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Column: Pass bill to improve on campaign financing

By Brodie Lockard • Today • Updated 5:06 pm

In this election year, one result is already in: Hawaii voters want clean elections. Early this month, a SurveyUSA poll of more than 1,000 Hawaii voters found deep and broad support for the idea.

But on Thursday, the House Judiciary Committee deferred Senate Bill 2381, which would start a system of full public financing (i.e., clean elections) for all state and county offices. Many concerns seem to have been thought up just for that hearing, like the idea that each county should fund its own elections. Clever — then five bills would have to pass, not just one.

One committee member said it wouldn't stop corruption. No, really? Two other members couldn't possibly vote yes without funding, though the bill clearly states that the program wouldn't run if funding was inadequate. Five others brought up other dubious reasons why it couldn't work. It was as if they'd imagined every possible objection, and passed them out to the members to raise.

The only legitimate concern was the Campaign Spending Commission's need for two additional employees, for about \$200,000. Deferring the bill based on one genuine objection — to that sum — reveals much about our lawmakers.

Under the bill, candidates who collect a specified number of \$5 contributions would receive grants from the state large enough to run competitive campaigns for their particular offices. The higher the office, the more contributions required, and the larger the grant. In return, those candidates could accept no other money for their campaigns.

Sixty-eight percent of voters polled supported a law like SB 2381, with only 11% opposed. And support was 60% or higher among every demographic subgroup.

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Support rose to 71% when respondents were reminded of the 2021 bribery convictions of former state Sen. J. Kalani English and former state Rep. Ty Cullen.

More reminders of government corruption may come soon. In February, English's sentence was reduced from 40 months to 32. The reasons were marked as "Restricted." This makes one wonder whether English has agreed to talk to federal investigators about others' wrongdoing. Cullen got a lighter sentence than English after cooperating with the feds.

The poll showed two other crucial results: 66% of voters agreed that, "My current elected officials are more focused on the interests of their wealthy donors than on the needs of my community." And nearly 60% thought that \$6 per resident — the estimated cost of the program — was reasonable. Since SB 2381 would not go into effect until 2028, funding it won't be an issue for years.

Nearly 90% of respondents said that campaign contributions influence which policies legislators support — with more than half saying they "greatly influence" elected officials. They believed legislators become obligated to campaign donors, again with more than half saying "greatly obligated."

SB 2381 aims to let candidates compete without special interest contributions, and elected officials to make decisions without obligations to special interests.

That's the whole idea: Get special interest money out of elections, so our representatives respond only to us, the voters. Candidates can talk to constituents instead of spending countless hours wooing major donors. The Maui fires and Oahu rail are daily reminders of what happens when special interests control public policy.

Clean elections allow everyone to participate equally in the political process. Small business owners, community activists, teachers, waitresses — all of these have won using clean elections elsewhere.

More than three-quarters of poll respondents agreed that, “Recent public corruption scandals have negatively impacted my trust in our state government.”

Passing the clean elections bill would improve public trust in government. Apparently, our representatives don’t really want that. What percentage of Hawaii voters do you suppose would approve of Thursday’s hearing?

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