



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MAINE

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TO: The Honorable Senator Dawn Hill
The Honorable Representative Margaret R. Rotundo, Co-chairs
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

The Honorable Senator John L. Tuttle, Jr.
The Honorable Representative Louis J. Luchini, Co-chairs
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

DATE: March 20, 2013

RE: LR 1046 The Governor's Biennial Budget

My name is Ann Luther. I'm a resident of Trenton. I work as a volunteer for the League of Women Voters of Maine and chair its Advocacy Committee. I'm here today on behalf of the League and its members to urge full funding for a robust Clean Elections program.

The League of Women Voters believes that methods of financing political campaigns should ensure the public's right to know; combat corruption and undue influence; enable candidates to compete equitably for public office; and allow maximum citizen access to the political process. The League believes that public financing of elections is the best approach for accomplishing these goals.

The League of Women Voters has been a champion of campaign finance reform at the state and federal levels for more than three decades -- since 1974, in the aftermath of Watergate. The League is proud to be a founding member of the broad-based, nonpartisan coalition that drafted the Maine Clean Election Act and collected 65,000 signatures in 1995 to put the citizens' initiative before the voters.

The Maine Clean Election Act was a landmark reform that appeared on the ballot in 1996, a Presidential election year when Maine ranked #1 nationwide in voter turnout. This measure passed with more than 56% of the vote. More Maine voters (320,755) voted "yes" on that ballot question than have voted for any winning gubernatorial candidate in the last 20 years. We believe that failure to retain Maine's public financing system would be a breach of public trust and an enormous loss to the public good. Therefore, the League opposes part MM of the budget proposal, and urges this Committee to restore the necessary funding that will provide a viable Clean Election option for future legislative and gubernatorial candidates.

Here's why our democracy needs publicly financed elections now, more than ever before. Today in our country, we have more concentrated wealth and income than at any time

Founded in 1920, the League of The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major political policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

since the beginning of the last century. There is nothing more antithetical to the rights of citizens in a democratic republic than concentrated wealth and power. I quote Robert La Follette when I say: "The supreme issue, involving all the others, is the encroachment of the powerful few upon the rights of the many." Barry Goldwater expressed a similar sentiment when he said, "The enemy of freedom is unrestrained power, and the champions of freedom will fight against the concentration of power wherever they find it."¹ He was talking about limits on the sources of campaign contributions.

Research at the federal level shows that legislators and policy makers are vastly more attentive to the interests of the affluent than they are to those of everyone else. Researchers call this "representational inequality." That's the notion that, although we each get one vote, we are not all represented with the same vigor. Because rich people give more to political campaigns, their interests are more likely to get public policy results. According to political scientist Martin Gilens:

The *extent* of this "representational inequality" is staggering: when preferences of low or middle income Americans diverge from those of the affluent, there is virtually no relationship between policy outcomes and the desires of these less advantaged groups. In contrast, affluent Americans' preferences exhibit a substantial relationship with policy outcomes whether their preferences are shared by lower income groups or not.²

In other words, affluent donors get what they want. The rest of us get what we want when, and only when, we want what they want.

And when big-moneyed interests spend in political campaigns, they create a feedback loop in public policy that further advantages their own interests, deepening the chasm between themselves and ordinary people. To quote Professor Gilens again:

Over the past decades, economic inequality has grown as income and wealth have become increasingly concentrated among a smaller and smaller fraction of Americans. The disproportionate political influence of the affluent (who tend, naturally enough, to favor policies that enhance their interests) may further reinforce their economic advantages leading to even greater representational inequality.³

Some have argued that the concentration of wealth fuels investment in growth and that overall growth benefits everyone – that a rising tide lifts all boats. But new research from the International Monetary Fund and others demonstrates just the opposite: that extreme

¹ Barry Goldwater, *Conscience of a Conservation*, 1960.

² [Martin Gilens](http://www.russellsage.org/research/inequality-and-democratic-responsiveness), Professor of Politics at Princeton University, "Inequality and Democratic Responsiveness," Russell Sage Foundation, <http://www.russellsage.org/research/inequality-and-democratic-responsiveness> [March 17 2013]

³ Ibid.

inequality contributes to financial instability and leads to shorter periods of growth, meaning less economic growth over the long term, not more.⁴

What does this mean? It means we're in danger of getting public policy that benefits only one small minority of our citizens – the donor class – leaving everyone else behind. It means that American democracy is failing to serve the needs of the vast majority of its citizens.

Publicly financed elections like the Maine Clean Election Act are a big part of the answer. Here is a system that does not recognize the difference between rich donors and everyone else. Everyone can participate. Maine people can elect those who represent the interests of the many, not the elite few. And legislators can serve the interests of their actual, diverse constituency. That's how the Maine Clean Election Act works to achieve the League's goals for reducing corruption and undue influence, allowing candidates to compete equitably for public office, and opening the doors to maximum citizen participation in the political process.

For the sake of a functioning democracy, we must continue to push back on big money in politics. This may be a never-ending endeavor, but we can't afford to give up.

Here in Maine, we've made a great start with the Maine Clean Election Act, and we're very fortunate to have it. Maine people worked hard to get it, and we must fight to keep it. We urge you to preserve full funding for a robust Clean Elections system that allows candidates for all state office – including governor -- to run and win without raising money from wealthy private interests.

Thank you.

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⁴ Annie Lowrey, "Income Inequality May Take Toll on Growth," *New York Times*, October 16, 2012
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/17/business/economy/income-inequality-may-take-toll-on-growth.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 [March 17, 2013]