



graphic: Matt Wuerker

## Corporate Cash Trumps Local Democracy

### The lessons of Humboldt County's Measure T

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Nature was generous to Northern California, especially Humboldt County: the rugged coastline where the Coho salmon and other sea life flourished; vast forests of firs, and giant redwoods; and a temperate climate with plentiful water. Unfortunately, this created the ideal breeding ground for corporate greed. Over a century of clear-cut logging, polluting paper mills, over-fishing and corporate political lock-down left Humboldt County ravaged and broke. Attempts by citizens to repair the damage to the environment and the local government were continually blocked by overwhelming amounts of corporate money thrown against their causes. In recent years, a series of particularly glaring examples of corporations controlling the political outcomes prompted the local Democratic and Green parties, organized labor and peace, justice and environmental groups to come together to craft a defense against further corruption of the democratic process.

In spite of the corporate money used trying to defeat Measure T, it passed in 2006 by 55% of the vote. The measure barred non-local corporate money from the Humboldt County elections. The citizen's coalition realized that this would clash with the legal fiction of corporate personhood, especially the ludicrous Supreme Court rulings holding that corporations have the First Amendment right to Freedom of Speech, and that money is equivalent to speech. To address this problem, Measure T also removed corporate constitutional rights within the county. By doing so, the citizens were intentionally and strategically inviting a court challenge. They were prepared to defend their right to local democracy.

What happened next was a great disappointment. The Measure had been in effect for two years and seemed to be working: corporate money was absent from the Humboldt County elections for the first time. Then the Pacific Legal Foundation—a right-wing law firm funded by oil and tobacco corporations—sued the county on behalf of corporations' supposed rights to personhood and to finan-

cial participation in the democratic process. As the citizens began to discuss the possible options for defense of Measure T, they were blind-sided by their County Board of Supervisors. These elected officials backed down in the face of a threatened lawsuit and repealed the measure that the people had passed just two years before.

"We were deeply disappointed," said Kaitlin Sopoci-Belknap, who serves as Executive Director of Democracy Unlimited of Humboldt County. "The citizen's initiative is the most direct expression of the people's will, and the settlement underscored how powerful corporations do not merely exercise power—they are ruling us."

But neither Democracy Unlimited nor the citizens of Humboldt gave up. They made the issues of corporate power and corporate personhood key issues during the most recent election cycle. Over one-half of all candidates for local office pledged to follow Measure T. Many candidates publicly declined contributions from companies that attempted to make political contributions to their campaigns. Over one-third of all candidates publicly pledged to oppose the doctrine of Corporate Personhood and to uphold the rights of citizens over those of corporations during their time in office. The majority of candidates taking the pledge were elected!

The lesson: it will take a dedicated group of agitated and organized citizens to build a movement powerful enough to make the promise of democracy a reality. Voters can still control the outcome of their elections by supporting candidates who refuse corporate money. The next step is to run candidates who share our core principles and values and will fight to protect our democracy from the power of corporate money.

*For more information visit: <http://www.DUHC.org>  
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