

The Midwest Democracy Network and the Public Financing Flap

By: Karen Rainey, LWVOEF Representative to the Midwest Democracy Network

Yes, we are effective!

Senator Barack Obama's responses to a Midwest Democracy Network (MDN) voters' guide question on campaign financing led to a pointed exchange between moderator Tim Russert and Sen. Obama during last Tuesday's Democratic presidential candidate debate. LWVO is a member of MDN.

MDN has been mentioned in more than a thousand articles and numerous editorials for its questionnaire sent to presidential candidates last fall. In reference to presidential public financing, the candidates were asked, "If you are nominated for President in 2008 and your major opponents agree to forgo private funding in the general election campaign, will you participate in the presidential public financing system?" Of the five candidates remaining at press time, only Sen. Obama had replied. (The others were solicited one more time, but did not respond.)

In his response, Sen. Obama stated that he was a long-time advocate for public financing of campaigns with free television and radio time as a way to reduce the influence of moneyed special interests, and if he is the Democratic nominee, he will aggressively pursue an agreement with the Republican nominee to preserve a publicly financed general election. (You can read the entire questionnaire on the MDN web site, www.midwestdemocracynetwork.org.)

The questionnaire became controversial in that the Obama campaign now denies making a formal promise to give up the opportunity to raise private money. Obama has attached several conditions to his pledge that must be met before he would accept public financing.

MDN is an alliance of more than twenty political reform advocates committed to improving democratic institutions in Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. The state Leagues in each of these states are a part of this alliance. All of the reform-minded groups are either advocacy organizations, national research and policy institutions, or single-issue groups involved in promoting and protecting our core democratic values. The MDN agenda parallels our five imPACT political reform issues and our national League's action priorities. Our participation in MDN allows us to speak in concert to bring greater attention to these issues.

A year ago, Sen. John McCain, now the Republican front-runner, had agreed to accept public funding during the general election campaign if the Democratic nominee agreed to do the same. This year, Sen. McCain has been sparring with the Federal Election Commission to opt out of the public financing system for the primary election. Although he has qualified for the financing, he has not yet accepted any money. If he is not released from the rules, he will be limited to spending about \$5 million between now and the Republican convention. The issue hasn't been resolved because the FEC doesn't have a quorum-nominations for commissioners are being held up in the Senate. As Sen. McCain did not respond to either the first or second questionnaire, it is not clear whether he would still accept public funding for the general election campaign.

LWVUS President Mary Wilson wrote in the October 2007 National Voter, ... "the League of Women Voters calls upon every declared presidential candidate to pledge to keep the corrupting influence of big money out of campaigns for President of the United States." She also noted that although it's not an excuse for candidates to refuse to participate, the changes brought by inflation and the "grotesquely long" campaign season have undermined the system.

Legislation currently before Congress would update the system and make it more palatable to candidates. HR 4294 would eliminate state-by-state spending limits and raise the overall limits for the primary and general elections, and provide funds to primary candidates earlier in the process. Since the bill has LWVUS endorsement, Leaguers are encouraged to lobby their representatives to support it.

Another MDN project, the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project, will focus on political television advertising in the five member states. An estimated \$1 billion is expected to be spent in 2008, including national cable. Analysis will include the Columbus, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Toledo and Dayton markets, and possibly Youngstown. Reports will allow voters to see who is spending money to influence election outcomes and what they are saying, and help policy-makers to determine what regulatory measures may

be needed.

We know that escalating campaign costs discourage incumbents from running for reelection and deter potential candidates who fear the burden of fundraising. We need to make the corrections that will make public financing workable for the candidates and for the health of our democracy.

Stretch Your LWVOEF Power Pledge on PowerPhilanthropy Match Day \$75,000 in matching charitable funds available

For one day only, The Columbus Foundation -- central Ohio's charitable community foundation -- will match your Power Pledge donation to LWVOEF. The Columbus Foundation has introduced a whole new way to improve the effectiveness of your charitable giving-PowerPhilanthropy. To encourage you to experience PowerPhilanthropy, the Foundation has put together a special promotion called Match Day.

To participate, visit www.columbusfoundation.org, click on Match Day and register for PowerPhilanthropy (you need only provide your e-mail address to sign in). On Match Day, March 6, beginning at 3:00 p.m., log in to make an online credit card gift to LWVOEF. The Columbus Foundation will make a matching donation of 50 cents on the dollar to LWVOEF until its \$75,000 matching charitable fund has been depleted. The minimum contribution is \$20 and the Foundation will match a maximum of \$1,000 per individual. (If you have a fund at the Foundation, the match is dollar for dollar.)

Matching Columbus Foundation funds will qualify for Power Pledge rebates to local Leagues, so it is worthwhile for League leaders to recommend Match Day to your members.

To learn more about Match Day and PowerPhilanthropy, visit The Columbus Foundation online at www.columbusfoundation.org.

With PowerPhilanthropy Match Day, and the generosity of so many individuals in the central Ohio community, we're about to be reminded just how powerful philanthropy can be.



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