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To House Election Law Committee

From Liz Tentarelli, president, League of Women Voters NH
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Re: HB324 public funding of Governor and Executive Council elections

The League of Women Voters is a non-partisan organization committed to empowering voters and encouraging informed participation in government. One of the biggest obstacles to encouraging voting and participation is the cynicism created by big money in politics.

When voters learn of the huge sums of money spent on campaigns, and the huge donations by corporations and other entities, the individual feels lost. “What difference does my money make?” is a logical question that leads to the next, “What different does my vote make?” If candidates are listening to donors, the cynic would say, the voices of the big donors are far louder than mine.

The big question about campaign spending is how much is enough? Candidates don’t need to spend above that “enough” whatever it is. Executive Council candidates spent over \$1.5 million on their campaigns in 2020. The gubernatorial candidates in the same year spent almost \$4 million. [2] In 2022, the two top candidates for governor together spent just about \$4 million. In 2022, the Executive Council candidates reported donations of a low of \$116,000 to a high of \$437,000. [3] It would seem that this huge amount of campaign money goes way beyond “enough.”

Voter Dollars are particularly important to voters regarding the Executive Council. Executive Councilors are the ones who actually sign the contracts to spend our tax dollars. Do we want them looking at contracts as benefiting corporate donors who have made generous donors to their campaigns? Of course not. We want them voting on contracts with the well-being of New Hampshire citizens—not special interests—at the forefront of their decisions.

With this public funding of elections bill, candidates must first qualify by getting small donations from a certain number of people and raise a certain amount of money. Then they qualify for the “Voter Dollars” and must promise not to accept huge donations in the rest of their campaign. This means candidates have three opportunities to engage with New Hampshire voters: to gather the first round of donations, to secure the Voter Dollars by appealing to voters’ concerns, then to raise more funding if they need to, primarily from in-state small donors.

The benefit to voters is that they are engaged with the candidates, and the candidates must pay attention to the issues of the voters. The big money corporations, who are neither “people” nor voters in my opinion, don’t play a role in this. Thus the candidates that move forward from the primaries are far more likely to represent New Hampshire voters’ concerns.

Candidates’ disavowal of large outside donations is likely to win them support at the ballot box. A 2017 New Hampshire poll by Public Policy Polling shows that 64% of voters polled would be more likely to vote for the Voter Dollars candidate who refused large donations. [1] One would hope that eventually all candidates would participate rather than go it alone with Dark Money donations.

Voters’ participation in this program is entirely voluntary. It has been used successfully in Maine, Connecticut, and Arizona. Bills similar to this one have passed in both Republican (South Dakota) and Democrat dominated states (California and Washington.)

The League of Women Voters at the national level has a long history of supporting campaign finance reform because it affects our mission, to empower voters and to defend democracy. Therefore League of Women Voters New Hampshire supports HB324 and encourages this committee to recommend Ought To Pass.

Sources:

[1] Public Policy Polling surveyed 579 New Hampshire voters from December 13-14, 2017. The margin of error is +/- 4.1%. This poll was conducted by automated telephone interviews

[2] Follow the Money <https://www.followthemoney.org/at-a-glance?y=2020&s=NH>

[3] NH Sec .of State’s candidate receipts/expenditures database.