

NEWS RELEASE

Contact: Amy Bunch (301) 593-2870
Ann Brown (301) 951-8018
Date: April 25, 2001
For Release: Immediate

NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERS AND CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORMERS CONVENE IN BOSTON FOR FIRST-EVER SUMMIT

35 Years After the Supreme Court Banned the Poll Tax, Leaders Meet to Tackle Campaign Finance as Newest Voting Rights Barrier

(Boston, MA) – National civil rights and campaign reform leaders from across the country came together today, for the first time, to initiate a national dialogue on reframing campaign finance as a civil rights issue. Organizers of the meeting argue that the current campaign finance system restricts civic and political participation based on socioeconomic status, and therefore results in a disparate impact on low-income communities and communities of color.

“Thirty-five years ago last month, the United States Supreme Court struck down the poll tax, a barrier which had existed for decades,” says John Bonifaz, director of the National Voting Rights Institute. “Thirty-five years later, we must now connect that history to today’s struggle to eradicate the newest wealth barrier to the right to vote: the campaign finance system.”

The meeting entitled “Campaign Finance and The Equality Promise: Building a Multiracial Movement for Reform,” was chaired by civil rights veteran Prof. Roger Wilkins and took place at Brandeis University.

“Campaign finance is a basic civil rights issue of our time,” says Stephanie Wilson, director of the Fannie Lou Hamer Project, a national grassroots organization linking campaign reform to earlier civil rights struggles. “Today’s campaign finance system corrupts our electoral process. But it also undermines this nation’s guarantee of political equality for all.”

According to a Public Campaign study, American communities that contribute the most money to political campaigns are overwhelmingly wealthy and white, with less than half as many people of color as the average community. In the 1996 election cycle, 95 percent of those who contributed \$200 or more to Congressional candidates were white and 81 percent had annual family incomes higher than \$100,000.

“Most American families are struggling to get by on less than \$50,000 a year, and the typical African-American household earns slightly more than half in income as what is earned in white households,” added Wilson. “In our current system, where money talks, the concerns of people of color and low-income families are not being heard or addressed.”

(more)

Organizers of today's meeting also argue that since people of color have less income and wealth than whites, the high cost of running a successful campaign disproportionately hurts their chances of competing effectively for public office.

"Lack of personal wealth should not prohibit people from participating fully in our political process," says Mark Roosevelt, director of the Gordon Public Policy Center at Brandeis. "We hope that this meeting will mark a new era for the campaign finance reform movement."

At a public event following the conference, the meeting sponsors honored the NAACP for its century-old commitment to the struggle for democracy. The NAACP has played an active role in recent campaign finance reform efforts, serving as the lead plaintiff in lawsuits throughout the country challenging the campaign finance system as unconstitutional. In addition, several NAACP state chapters have already adopted campaign finance resolutions that support full public financing of elections; a resolution that will soon be placed before the national organization.

Nelson Rivers III, the National Director of Branch and Field Services for the NAACP, received the award on behalf of the organization. Other speakers included Professor Wilkins; Ms. Wilson; and Victoria Gray Adams, one of the original founders, with Fannie Lou Hamer, of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which challenged the seating of Mississippi's all-white delegation at the Democratic National Convention in 1964. In 1965, Ms. Adams, Ms. Hamer, and another civil rights worker, Annie Devine, became the first African-American women in history to be seated on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives.

The meeting was co-hosted by the Gordon Public Policy Center at Brandeis University, the Fannie Lou Hamer Project, and the National Voting Rights Institute, a national legal center which has pioneered a series of constitutional challenges to the campaign finance system on voting rights grounds.

A list of the meeting participants is attached to this release.

(###)