



# LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF MAINE

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TO: The Honorable Senator James M. Hamper  
The Honorable Representative Drew Gattine  
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Appropriations and Financial Affairs

The Honorable Senator Garrett P. Mason  
The Honorable Representative Louis J. Luchini, Co-chairs  
Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs

DATE: February 28, 2017

RE: LD 390 The Governor's Biennial Budget

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My name is Ann Luther. I'm a resident of Trenton. I am here today as a volunteer for the League of Women Voters of Maine, where I 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, including gubernatorial candidates.

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, and under current jurisprudence, one of the few tools that citizens have left for those purposes.

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. We were there again in 2014 and 2015 when League members were among the hundreds of volunteers once again taking matters into their own hands to protect the Maine Clean Election Act. We circulated petitions to collect 81,000 signatures to put a ballot measure before the people in 2015 to strengthen the Maine Clean Election Act. **That measure passed with a 10 point margin and included robust, competitive funding for both legislative and gubernatorial candidates.**

We believe that failure to fully fund Maine's public financing system for all state offices would be a breach of public trust and an enormous loss to the public good. We urge your support for the Ethics Commission recommendation.

Here's why our democracy needs publicly financed elections now, more than ever before, and why we need it for the top offices as much as for the down-ticket races. Today in our country, we have more concentrated wealth and income than at any time since the beginning of the last century. There is nothing more antithetical to the rights of citizens in a democratic republic than concentrated wealth

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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.

and power. I quote Progressive reformer 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."<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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. This is not about the individual corruption of legislators selling their votes. It's about a systematic tilt of the entire policy-making apparatus toward influential donors. No wonder we are in the middle of a populist revolt. **Ordinary people know that their voices don't count.**

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.<sup>3</sup>

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 research from the International Monetary Fund and others demonstrates just the opposite: that extreme inequality contributes to financial

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Goldwater, *Conscience of a Conservation*, 1960.

<sup>2</sup> [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]

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

instability and leads to shorter periods of growth, meaning less economic growth over the long term, not more.<sup>4</sup>

When many office holders are themselves very wealthy, or when everyone they know is very wealthy, when they spend so many of their waking hours doing call time with wealthy donors, or when many of them have been elected with campaign contributions skewed toward the very wealthy, it's not too surprising if we wind up with public policy that benefits the very wealthy.

What does all of this mean? It means we're 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. The 2016 presidential election could be read as a cry from the heart of those left behind.

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 elected officials can serve the interests of their actual, diverse constituency. Although lots of Maine people wish that candidates were **required** to run with public funding, that is not the system we have. But neither should we have a system that **requires** candidates to jump into the deep-money end of the pool. **The system we have is a system of opportunity.** It gives legislative and gubernatorial candidates the opportunity to run, even if they don't want to spend countless hours dialing for dollars, even if they don't have connections to business interests or wealthy donors, even if they are not wealthy themselves, even if their policies and world-view are not endorsed by big-money interests. That's how the Maine Clean Election Act works to achieve the League's goals.

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 offices – including governor -- to run and win without raising money from wealthy private interests.

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<sup>4</sup> 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](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/17/business/economy/income-inequality-may-take-toll-on-growth.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) [March 17, 2013]