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'Soul Of A Citizen' Excerpt: Taking Money Out Of Politics: A Grassroots Effort For Clean Elections

Nothing makes us feel more powerless than the corruption of our democracy by money. It undermines progress on every issue we face. If America is ever to deal with our critical problems, we're going to need to sever the links between wealth and politics, a task made more challenging by the recent Supreme Court decision that overturned a hundred years of precedent to increase still further the influence of companies like Exxon, United Health and Goldman Sachs. The Maine Clean Elections model offers a powerful alternative model, one achievable even within the parameters of the ghastly Supreme Court decision. The story of how activist Alison Smith helped it pass also exemplifies how individuals can proceed into social involvement step by step:

While Alison Smith was raising her kids in a rural Connecticut town, a developer arrived one Thanksgiving weekend, when no one was around, and cut a canal to drain the water from a large marsh that adjoined her backyard. "He was slimy and greedy," she says, "doing things on the sly. He filled in the land and built new houses. Gradually it dawned on me that we had wetland regulations, that he'd broken the rules, and that no one was doing anything about it. So I went to a town meeting of a couple hundred people, and waited for someone to say something. Nobody did. So even though I didn't know that much about the issues, I voiced my opinions as best I could, red-faced, hesitant, and embarrassed. And I found that all these other people were thinking the same thing. They'd say it to each other, but not in public. It was really hard for me to speak out, but it was also really neat."

Shortly afterward, a neighbor suggested that she join the League of Women Voters. "I told her I wasn't much of a joiner, but she kept asking me to different meetings and said I could bring my three-year-old daughter." Gradually Alison got involved, working mostly on wetland problems and recycling programs. "I was hesitant at first. I don't have a college degree. I'm more of a behind-the-scenes person. But I've always felt like someone who cares, even if I didn't always know what to do about it."

When Alison moved to Maine, she joined the League's Portland affiliate, focusing on clean-air issues and transportation alternatives. She helped organize a diverse group of stakeholders to pass a new state law on waste-oil recycling. "The more I did, the more confident I became. The more I felt I had something to contribute." By the fall of 1995, when she was asked to collect signatures to get a new campaign reform measure on the ballot, Alison jumped at the chance.

"We've become so used to being disgusted with elections and politicians," she said. "We assume that almost anyone who gets in will be corrupt. But the decisions they make in our name matter hugely, often leaving us with even less power. I didn't know whether the initiative would pass, but I didn't want cynicism to rule my life. I'd like to see politics bring out the best in us, not the worst. I get tired when people complain all the time but never do anything to change things."

Maine's [Clean Elections Act](#) offered candidates for state office an alternative to the degrading and often corrupting process of financing their campaigns. Under its provisions, they could choose a Clean Election Option, pledging not to take private funding or spend their own money (apart from modest initial seed funds), and raising a designated number of five-dollar contributions in their district to demonstrate their grassroots support. In return, they would receive enough public money to mount a full-scale campaign; if privately funded opponents or outside political committees out-spent them, they'd get enough additional money to stay competitive. The initiative also included other reforms, including tightened limits on individual and corporate spending.

In a single day, 1,100 volunteers qualified the measure by staffing tables outside polling stations. "I just sat at a table with a sign saying 'Do you want to take big money out of politics?'" recalls Alison. "Almost everyone who came over responded and signed."

The campaign worked closely with members of an allied research project that publicized in-state contributions from such sources as the tobacco and trucking industries. It was especially effective to invite the press to film a \$100-a-plate event that industry lobbyists held for the chair of the banking and insurance committee in the state legislature. These stories, says Alison, "helped us talk about the issue not only in speculative terms, but in terms of how wealthy interests were buying and selling our government. People felt they didn't have to accept this as the way things always had to be."

As she got more deeply involved, Alison met with newspaper editorial boards and spoke wherever anyone would have her. "I felt nervous when the League asked me to do new things like speak at press conferences. 'Why on earth would they want me to do it,' I asked, 'instead of some expert?' But I also found that as an ordinary person I had more credibility than the political professionals. The more I talked with people, the more I began to understand the issues. When people asked why I was involved, I'd tell them about the cynicism that seems to be destroying the very core of our democracy. I'd repeat over and over how if we could just break the links between money and politics, we'd begin to have a solution."

The initiative passed with 56 percent of the vote, and it changed Maine's politics. One Republican legislator said that before the Act's passage, he always had to listen to his donors first; now he was finally free to vote on his and his constituents' beliefs. By 2008, three quarters of the candidates in the state were participating. It made it easier for the legislature to pass bills like one that sharply dropped the price of prescription drugs. Although the Clean Elections Act couldn't legally affect federal races, its popularity helped persuade Maine's two Republican U.S. senators to buck party leadership and back national campaign finance reform efforts. Citizen efforts have since led to public financing of major state offices in Arizona, Connecticut, and Vermont, as well as public financing of selected offices in New Mexico and North Carolina, and a legislative pilot project in New Jersey. An Arizona state legislator I met had been a high school teacher whose students urged him to run; since he knew no one with money, he said, he wouldn't have even tried in the absence of the clean election system.

Since the Maine initiative's success, Alison has chaired the League's national committee on campaign finance reform and continues to advise other states and national efforts on the value of

the Clean Elections model. The impact she helped make also changed Alison personally. "It gave me a sense that I really can do something just by showing up to further a cause -- this fundamental cause of democracy that affects everything I care about, so my kids won't grow up in a cynical world."

Adapted from the wholly updated new edition of "[Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in Challenging Times](#)" by Paul Rogat Loeb (St Martin's Press, publication date April 5, 2010, \$16.99 paperback). With over 100,000 copies in print, Soul has become a classic guide to involvement in social change. Howard Zinn calls it "wonderful...rich with specific experience." Alice Walker says, "The voices Loeb finds demonstrate that courage can be another name for love." Bill McKibben calls it "a powerful inspiration to citizens acting for environmental sanity."

Loeb also wrote "[The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear](#)," the History Channel and American Book Association's #3 political book of 2004. HuffPo will serialize selected sections of "Soul" every Thursday. Sign up [here](#) to see previous excerpts or be notified of new ones. For more information or to receive Loeb's articles directly, see www.paulloeb.org.

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