

How to close dark money loophole in Illinois political campaigns -- *continued*

This kind of dark money didn't used to be a problem in Illinois political races, but as campaign laws have been rewritten, particularly after the U.S. Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United v. FEC decision, the floodgates have opened. But we can do something about it.

A bill introduced by state Sen. Don Harmon, D-Oak Park, with state Sen. Sam McCann, R-Plainview, as chief co-sponsor, would effectively require full disclosure of the source of such money. The bill cleared the Senate's Executive Committee last week by a vote of 11-3, and the full Legislature should pass it. The measure is backed by the Better Government Association, the League of Women Voters, the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform and Illinois PIRG. Significantly, it is opposed by two groups that in the past have channeled dark money into elections.

Both Republicans and Democrats benefit from bundles of dark money, which now amount to millions of dollars in an election cycle. Dark money was used against state Rep. Linda Chapa LaVia, D-Aurora, and one of her opponents when Chapa LaVia ran in a four-way race for Aurora mayor on Feb. 28. Dark money from a Democratic group, the Fight Back Fund, provided about a third of the funding for the Safe Roads Amendment, a successful union-backed measure on the ballot last November. Last year, the Illinois Opportunity Project used dark money to back former state Rep. Ken Dunkin, an ally of Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner, and Jason Gonzales, who challenged Rauner foe Michael Madigan in the 22nd Legislative District.

When campaign donations are secret, voters don't know if elected officials are putting the electorate first or simply paying back big donors. That's not healthy for democracy.

A ban on dark money wouldn't limit the flow of ideas in campaigns. Even people who argue campaign donations are a form of free speech should agree those donations should be transparent. If people or organizations want to contribute a large amount of money to influence an election, as is their constitutional right in this post-Citizens United era, at least their names should be disclosed.

It's always good to know who's pulling somebody's strings.