside expenditures.

A broad range of groups representing more than 60 million people—including the AFL-CIO, the NAACP, the League of Women Voters, the Dolores Huerta Foundation, the National Council of Churches and others—have announced their support for the Fair Elections Now Act. In addition, the bill is also co-sponsored by Sens. Barbara Boxer, (D-CA), Ben Cardin (D-MD.), Tom Carper (D-DE), Russ Feingold (D-WI), Tom Harkin (D-IA), Ted Kennedy (D-MA), Claire McCaskill (D-MO), and Barack Obama (D-IL.).

This brain trust will bring together Clean Elections experts, elected officials, candidates, community activists and community organizers—all with insight and experience on the merits and benefits of existing public financing of elections systems and prospects for the future.

DATE: Thursday, September 25th, 2008, 4:00 p.m. to 5:50 p.m.

PLACE: The Congressional Black Caucus Foundation's 2008 - 38th Annual Legislative Conference
Room 144-A
The New Washington Convention Center
801 Mount Vernon Place, NW
Washington, DC 20001

Moderator: William McNary, President, USAction, Co-Director, Citizen Action /Illinois

Confirmed Presenters:

- Dolores Huerta, president of the Dolores Huerta Foundation and co-founder of the United Farm Workers Union
- The Honorable Wanda G. Bryant, Judge, North Carolina Court of Appeals
- The Honorable Speaker Karen Bass (California State Assembly-47th District)
- Hilary O. Shelton, Executive Director of the Washington Bureau of the NAACP
- Gary Holder-Winfield, Candidate, Connecticut State Assembly District 94

Invited:

- Donna Brazile, Founder and Managing Director of Brazile and Associates, LLC
- Arlene Holt Baker, Executive Vice-President, AFL-CIO