

## **Voting Rights, cont.**

As a first step, AIR is organizing a Community Issues Forum at Christ Church Cathedral on Thursday September 13th entitled "Voting Rights- Protecting Voting Rights and Focusing On Efforts To Register and Motivate People to Vote." This noontime Forum will feature a panel of speakers such as Elizabeth Brown, Co-President of the League of Women Voters of the

Cincinnati Area, who are currently involved in registering voters and motivating them to vote. A Forum co-sponsor is an informal coalition of grassroots organizations that recently came together because of their common concern about voting this fall. It includes the NAACP, the Poor People's Campaign, The Faith Community Alliance, Project AMOS, MARCC, For Our Future Fund, and representatives of organized labor. All the participants are either planning or currently conducting activities focused on registering voters or getting out the vote. AIR was invited to join this coalition and will work with its members in the weeks ahead.

### **City Contribution Limits to Campaigns**

The second reform opportunity this fall concerns a local campaign finance issue. Back in 2001, AIR helped organize a successful effort to pass a series of campaign finance reforms packaged in a City Charter Amendment. One of the reforms established contribution limits for individuals, political action committees, and parties, and the initial limit for a person contributing to a Council or Mayoral campaign was \$1,000. This limit was weakened in 2005 by a flawed guideline provided to a Council candidate by the City's Election Commission.

That year, Council candidate John Cranley requested from the Election Commission a decision about how a contribution from a legal liability company should be classified. The Commission, established by the Charter Amendment in order to insure adherence to campaign finance regulations, over stepped its powers by determining that each LLC should be regarded as a person. This decision meant that a person could give \$1,000 to a candidate and then through his or her LLC contribute another \$1,000. Although little known and never given further public review, the Commission's decision led to unfair manipulations by certain individuals. Not only did certain LLC owners give personal and company contributions, but it led to some people establishing multiple LLCs for the purpose of giving large amounts of money to a Council or Mayoral candidate. Several candidates have reaped huge benefits from this expansion of the definition of individual contributions. For instance, Mayor Cranley received an estimated \$500,000 from seventy-five LLCs in his recent campaign. Last year, former Judge Mark Painter, civic leader Don Mooney, and Councilman Wendell Young, sought to close this unfair loophole in the law. When they were rebuffed by the Elections Commission they mounted lawsuit against the Elections

Commission and Mayor Cranley. Joined by other reformers who were part of the 2001 Charter Amendment campaign, the suit claimed the Commission had gone beyond its authority in making its decision about LLCs. This suit led to an informal settlement that this issue would be placed on the ballot as a Charter Amendment proposal for voters to decide. That is where the issue stands today. City Council at its first meeting in September is scheduled to place on the November ballot a proposal to eliminate the ability of the owner of LLCs to give a personal contribution to candidate and then follow up with contributions from his or her LLCs. Individuals can either give personal contributions or a contribution from one of their LLCs, but not both. AIR plans to work with other reform groups to educate voters about this opportunity to restore the intent of the 2001 contribution limits that were designed to make "big money" less of a factor in Cincinnati's elections.