

**Title: Return power of the vote where it belongs: With voters**

**By: Marc J. Lane**

**Copyright: Crain's Chicago Business**

**Date: March 3, 2015**



Nearly 80 percent of Chicago's voters supported a citywide advisory referendum on the Feb. 24 ballot that would reduce the influence of special-interest money in city—and state—elections by financing campaigns using small contributions from individuals and a limited amount of public money.

It's been widely reported that the issue and two others, none of them controversial, were put to the voters only to **block** a politically charged, 50-ward referendum on whether members of the Chicago Board of Education should be elected rather than appointed as they are now. State law limits the number of ballot propositions that can be posed across the city to three.

The campaign finance question appears to have been drafted to go nowhere. Short on specifics, it dodged the uncomfortable reality that small contributions and limited public investment wouldn't be enough to fund the city's campaigns.

Still, the voters have spoken: They want their government back, and policymakers are obliged to return it to them.

### **OUT-OF-TOWN MONEY**

Contributions of \$1,000 or more accounted for 86 percent of the money raised by this year's five mayoral hopefuls, the largest checks coming from out-of-towners who have no right to sway our elections. The influence of wealthy contributors, corporate lobbyists and peddlers of special interests inevitably denies the electorate the promise of democracy.

But when campaigns rely on small contributions, voters who had been marginalized gain the political power they deserve and the public's faith in the election process is restored. Those are urgent objectives: Voter turnout in Chicago's election was a stunningly low 34 percent, down from 42.5 percent four years ago.

In New York's 2013 primary, 149 candidates—92 percent of candidates on the ballot—rejected corporate and PAC contributions to qualify for \$6 in public funds for every dollar they received, but

only on contributions of \$175 or less. Many other cities also are successfully boosting the impact of small contributions by matching them with public dollars. So should Chicago.

The Illinois Campaign for Political Reform estimates that campaign finance reform in Chicago could cost up to \$10 million each election cycle, a sum that Common Cause suggests might be funded by a voluntary checkoff on tax forms. But the value of democracy is greater than its cost, especially if leadership in city government inspires state policymakers to follow suit.

Both Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Cook County Commissioner Jesus “Chuy” Garcia have voiced support for the ballot question. Let's urge each of them to embrace the spirit of the referendum and vow that if he wins the April 7 runoff election, he'll lead the City Council to rein in big money in Chicago's mayoral and aldermanic politics.



*Marc J. Lane is a Chicago-based business and tax attorney and financial adviser.*

*Reprinted from Marc Lane's March 3, 2015 editorial which appeared in Crain's Chicago Business. Crain Communication Inc.'s permission is gratefully acknowledged. Copyright © 2015 by Crain's Communications Inc. Read more:*

*<http://www.chicagobusiness.com/article/20150303/OPINION/150309927/return-power-of-the-vote-where-it-belongs-with-voters>*