

Florida PIRG

Standing Up To Powerful Interests

Florida Public Interest Research Group & Florida PIRG Education Fund



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2007 ANNUAL REPORT

Fair and Open Elections: Make Every Vote Count

State throws out error-prone voting machines

Voter confidence in Florida's elections has declined in recent years due to a steady stream of election errors beginning with the controversial presidential election in 2000.

Since then, Florida PIRG has worked with a broad coalition of groups and thousands of members. We attended committee hearings, met with legislators and generated thousands of e-mails and calls. Our work finally paid off in 2007 when the Legislature passed, and Gov. Crist signed, a bill to replace the state's error-prone touch-screen voting machines with optical-scan voting machines that will produce a voter-verified paper trail.

Fifteen counties had been using touch-screen machines. Prone to malfunction, these machines gave voters and election officials little recourse if technical problems or tampering caused a recount.



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Thanks to Florida PIRG's advocacy and strong leadership from Gov. Crist, Florida now requires every county to produce a voter-verifiable paper ballot.

To learn more about our work as part of the Florida Voters Coalition, visit our Web site, www.floridapirg.org.

Voting & Democracy: The Power Of The Youth Vote

Youth Vote Surged In Primaries

Thousands of young people took their first steps toward a lifetime of civic participation by registering to vote in 2007.

Run in coordination with other PIRGs across the country, Florida PIRG helped increase their numbers through our New Voters Project. The work paid off in 2008, when the youth vote (18- to 29-year-olds) more than tripled in the Iowa caucuses and increased by 25 percent in the New Hampshire primaries, compared to 2004 turnout.

According to The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, 13 percent of Florida citizens under 30 participated in our '08 primary, up from 4 percent in 2000. These results show that more young people will vote if their peers encourage them to do so and if the candidates address the issues they care about—issues such as global warming, college affordability, health care and financial security.



Student PIRGs

Sen. John McCain poses with New Voters Project organizers. Students talked with candidates on both sides of the aisle, on the campaign trail in Iowa and New Hampshire.

See more pictures and find out more about the New Voters Project at:
www.newvotersproject.org/whatsyourplan.



Product Safety: A Call For Stronger Action

After Recalls, Demands For Accountability

In 2007, the recalls of millions of lead-tainted or otherwise hazardous toys made headlines for months. The media frenzy brought new attention to our longstanding calls for reform at the federal Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). Within a span of two months, our senior fellow in Washington, D.C., Ed Mierzwinski, was quoted or featured in stories in the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post and others.

In December, Congress acted on some of our concerns by providing the CPSC with an \$80 million budget for FY08—\$16.75 million more than the Bush administration's request. Then, Congress introduced bills that would increase fines on manufacturers whose unsafe products reach consumers. Reps. Allen Boyd, Kathy Castor, Alcee Hastings, Tim Mahoney, Clifford Stearns, and Debbie Wasserman Schultz co-sponsored the House bill. In 2008, we will work to strengthen consumer protections in the bill that goes to the president's desk.



Staff

We released our 2007 toy safety report in Tampa. Joining us were Tampa General Hospital's Dr. Neil Reinhardt, Rep. Kathy Castor, and members of the media including the St. Petersburg Times, Fox 13 News and WMNF community radio.

Download copies of our toy safety research, and get more information on the latest recalls and action in Congress. Go to our Web site, www.floridapirg.org.

In The News

If Congress doesn't fix toy safety, put a lump of coal in its stocking

Ocala Star-Banner—December 23, 2007

By: Florida PIRG Consumer Advocate Brad Ashwell and former Chairman of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), Ann Brown

This holiday season, more and more parents and toy-givers are saying no to children's toys that pose threats ranging from lead paint to small, ingestible magnets.

The wave of recalls of dangerous toys hasn't ended. New findings from the annual "Trouble In Toyland" report recently released by Florida PIRG show that hazards remain on store shelves.

The bad news is that the Bush administration has ignored the needs of our kids at the safety level. Their stocking is already full of coal. The good news is that Congress is taking a close look at improving our product safety system for the first time in nearly twenty years.

Congress can and must take this opportunity to improve the safety of products that appear on store shelves in our communities.

Changes should include a ban on lead at any level higher than those recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. The science is undisputed. Exposure to lead has been shown to cause long-term developmental deficiencies and lowered IQ in children. There is no reason to tolerate excessive lead levels in paint, jewelry, toys or other products intended for children under age 12.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) must be given the resources to do its job, including additional inspectors and the power to punish corporate wrongdoers. Companies will comply with the law when they know they will take a real hit to the bottom line if they don't. Fines must be meaningful to an industry that records billions in revenue. The U.S. Senate has proposed raising potential fines to \$100 million for the worst violators. The House has thus far resisted imposing significant penalties on wrongdoers.

Parents should have access to information that will protect the health and safety of their families. Current law allows companies to control disclosure of information about their dangerous products.

If it fails, Congress should find a lump of coal in its stocking.

You can sign up for updates via e-mail on our Web site. We'll let you know when it's important for Congress to hear from you on other important issues, too.

Health Care & Rx Drugs: Standing Up To Drug-Makers

New Law To Promote Drug Safety

Despite fierce resistance from the pharmaceutical industry, Congress passed new legislation in 2007 that should make the drugs we put in our medicine cabinets a little safer.

Florida PIRG supported provisions in the final bill that will require greater transparency in clinical trials of new drugs, fewer conflicts of interest on FDA drug safety panels and greater accountability for drug companies that fail to perform required safety studies—including fines of up to \$10 million. Twenty-four Florida representatives on both sides of the aisle voted in favor of the bill.

According to Paul Brown, our lead advocate on the issue, controversies surrounding the harmful side effects of such drugs as Vioxx, Paxil and Avandia left members of Congress more open to our push for reform. “In the end, there were too many headlines...Congress had to act and we’re pleased they did.”



Peter Morgan, Getty

Raymond Gilmartin, former CEO of Merck, speaks to the media. Merck opposed drug safety legislation.

Read our report, “Turning Medicine Into Snake Oil: How Pharmaceutical Marketers Put Patients At Risk,” on our Web site, www.floridapirg.org.

Health Care Reform: Fighting For Affordable Medicine

Florida PIRG Works To Ease The Cost Burden

As a country, we spend twice as much per capita on health care than other industrialized countries, and total health care expenditure in Florida is increasing at twice the rate of inflation. So, in 2007, Florida PIRG assembled a coalition of groups to align against the hospitals and doctors whose influence could block reforms that would lower health care costs.

Florida PIRG and HealthCHECK coalition members were busy laying the groundwork to pursue legislation that will force the industry to disclose pricing information, which will lead to competition and lower prices. Lowering the cost of medical procedures, supplies and doctors' visits will benefit everyone, but especially those who pay for health care out-of-pocket. The AARP, the Florida Retail Federation, the National Federation of Independent Businesses, Humana and the Florida Nurses Association are working with us to ensure that more Floridians have access to quality, affordable health care.



Florida PIRG's Brad Ashwell addresses the Florida Alliance for Retired Americans on how the high cost of health care directly affects those who pay for medical needs out-of-pocket and indirectly affects everyone else through higher insurance premiums.

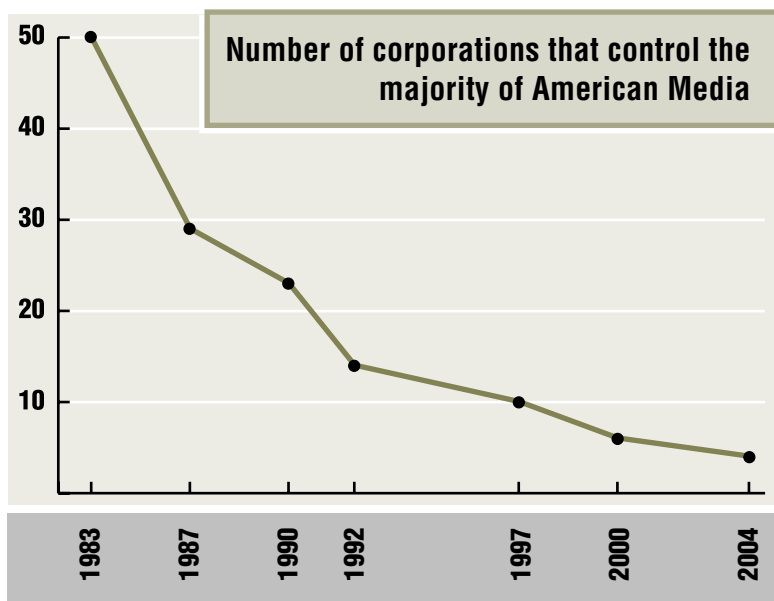
Download "Paying the Price," our report on the high cost of care for the uninsured.
Visit our Web site: www.floridapirg.org.

Media Reform: Standing Up To Media Conglomerates

Florida PIRG, Coalition Promote Local Media

As large media conglomerates continue to consolidate, we are seeing an increasing share of our media moving into the hands of just a few companies. That consolidation hurts accountability and the free exchange of ideas to the public. Florida PIRG worked with allies to build a new state-based media reform coalition that will promote a unified vision for competitive, diverse and independent media that will better serve our nation's democracy and culture. A vibrant media, full of diverse and competing voices, is the lifeblood of America's democracy and culture, as well as an engine of growth for its economy.

Florida PIRG, with partners including Consumers Union and Freepress, helped turn out 400 citizens to participate in the FCC hearing in Tampa, one of only five in the nation, to make sure they heard our voices loud and clear: protect local media.



*Source: Bagdikian, Ben. The New Media Monopoly. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004.

To help protect free and independent media, visit our online action center at www.floridapirg.org/action/media-internet.

Money & Politics: Lobby Reform

Victory For A More Open Government

Responding to a wave of corruption scandals, in 2007 Congress passed the most sweeping changes to the rules governing lobbying in a generation. The president signed the bill, which we supported, in September.

The new law bans gifts and travel paid for by lobbyists, requires lobbyists to disclose the contributions they raise on behalf of candidates, and makes former lawmakers wait longer before they can return to Capitol Hill as lobbyists. The House approved the bill in August by a vote of 411 to 8. Although Florida Rep. Allen Boyd was one of the 8 votes against, the rest of our congressional delegation voted in favor of this reform. Congressional leaders on this issue relied on Gary Kalman, our chief advocate on the issue, for his help in shaping a bill that would produce real reform. For example, his research on best practices at state ethics commissions was used in committee hearings.



Federal Legislative Director Gary Kalman testified before the Senate Rules Committee on the importance of strong lobby reform measures.

Now that Congress has passed lobby reform rules, we're pushing for an independent enforcement commission. Find out the latest on our Web site, www.floridapirg.org.

Florida PIRG Supporters

Citizen support is the cornerstone of Florida PIRG and Florida PIRG Education Fund. Thousands of Florida citizens supported Florida PIRG by making membership contributions in 2007. The members listed below were particularly generous in backing the organization's research and advocacy. Names that appear in italics denote our monthly supporters. These members provide stability to the organization's resources through our monthly giving program.

Development Committee

Florida PIRG Development Committee members supported the organization with contributions of \$500 or more.

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Patrons supported Florida PIRG with contributions of \$350 - \$499.

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Planned Giving

Members who include Florida PIRG in their wills leave a legacy of activism that will protect consumers and taxpayers, as well as revitalize participation in the democratic process for decades to come. For more information about including Florida PIRG in your estate and major giving plans, call (800) 841-7299 or send an e-mail to plannedgiving@floridapirg.org.

For more updates and to learn about ways in which you can help Florida PIRG lobby elected officials to support our issues, please visit our Web site:
www.floridapirg.org.





Brad Ashwell
Consumer
Advocate

Dear Florida PIRG member,

A recent St. Petersburg Times analysis found that—for the bargain price of \$200 million—you, too, could buy power and influence in government. That sum is the average annual expenditure on lobbyists in Florida.

At Florida PIRG, we know that all you need is a clipboard. Instead of wheelbarrows of cash, we take our tough-minded advocacy and well-researched policy solutions with us to the Statehouse. With the political support of thousands of members across the state, instead of gifts and contributions, we helped pass a law that will ensure that every vote counts in the next election.

That's why your support of Florida PIRG is so important. While corporate America spends millions on hired lobbyists to push their agenda, we stand up to powerful interests with the funding of our members.

We couldn't play David to their Goliath without your support. Thank you.

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Standing Up To Powerful Interests

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