

TexPIRG

Standing Up
To Powerful Interests

Texas Public Interest Research Group
Citizen Agenda: An Update For Members Of TexPIRG

FALL 2008 • Vol. 6, No. 2

Find links to resources and actions at www.texpirg.org/newsletters

Consumer Protection

Victory! Product Safety Bill Now Law

The Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act, signed into law on Aug. 14, is the largest overhaul in the history of the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), which was established in 1973. It will help make products around the country safer—far less likely to trigger the massive recalls we saw a year ago and, more importantly, far less likely to cause harm to children.

The concentrated, last-minute efforts of TexPIRG members, consumers and public interest and scientific groups helped push the measure over the top. In the days leading up to the final vote, more than 7,000 PIRG members sent letters, signed petitions or made phone calls in support. Despite heavy resistance from powerful interests including ExxonMobil, the National Association of Manufacturers and the American Chemistry Council, we were able to secure this important victory.

Heading Off The Recalls

To address the slew of dangerous products that have recently slipped through the cracks, the comprehensive bill will ban lead and six kinds of phthalates (a class of toxic chemicals) in children's products, and require third-party testing and certification for products going to children age 12 or under.

The bill will also provide much-needed resources for the safety commission, allowing it to remove hazardous products more quickly, hand out fines and penalties to

those violating product safety laws, and create a public database so that consumers and the media can learn about potentially hazardous products.

"Protecting our children from dangerous products is always a good idea, but now it's the law," said Consumer Program Director Ed Mierzewski. "We look forward to working with a stronger CPSC with more tools at its disposal." ■

Law And Policy

TexPIRG Releases Congressional Scorecard

This summer, TexPIRG released our annual legislative scorecard, which ranks our senators and representatives in Washington based on how they voted on important public interest issues in 2008.

In 2008, legislators had a chance to vote on a variety of critical public interest issues, including measures to promote energy efficiency, challenge political corruption, protect consumers from unsafe products and many others.

Nationwide, the voting record of 161 representatives and 24 senators, including Reps. Lloyd Doggett



KIDS PROTECTED—Nancy Pelosi signs the TexPIRG-supported product safety bill and sends it to the president. Now that the bill is law, lead is banned from all children's products.

Member Resource

PRODUCT SAFETY
Read more about the victory. Go to our Web site, www.texpirg.org.

(Austin), Al Green (Houston) and Solomon Ortiz (Brownsville) scored a perfect 100 percent.

Fifteen Texas representatives, including Lamar Smith (San Antonio) and Jeb Hensarling (Dallas) received a 0 percent—meaning the member voted with the public interest in none of the votes that we scored this year. A missed vote counted as a vote against the public interest in our scorecards.

TexPIRG distributed scorecards to thousands of households across the state during our summer door-to-door citizen outreach efforts. ■

Outsourcing Accountability

A Victory To Rein In Federal Contractors

After media reports confirmed that Kellogg, Brown and Root and several other government contractors had set up sham companies in tax havens like the Cayman Islands



Ed Mierzwinski

CLOSING THE LOOPHOLE—TexPIRG's Ed Mierzwinski was part of a team of advocates that helped pass a law to crack down on private contractors such as KBR, which had avoided paying taxes up until now.

Member Resource

HIGHER EDUCATION
Read "Cutting Interest Rates," our report on the effects of new legislation on student loan rates. [Download the report at www.texpirg.org/report](#).



to avoid paying millions in taxes, TexPIRG took action. And, this spring, we scored a major victory for the public, by making sure tax-dodging private contractors are held accountable. The HEART Act rewards members of the military for their service and pays for it by stopping tax gimmicks from some of the government's largest private contractors.

With our national federation, U.S. PIRG, we organized a coalition of consumer, labor, church and taxpayer groups to urge Congress to close the loophole that allowed private contractors to avoid paying their taxes. Leadership in both chambers responded, and a bill closing the loophole was unanimously approved by both the House and Senate, and was signed by President Bush.

"Americans are working hard and paying their fair share, and we expect contractors that receive billions from the federal government will do the same," said TexPIRG Staff Attorney John Krieger. ■

Higher Education

Lower Interest Rates For Students This Fall

According to a new report by TexPIRG, new first-year college students can expect to save more than \$2,500 on their student loans under new interest rate changes that took effect this summer.

The report, "Cutting Interest Rates, Lowering Student Debt Updated," finds that, on average, a four-year college student starting in 2008 with subsidized Stafford loans will save about \$2,570 over the life of his or her loans. Our research showed that 37 percent of public four-year college graduates and 55 percent of private four-year college graduates have so much debt that they cannot consider careers in social work.

The changes are the result of the College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007, which TexPIRG helped to pass last summer.

"With more students taking out larger loans to pay for college, the interest rate reductions that went into effect this summer will save new low- and middle-income borrowers several thousand dollars over the life of their loans," said Luke Swarthout, our federal higher education advocate. ■

Government Transparency

A New Way To Hold Our Government Accountable

In an age of instant information,

when people can check online for up-to-date information on everything from local sports to credit reports, there still isn't an easy way to track down information about government spending.

TexPIRG lauded passage of the Obama-Coburn Federal Funding Transparency and Accountability Act, which created a searchable database of all federal awards to contractors.

Citizens, journalists and watchdog groups can find up-to-date information by entering search terms such as "Halliburton" or "Blackwater," or browse the contracts and tax breaks given by particular agencies.

Now we're backing efforts to increase the transparency of state government. In December, nine state PIRGs held media events to showcase techniques that states are using to share information on spending, contracting and subsidies with the public.

Our hope is that the increased transparency will result in more feedback from the public when it comes to how tax dollars are spent—and less waste and influence peddling.

In Wisconsin, our sister organization WISPIRG's advocate, Bruce Speight, was invited to the bill signing with Gov. James Doyle after his testimony helped push through legislation for a statewide online database. And support from Maryland PIRG helped bring victory for a similar accountability system in Maryland. ■

An advertisement for Green Century Funds. It features a green and white color scheme. At the top, there is a logo with three stylized leaves and the text "GREEN CENTURY FUNDS". Below the logo, the text reads: "AN INVESTMENT FOR YOUR FUTURE", "TO LEARN ABOUT GREEN CENTURY'S FAMILY OF ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE MUTUAL FUNDS", and "CALL 800-93-GREEN OR VISIT WWW.GREENCENTURY.COM". At the bottom, there is a smaller line of text: "Before investing, carefully consider the Funds' investment objectives, risks, charges and expenses. Contact Green Century for a prospectus that contains this and other information. Please read it carefully before investing. Distributed by UMB Distribution Services, LLC 11/07".

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Engaging Young Voters: 650,000 Voters Registered

On more than 100 campuses around the country, New Voters Project organizers are working to train thousands of students to help turn out hundreds of thousands of young, first-time voters to polls on Election Day.

The effort underway represents the largest effort undertaken by the Student PIRGs' New Voters Project

Boosting Participation

"The more people that vote, the better," said New Voters Project's Sujatha Jahagirdar. "Until recently, young voters had some of the worst turnout of any demographic. And since we know that voting is a habit most learn young, we need to turn that around if we want a strong democracy."

The New Voters Project peer recruitment model has been perfected over the last several elections. It relies on training student volunteers to recruit their friends to register and commit to voting.

A University of Michigan study found that those who received a reminder in a text message one day before an election were 4.2 percent more likely to vote. That's why leading up to Election Day, New Voters Project organizers and volunteers will help send hundreds of thousands of text messages, to remind their peers to hit the polls.

Youth Vote Surges

When the Student PIRGs' New Voters Project began in late 2003, our goal was to invigorate democracy with the voices of young people—who have been traditionally infrequent voters—and to get prominent politicians to address the concerns facing the next generation.

Until recently, the numbers of college-age Americans who registered and voted were declining with each new election. In 2004, however, young voters bucked

the trend, catching many political observers by surprise.

In 2006, the trend continued, even in a mid-term election. According to Youth Voter Strategies, "Turnout in the 2006 election more than doubled in the 36 precincts where groups like the New Voters Project actively turned out this age cohort."

In that election, New Voters Project organizers turned out more than 75,000 students to vote and ran operations on 80 campuses.

Over the years, the New Voters Project has helped to register an estimated 650,000 18- to 24-year-



YOUNG VOTERS GET ACTIVE—New Voters Project organizers have reached out to more than 650,000 young voters in the past three election cycles.

old voters, bringing new energy to the political process.

That work has helped broaden the debate to include issues like making higher education more affordable, addressing global warming, as well as providing better access to health care. ■

From The Staff



Dear TexPIRG member,

Imagine my surprise on hearing that a veritable army of ExxonMobil lobbyists were lining up for a Senate hearing on a product safety bill. What does ExxonMobil have to do with safe toys?

I wasn't alone. The Washington Post even quipped that our lead consumer advocate Ed Mierzwinski's "jaw [went] slack."

Apparently, ExxonMobil makes a good deal of money selling highly toxic chemicals called phthalates, which are used in children's toys. We think that's wrong and we called on Congress to ban the practice. So ExxonMobil sent over their lobbyists to block the reform so they could continue to sell us, without our knowledge, children's products laced with chemicals linked to reproductive disorders.

They succeeded in slowing down the ban by stirring up controversy about every last part of the bill. They might have killed the bill, too, if thousands of you hadn't called and e-mailed your representatives and told them to ignore the pressure and do the right thing—which I know made a big difference.

I can assure you that no matter who this election brings into Congress and the White House, powerful corporations and their lobbyists will be ready. But, thanks to you, so will we.

Sincerely,

Joe Rupp
For TexPIRG
info@texpirg.org

TexPIRG Citizen Agenda

This newsletter is published three times a year by Texas Public Interest Research Group. You can receive the newsletter through your e-mail. Just go to our Web site to sign up.

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Victory: Product Safety Bill Is Law



Reining In Federal Contractors



650,000 Young Voters Registered

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Transportation

Improving Public Transportation

In August, the U.S. House approved \$1.7 billion in additional public transportation funds that would expand service for commuters. Earlier in the summer, Congress approved another \$15 billion in funding for Amtrak and intercity rail, including a new generation of high-speed rail.

These TexPIRG-backed measures are part of our ongoing work to provide a 21st century transportation system for America. As consumers faced previously unthinkable gas prices this summer, TexPIRG joined U.S. PIRG in a full-tilt effort to dramatically improve and expand public transportation across the country—including speaking to half-a-million people.

We released a report, “A Better Way to Go: Meeting America’s 21st Century Transportation Challenges with Modern Public Transit,” the first-ever state-by-state accounting of how transit saves oil and reduces global warming pollution, which was covered by more than 120 media outlets around the country.



Erin Winigo

VICTORY—TexPIRG’s John Krieger, with the support of members nationwide, lobbied for an increase in funding for public transportation.

Forcing a shift in our transportation spending away from massive new highway projects that generate lucrative contracts for road-builders won’t be easy. But with more and more people seeing the need to reduce oil consumption, and record numbers riding public transportation all across the country, it’s getting harder for Congress to ignore the benefits of better public transportation. ■

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TexPIRG’s Mission

TexPIRG is an advocate for the public interest. When consumers are cheated, or when the voices of ordinary citizens are drowned out by special interest lobbyists, TexPIRG speaks up and takes action. We uncover threats to public health and well-being and fight to end them, using the time-tested tools of investigative research, media exposés, grassroots organizing, advocacy and litigation.

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Printed on recycled paper.