



Powerful Ideas, Practical Actions

## Alison Smith: Elections Money Can't Buy

[The YES! Breakthrough 15: How a quiet, stay-at-home mom became a clean-elections champion.](#)

by [Paul Loeb](#)

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HOW TO BREAK THROUGH:

*“I kept showing up because something about the work fed my soul ...  
Everyone can show up for something. And who knows where it will lead?”*

- Alison Smith

When Alison Smith was raising her kids in a small Connecticut town, a developer illegally drained the water from a large marsh adjoining her backyard. “Gradually it dawned on me that he’d broken the wetland regulations. I went to a town meeting and waited for someone to say something. Nobody did. So I voiced my opinions as best I could, red-faced, hesitant, and embarrassed. I found all these other people were thinking the same thing.”

Shortly afterward, Smith joined the League of Women Voters, and began working on wetland and recycling issues, first in Connecticut and then in Maine. She became a more confident

activist with experience, and by the time the League asked her to help get a campaign finance reform measure on the ballot, she jumped at the chance.

“We’ve become so used to being disgusted with elections and politicians,” says Smith. “We assume that almost anyone who gets in will be corrupt. I didn’t know whether the initiative would pass, but I didn’t want cynicism to rule my life.”

Selected by author and activist Paul Loeb: “An ordinary citizen who found her voice, became a leader, and showed us it’s possible to confront the intractable: money in politics.”

The initiative offered a Clean Election Option, where candidates who pledged not to take private funding and who raised enough \$5 contributions could receive public money to mount a competitive campaign. Smith met with newspaper editorial boards and spoke wherever anyone would have her. “I found that as an ordinary person I had more credibility than the political professionals. When people asked why I was involved, 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 changed Maine’s politics. By 2010, 80 percent of the state’s candidates were participating, and Vermont, Arizona, and Connecticut had launched similar programs. Smith now works with a new generation of activists in Maine to defend, preserve, and strengthen Clean Elections.

“One of the great things,” she says, “is that these reforms require citizen participation. For ten years, Maine people have made the system work, supporting Clean Election candidates with qualifying contributions of \$5. Without the pressures of fundraising, candidates put a premium on voter contact. Once elected, lawmakers know that their only debt is to the voters. Although our law has come under attack, Maine people always rise to defend their Clean Election system.

“As former U.S. Senator from Maine, Ed Muskie, once said, ‘Campaign finance reform is not for the short-winded.’”

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Paul Loeb wrote this article for [The YES! Breakthrough 15](#), the Winter 2012 issue of YES! Magazine. Paul is the author of [Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in Challenging Times](#).