Not since the Watergate scandal has North Carolina made so many changes to “clean up” its political system. Scandal again pushed the 2006 state legislature to adopt ethics, lobbying and campaign finance reforms. Many lawmakers did not like the reforms, but they felt compelled to respond to public pressure following months of news about illegal lobbying tied to passage of the state lottery and a multi-faceted Board of Elections inquiry spurred by a Democracy North Carolina complaint.

The united power of reformers (box) led to landmark success, but more needs to be done:

✓ The state’s first Ethics Commission will oversee ethics education and conflict-of-interest problems in all three branches of government, but its hearings should be open and it needs more authority.

✓ Restrictions on lobbyists supplying free meals, trips and gifts promise real change, but the law’s wording has some loopholes that need plugging.

✓ The new ban on lobbyists making campaign donations to state candidates does not address the larger issue of special interests supplying millions through PACs, etc. And the total ban will likely be challenged as unconstitutional. A better approach would be to offer a public financing alternative; yet, sadly, a pilot for 4 legislative races didn’t get enough support in 2006.

The continuing state and federal investigation into money-in-politics corruption should set the stage for a new push in 2007 to refine the gains of 2006 and expand the public financing program.

Support This Work
See Coupon Inside
From Blank Checks to Instant Runoff

In addition to the big ethics and lobbying reform bill (p. 1), a host of new laws passed this year. Here are the major ones:

CAMPAIGN FINANCING

- Use of campaign funds. For the first time, NC law specifies that campaign funds can only be used for costs related to campaigning or holding office, not for personal benefits.
- No blank checks. New wording clarifies that donors can’t give checks with blank payee lines (creating a slush fund) but must specify who it’s for.
- Cash donations. The limit on cash donations is now $50 per election and the treasurer must have a record of who gave all money. (No passing the hat.) Treasurers must attend training classes by the State Board of Elections.

OTHER LEGISLATION

- Instant Runoff Voting. In 2007, 10 cities can save money by letting voters rank their choices in a city election 1-2-3. If no candidate wins outright, the top 2 go into a “virtual” runoff; the votes of those choosing a loser go to whichever remaining candidate they ranked highest. In 2008, up to 10 counties can use IRV rather than pay for runoffs. Then the Board of Elections (which oversees this pilot) will submit an analysis to the legislature. If it works, let’s use IRV statewide!
- Judicial Public Financing. Several changes improve this program for appeals court judges and can help undercut the current legal challenge by opponents.
- Funds for Board of Elections. Despite fears about reprisal for its investigation of Speaker Jim Black, the Elections Board actually got more money: Six new staff positions are being added to the Campaign Finance Division, the first real change in years. So it pays to do a job well — with public backing!
- 527 Committees. Two new laws beef up the restrictions on “issue ads” being paid for by business or union funds near an election and require more disclosure of the ads’ funders. Expect challenges in court to both.

Campaign Donors for Campaign Reform

Cy King of Raleigh has been active in politics for many years. He lets his representatives know his views on a wide range of issues, and organizes his fellow voters to do the same.

Here’s Cy’s latest tactic: Send a message that grabs the politician in the pocketbook! This spring, we were pleased to receive a copy of a letter Cy sent his Congressman, along with a donation to Democracy North Carolina. The letter explained that half of Cy’s usual contribution to the candidate was being given to us, in the Congressman’s honor, to emphasize the importance of comprehensive public financing.

He’s sending similar letters and checks to other groups.

It’s brilliant, Cy! Kudos and thank you!

Talent Abounds at Democracy-NC

Our founding board chair, Peg Chapin, is succeeded this year by Dr. Reginald Watson, English professor at East Carolina, alum of NC Central, youth mentor, human rights leader, and more.

On the staff, Elizabeth Waugh-Stewart recently left to become a new mother, and the new deputy director is Jeanne L. Allen, who left the state after college at UNC. She returns with years of experience in adult education, administration and strategic planning.

Jeremy Collins left to become the new head of the coalition for a moratorium on NC’s death penalty. Our new organizer is Kristi Henderson of Warren County. She has degrees from Howard University & the London School of Economics, and media and political campaign experience. She’ll focus outreach on the eastern part of NC.

Cy King Sr.

Yes, I’ll be a supporter - a Democracy Advocate - for Democracy North Carolina’s voter education and advocacy work.

Mail to Democracy-NC, 105 West Main St., Carrboro, NC 27510. Or contribute online at www.democracy-nc.org

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