

League of Women Voters of Illinois
Testimony for Illinois Campaign Finance Reform Task Force
Thursday, December 15, 2011

Good Morning members of the Illinois Campaign Finance Reform Task Force. My name is Paula Lawson, and I am the League of Women Voters of Illinois (LWVIL) Campaign Finance Reform Issue Specialist and a former State League President. The League is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.

Campaign Finance Reform is a very high priority of LWV. We have focused on this critical issue since the early 1970s -at the national level during the Watergate era and on the state level since the mid 1990s. In the 1999 spring legislative session, we initiated a contribution limits bill.

It is the League's position that the methods of financing political campaigns should ensure the public's right to know the source of the money, combat corruption and deter undue influence, make competing for public office more equitable, and ensure open and honest elections. The League's campaign finance reform strategy is to achieve incremental reforms where possible in the short term with the ultimate goal of public financing as the best long-term solution. This would level the "playing field" and allow for maximum citizen participation in the political process.

In a survey conducted for the Joyce Foundation in January 2009 by Belden, Russonello and Stewart, concerns about corruption in state government and the influence of money in state politics topped residents' list of concerns for the State. Six in ten (61%) were extremely concerned about the corruption in state government and 54% were concerned about the influence of money in state politics. Seventy one percent (71%) of people surveyed believe that public financing of political campaigns will make a difference in helping state government work better.

In the fall of 2009, Illinois did enact legislation that establishes a framework for better disclosure and enforcement. For the first time limits were placed on money coming into the political system. Although the goal of taking this action is to ensure the public's right to

know and to end corruption, to ultimately restore the public's faith in its government, **public financing of elections is necessary.**

Testimony given to the Task Force by David Morrison of ICPR outlined two forms of public financing – block grants and taxpayer-directed systems. Either of these systems would be steps that Illinois can implement to minimize the risk of corruption and to assure the public that elected officials are concerned mostly with the interests and needs of voters. A system of public financing designed to encourage small donors to contribute to campaigns could greatly increase voter participation in campaign financing and change the dynamic of how races are funded.

JUDICIAL ELECTIONS

The LWVIL supports merit selection as the ideal method for appointing judges to serve in the Illinois court system and succeed in limiting political influence in the selection process. With the escalating cost of judicial races and the slow progress in achieving merit selection, since 2003 the League has also advocated for public financing of judicial elections at the Supreme and Appellate Court levels.

While legislative and executive officials serve in representative capacities and are agents of the people, judges are not political actors. They do not have constituencies and must be impartial and not subjected to political influences in making their decisions that should be based on law, evidence and facts of individual cases.

The League urges you to recommend implementing a public funding system for judicial elections. We recognize the severe budget constraints of the State of Illinois and know that this must be addressed but possibly a surcharge on criminal and civil penalties would be one source of revenue.

There is support for public financing of judicial elections. The Joyce Foundation poll found that 72% thought that public financing for election of judges would make a difference. A poll conducted by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute in October 2011 found, that when asked if they favored or opposed eliminating contributions to judicial races by providing public funding for all candidates who qualify for it, more than 53.6% of voters surveyed favored or strongly favored the proposal. Thirty four percent (34%) opposed it.

The League of Women Voters of Illinois urges the Task Force to recommend that the General Assembly consider a system of public financing that will be open, fair and restore the trust of the public in elections in Illinois and in their state government.

Jan Dorner
LWVIL President

Paula Lawson
LWVIL Campaign Finance Reform Issue Specialist