

Vos Bill Opens The Door On “Dark Money” In Campaigns

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Sen. Kathleen Vinehout focuses on the campaign finance bills currently moving through the Legislature that favor the rich and well-connected candidates, and open the door to “dark money” contributions where who wrote the check is unknown.

MADISON - “This bill strengthens democracy because it allows more citizens to participate,” Assembly Speaker Robin Vos told the Wisconsin State Journal. Vos is the lead author of a bill to overhaul the state’s campaign finance law.

Wisconsin was an early leader in campaign finance reforms of 1911 that limited money in campaigns and provided “rigorous penalties” including disqualifying candidates and sending them to prison. Ironically, the effort over 100 years ago was led by legislative Republicans.

Today’s Assembly leader may advocate for more democracy, but the bill he authored favors the rich and those well-connected candidates. I fear the bill’s effect will be more negative ads, less voter knowledge, more out-of-state contributions, more centralized control by legislative leaders, and an increasingly dispirited electorate.

The bill opens the door to so-called “dark money” or contributions not reported by who wrote the check. Loopholes created in the bill make it unclear which political action committees (PAC) or independent expenditure groups must report donors and campaign spending.

Unlimited campaign contributions are allowed in a host of new areas. Unlimited donations can be made to a PAC or to two new political committee types for a recall or a referendum. This

makes me concerned more money and outside groups will try to affect local elections and referendum.

Corporations cannot contribute to candidate campaigns but corporations, labor unions and Native American Tribes can make unlimited contributions to independent expenditure groups, a referendum committee or a special fund for non-candidate contribution purposes run by a political party or a legislative committee (run by legislative leaders).

In addition, unlimited dollars can be moved from a political party or legislative campaign committee to a candidate. The latter increases the hold leaders have over legislative members. The former increases the power of the political party to pick candidates.

Donation limits to candidates' campaigns are doubled. For example, the current limit for a single individual over a four-year Senate term is \$1,000. This limit becomes \$2,000 under Vos' bill.

Who benefits from adding more money to campaigns? An analysis by Nick Heynen of the Wisconsin State Journal, shows that since 2008, \$17.8 million in donations that reach the maximum limit were contributed to candidates for statewide office. Almost 60% of this money came from outside Wisconsin.

Donors would not be required to report their employer. This makes it difficult to track the relationship between a company that receives grants or tax credits from the state and donations of their employees to candidates.

Removed from the statute is the purpose of campaign finance laws: ***The legislature finds and declares that our democratic system of government can be maintained only if the electorate is informed. It further finds that excessive spending on campaigns for public office jeopardizes the integrity of elections....When the true source of support or extent of support is not fully disclosed, or when a candidate becomes overly dependent upon large private contributors, the democratic process is subject to a potential corrupting influence.***

Perhaps Speaker Vos found his bill a bit in conflict with the real purpose of campaign finance laws. If he truly wants to improve democracy by increasing citizens’ participation in campaigns, I wonder if he’d join me in supporting an amendment to his bill suggested in the testimony of Matt Rothschild, the executive director of Wisconsin Democracy Campaign.

In a March hearing, Mr. Rothschild cited one way to amplify the voice of small campaign donors was to use public financing to match – by five times – the donation of anyone who gave \$175 or less to a candidate. This sounds like a great way to strengthen democracy.

I haven’t met a single voter who thinks we need more out of state or dark money in Wisconsin elections. Without regard to political affiliation, people think there is already too much influence on elections from outside Wisconsin.

Every donation to influence an election needs to be reported in a way citizens can see who is behind the nasty ads. Not only should groups disclose their donors, they should register every patriotic or feel good name used to influence elections.

We don’t need more dark money. We need more democracy and the best way to get that is to let the light shine in.

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