

Democracy Versus Dollars

Will Hawaii legislators step up and be part of the solution?

By Nikki Love of Common Cause Hawaii and JoAnn Maruoka of the League of Women Voters Hawaii

For once, Hawaii was ahead of the curve—but on the wrong track. Last summer, the Intermediate Appeals Court upheld a decision to allow huge sums of corporate money in Hawaii's political campaigns. Then in January, the U.S. Supreme Court took a similar path and opened the floodgates to unlimited corporate spending to influence elections.

Citizens are angry. We know these court decisions will threaten democracy by magnifying the already powerful influence of corporations and unions. A Washington Post / ABC News poll finds an overwhelming majority of Americans across the political spectrum oppose the Supreme Court's decision to allow unlimited corporate spending. In Hawaii, hundreds of local residents signed petitions calling for Congress to respond swiftly to the ruling.

In Washington, D.C., members of Congress are now working on various legislative fixes to prevent corporate funds from flooding our political system. But in Hawaii, we see no serious response by our state leaders. Worse, some legislators are even attempting to repeal the good campaign laws currently in place.

Something must be done in the 2010 legislative session. Our state leaders should address citizens' concerns and tackle the issues of campaign donations, undue influence and public trust. Common Cause Hawaii, the League of Women Voters of Hawaii and other citizen groups are calling on legislators to address these key democracy issues:

- **Limit and Disclose Corporate Political Spending.** Require corporations to disclose all donations and expenditures through a political action committee to ensure transparency. Furthermore, since the U.S. Supreme Court did not strike down the federal ban on corporate donations directly to candidates, Hawaii should continue to limit those direct contributions. Senate Bill 2918 and House Bill 2968 would establish these disclosure and limitation regulations.
- **Uphold Our "Pay to Play" Reform Laws.** In 2005, Hawaii enacted a significant reform that prohibited those with government contracts from donating to campaigns. But now lawmakers are attempting to water down or even eliminate this important law, and that would welcome back the unseemly connection of political donations and lucrative government contracts.
- **Ensure Campaign Reporting for Special Elections.** When voters cast ballots for the upcoming Congressional special election (expected to be conducted all by mail), they will not have campaign finance information that is normally reported by candidates for regular elections. SB 2321 would correct this problem by requiring additional campaign reporting.
- **Disclose Lobbyists' Campaign Donations.** Lobbyists currently report their lobbying expenses such as fees, printing and advertising. But in addition, they often make donations at legislators' fundraisers during the session – the same time of the year when they are pushing for legislation favorable to their interests. SB 2870 and HB 2955 would improve disclosure by requiring campaign donations to be reported on lobbyists' reports.

- **Ensure Timely Disclosure of Financial Interests.** Some lobby groups also have business relationships with legislators, but legislators are not required to disclose their financial interests until after the legislative session adjourns. SB 653 would require legislators to report their finances by the first crossover deadline in early March, so potential conflicts of interest can't be kept secret while legislation is being finalized.

These are clear, simple issues that legislators can address now to help shed light on money and politics. But time is short. The first crossover deadline is near, and many of these key reforms will die unless they are quickly scheduled for a committee hearing.

We urge the chairs of the judiciary committees—Senator Brian Taniguchi and Representative Jon Riki Karamatsu—to show leadership, address the fallout from recent court decisions and help regain public trust. The people of Hawaii deserve no less.