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Guest Columns

Campaign finance laws must support transparency, disclosure

By Barbara McDade

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Don't you want to know who is paying to influence your vote?

Don't you think that makes a difference in how you view political advertising?

Imagine a TV ad touting the numerous economic benefits a casino would bring to southern Maine. Wouldn't you want to know that the ad was paid for by the same group that planned to build such a casino and thus had a huge financial stake in the issue?

Imagine another ad decrying the building of a casino in southern Maine. Would it be of interest to you to know the ad was funded by the corporation that owned an existing casino in northern Maine and feared a new casino would impact its profits?

Public disclosure of who is behind such campaign ads is an absolute necessity for our democracy and for healthy politics. As citizens, we have a fundamental right to express our opinions, but we also have a fundamental right to know who is spending money to influence our elections.

That right is being challenged both at the state and national levels.

The National Organization for Marriage, a New Jersey-based group that donated almost \$2 million to the political action committee that worked to repeal Maine's same-sex marriage law, is contesting the constitutionality of Maine's campaign finance laws. NOM is seeking to shield the identity of its donors and to overturn Maine's requirement that groups register and disclose if they raise or spend a significant amount of money in state elections.

We cannot afford to allow individuals, organizations, and corporations to make secret political donations for campaign ads. We voters deserve to know when special interests are trying to influence our elections. We must require special interests to stand by their ads — to disclose to voters whose money paid for which advertisement. That is not only common sense, it is crucial if informed voters are to remain the cornerstone of our democracy.

Here in Maine, by requiring campaign contribution disclosures, we put the public on notice of where the money is coming from. This information helps voters evaluate ads and shines a light on large contributions and expenditures.

Mainers strongly support transparency and disclosure in campaign finance law. A recent poll conducted by Maine Citizens for Clean Elections shows that more than 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.

Eighty-five percent of Maine voters feel it is important to know who paid for the political campaign ads. Knowing the name of an organization is not enough; voters want to know who finances and leads the group.

It is important to know who gives to political campaigns. It is important to know whether contributors stand to gain from the outcome of an election, if they are from Maine or from out-of-state, and how much money they are giving. This information directly affects how people choose to vote.

Recently, a U.S. District Court judge ruled in favor of protecting the core of Maine's campaign finance laws and against the challenge from NOM. But the case is not over; NOM is appealing. The judge's ruling affected only half of the original suit — that pertaining to candidate elections. The other half of the NOM challenge, the part pertaining to campaign finance disclosure in ballot question elections, has yet to be decided.

When individuals, organizations, or corporations spend money on ballot questions, they're using money to influence the lawmaking process. If they spent money to influence the lawmaking process at the Legislature, we would call that lobbying. We require lobbyists to disclose. We insist that legislators have this important information needed to determine whose interests are being served.

When it comes to ballot questions, it is the voters who are making the laws. When money is deployed to influence voters in our role as lawmakers, we need information about whose interests are being promoted in order to make a decision.

For more than 90 years, the League of Women Voters has helped citizens make informed decisions through nonpartisan education. The League works to ensure the fundamental right of citizens to know about the money being spent to influence our elections and our government's decisions.

We urge all Maine voters to be informed and to get involved.

This fall, when the special interest political ads come on TV and in your mailbox, don't you want to know who is paying for them?

Barbara McDade is president of the League of Women Voters of Maine.