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GUEST COLUMN

Democracy by special interests opaque

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By Harold Pachios

Transparency in American elections is the underpinning of our democracy. Without it, citizens have no way of knowing which special interests are trying to influence our decisions as we cast our votes for those who will represent us in Washington. Across the nation, the fall election campaigns are in full gear, and they are shaping up to be the most ideologically divisive in decades.

The reason that they are becoming so rough-and-tumble is that much of the political dialog is being fueled by the independent expenditures of powerful special interests, particularly corporations, unions and extraordinarily wealthy individuals.

Earlier this year, in a case known as Citizens United, the Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, struck down a longstanding ban on election spending by corporations and unions.

The court has decided that corporations and unions have the same right to political free speech as we the people. Now some of America's most powerful special interests are pouring money into television issue advertising to influence America's elections while keeping their identities secret.

As anticipated, the dangerous effect on our democratic process is quickly becoming apparent. This fall, voters are facing a deluge of television commercials, direct mail and online ads. Much of the tenor is typified by negative attack advertising sponsored by shadowy front groups all financed by hidden donors.

The court has opened the floodgates to a very real threat to our democratic process. It begs the question: Are we a nation of individuals or a nation of financially powerful corporate interests?

Current disclosure laws are not up to the task of following the money in this newly deregulated environment. Congress must put politics and partisanship aside and adopt common sense reforms to protect our representative democracy. Thus the question is: Will the Senate pass the DISCLOSE (Democracy is Strengthened by Casting Light on Spending in Elections) Act and take an important step on behalf of restoring transparency to our democratic process and to American voters?

Before partisanship engulfed the midterm election season, even Sen. Mitch McConnell, the Republican leader in that chamber, is on record saying, "public disclosure of campaign contributions and spending should be expedited so voters can judge for themselves what is appropriate."

Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins have long supported campaign finance reform and transparency in government. Their continued support is critical.

The principles contained in the DISCLOSE Act are straightforward and have been supported by Republicans and Democrats for decades. It would require corporations and unions to publicly stand by their ads. It would prevent foreign firms and governments from legally injecting unlimited amounts of money into our electoral process. It will also prevent corporations dependent on lucrative governmental contracts from pouring millions of dollars into political advertising that advance their own interests.

If the loophole created by the Citizens United decision is not closed, American elections will be up for sale, and we'll never know who bought them.

Maine people overwhelmingly support campaign finance reform provisions like those contained in the DISCLOSE Act, as is evidenced by a Critical Insight poll, commissioned by Maine Citizens for Clean Elections that found that 85 percent of Maine voters feel that it is important to know who paid for the political campaign communications they see and hear. What's more, 80 percent of Maine voters believe that having the names of donors to political organizations available to the public is important because it keeps the process open and transparent.

The DISCLOSE Act is critical to protecting our democracy by shining a light on the oncoming flood of special interest money. But the fact is, even with DISCLOSE, the corrosive influence of money in our political system is only going to get worse. To change the game, and make Congress accountable to the voters instead of wealthy special interest, Congress should follow Maine's lead and adopt a public financing system similar to Maine's successful and popular Clean Election Act.

The Fair Elections Now Act does just that and will be voted out of the House Administration Committee this week.

The Senate has an opportunity to ensure that special interests cannot control the outcome of our elections with untruthful and distorted advertising by supporting the DISCLOSE Act.

By supporting these reform efforts, Sens. Snowe and Collins will continue their legacy of putting the interest of Maine people and our nation ahead of political partisanship. And they will be ensuring that our democracy is not replaced by a corpocracy, which seems to be what is happening in our country.

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