

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Action needed on DISCLOSE

By Pamela Cahill and Karl Turner, Special to the BDN

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As we head into the 2012 elections, it's clear that our campaign finance laws need more transparency.

Record levels of special interest spending are drowning out the voices of the candidates themselves and swamping individual voters in Maine. This phenomenon is affecting every other state in the country as well.

We saw large sums of money dumped into Maine's midterm elections in 2010. The expectation for 2012 is much more of the same. This election year, we have a presidential election at stake. We also have a high-profile contest for a rare open seat in the U.S. Senate.

We can expect to see unprecedented sums of money from out-of-state sources going into campaign advertising here in Maine, and much of it is the kind of negative advertising that poisons the airways and the political climate. And lots of that money in federal races will come from undisclosed sources, depriving residents of the information they need to make informed decisions about the issues and the candidates seeking their votes. This secret funding in elections undermines our democracy.

Congress needs to act now.

The DISCLOSE Act of 2012, S. 2219, would restore transparency to U.S. elections by requiring complete disclosure of spending on big-money advertising in federal candidate elections. Disclosure of corporate, union and individual spending in our elections is the key to allowing voters to make their decisions. S. 2219 accomplishes that fundamental purpose.

The DISCLOSE Act of 2012 is carefully crafted to require disclosure by outside groups of large campaign contributions and expenditures — those over \$10,000 — and includes a valuable “stand-by-your ad” provision for ads run by such groups. It requires outside groups to certify that their spending is not coordinated with candidates and, very importantly, covers transfers of money among groups so that the actual sources of funds being spent to influence federal elections will be known.

Two years ago, when they decided Citizens United, eight out of nine U.S. Supreme Court justices resoundingly supported just this kind of disclosure. They declared that “transparency enables the electorate to make informed decisions.” We couldn't agree more.

Voters deserve and need to know the sources of funding for election advertising. Undisclosed campaign money undermines and discourages voters and hurts the election process. Voters have a right to know, whether it is a corporation, union, trade association or nonprofit advocacy group making unlimited political expenditures to influence elections.

Candidates also benefit from disclosure of the sources of independent expenditures. There is a danger that the candidates' own voices will be drowned out by huge outside spending, and that a last-minute onslaught of untrue charges from secret spenders will alter the outcome of an election without the candidate being able to challenge the sources or to hold them accountable in any way.

Candidates should speak in their own voices and control their own messages so that the voters can make informed decisions, rather than having unknown and unaccountable spenders distort the candidates' views.

We hope that the DISCLOSE Act of 2012 will receive the careful and thoughtful consideration it deserves in Congress. After all, open and honest debate is the heart of our democratic process.

Fair elections, determined by the votes of Americans, should be at the center of our democracy. We urge Sens. Collins and Snowe to cosponsor and support quick action by the Senate to enact the DISCLOSE Act of 2012.

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