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Money in politics: 'The issue of our time'

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At the close of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, as he left Independence Hall, Dr. Benjamin Franklin was approached by a man on the street who asked, "Well, doctor, what have we got?"

Franklin famously answered, "A republic, if you can keep it."

Whether we can keep it or not is a question that must be revisited by each succeeding generation.

Today our republic is threatened by the twin problems of highly concentrated wealth and a campaign finance system that allows wealth to play a central role in elections and to drive public policy.

I consider myself a patriot and a capitalist. I believe that the founding of the American republic is one of the shining moments in human history, and that the American experiment in self-governance has been a beacon of hope to the rest of the world for over two centuries. I believe that economic enterprise, trade, and commerce are as essential to a functioning democracy as the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. I believe that entrepreneurship and the hope of economic advancement have fuelled human progress over the millennia.

That said, I also believe that there is nothing more antithetical to the rights of citizens in a democratic republic than too much concentrated wealth and power. To quote Robert La Follette: "The supreme issue, involving all the others, is the encroachment of the powerful few upon the rights of the many."

Today in our country, we have more concentrated wealth than at any time in the last century. 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.

While the First Amendment protects our right to spend money on political speech from the encroachment of government, the courts have never considered or ruled on the possibility of wealthy special interests overwhelming campaigns, clogging the channels of political discourse, monopolizing media outlets, and denying equal access to ordinary citizens with ordinary financial means. But this is precisely the situation that we are beginning to face today.

For the sake of our 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 lucky to have it. We must fight to keep it, but we can't rest there. We must also push forward with the next round of reforms, and that leads us to the Political Action Committees (PACs) that play an increasing role in candidate elections. We are one of the few states in the nation, and the only one in New England, that has NO LIMITS on what anyone can contribute to a candidate PAC.

PACs aren't bad in and of themselves. They allow people of like mind to pool their resources to further their cause, and they provide important disclosure. There's nothing wrong with that!

But today big money floods into PACs — huge donations from vested interests that find their way into Maine races. And because we have no limits, Maine is becoming a dumping ground for out-of-state money that can't be used to finance electioneering at home. Because our media markets are inexpensive, we're an attractive target. Why should Maine be for sale to out-of-state interests that can't buy influence with voters at home?

The U.S. Supreme Court's decision in Citizens United last year left us with fewer options for curbing the influence of big money in politics. We must make the most of those that remain. Contribution limits and disclosure are still viable options, and Maine's law could use more of both.

Contribution limits to candidate PACs are the next most essential reform. At the same time, let's enhance our disclosure rules to make it easier for ordinary voters to know who is behind the political ads they see and hear.

Every generation of Americans must work to keep the republic for which our founders fought. It's our turn now. Money in politics is the issue of our time, and PAC reform could be an important contribution to our democratic future here in Maine.

Ann Luther is co-chairwoman of the *Maine Citizens for Clean Elections*.