



Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups
Advocacy = Membership = Elder Law



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January 26, 2009

TO: All Legislators & Governor Jim Doyle

We write to express our shared concern about the health of the democratic process in Wisconsin, our common interest in and support for reform, and our collective sense of optimism and enthusiasm over what we regard as the best opportunity to fundamentally change our political system in at least 30 years.

Our shared hope is that over the course of the two-year session the new Legislature will do something that has eluded Wisconsin lawmakers for quite some time now – **reach agreement on comprehensive campaign finance reform that applies to all state offices.**

We realize this is not an easy task. But we also know the need is great and the time is right, and our confidence in the ability of state leaders to get the job done has never been higher.

We understand this kind of sweeping reform happens maybe once in a generation, and it doesn't come to pass overnight. As you work to bring this about, however, we strongly believe there are much-needed and significant reforms that can and should be approved in the early stages of the 2009-2010 legislative session. Two stand out.

1. Full disclosure of special interest electioneering

The state Government Accountability Board unanimously approved a new rule last November requiring special interest groups to fully disclose the campaign advertising they sponsor and abide by existing limitations on campaign contributions. This new rule has been forwarded along to the Legislature for review and approval, and should be approved at the earliest possible date. Legislation mirroring the GAB rule should then be adopted, thereby cementing this critically important reform in state law.

This reform addresses the single biggest threat to the health of democracy in Wisconsin. Because so-called "issue ad" groups are operating totally outside the law, they are able to use money from sources that are off limits to candidates and effectively hijack state elections, pushing candidates to the sidelines and doing most all of the talking during campaigns. And even as they overwhelm candidates and control much of what voters read, see and hear about state campaigns, these groups keep voters entirely in the dark about how much they are spending to influence elections and where they get the money to pay for all the advertising they are doing. The public has a right to know who is trying to influence the outcome of state elections, and this reform measure restores real meaning to that right.

2. Reform of state Supreme Court elections

The serious degradation of Wisconsin Supreme Court elections that we all have witnessed in the last two years is intolerable and cries out for action. We share a strong belief that the Impartial Justice bill

creating publicly financed Supreme Court elections represents the proper course of action, and urge the new Legislature to take it up promptly.

In December 2007, all of the members of the state Supreme Court signed [the attached letter](#) supporting the concept of “realistic, meaningful public financing for Supreme Court elections to facilitate and protect the judicial function.”

There also is broad public support for the kind of reform embodied in the Impartial Justice bill. A January 2008 poll by the national Republican polling firm American Viewpoint found that 65% of Wisconsin residents support publicly financed judicial elections, and after hearing arguments both for and against the idea support went up to 75%. A May 2008 poll by the national independent survey research firm Belden Russonello and Stewart found that 85% of state residents believe public financing would make a difference and 54% believe it would make a “big difference.”

Reform of Supreme Court elections can’t wait. There already is disturbing evidence that public confidence in the integrity and independence of our state courts is eroding. American Viewpoint’s polling found that only 5% of state residents believe that campaign contributions to judges do not influence decisions, while 78% believe they do. While our justice system is built on the bedrock principles that judges don’t belong to anyone and their decisions are based on facts and the law, Belden Russonello and Stewart’s polling found nearly half of Wisconsinites (47%) believe judges’ decisions are based on politics and special interest pressure.

We look forward to working with you this session to safeguard the independence of our courts, restore transparency and enhance accountability in election campaigns, and improve the overall condition of democracy in Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

American Association of University Women-WI
Citizens Utility Board
Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups
Common Cause in Wisconsin
Disability Rights Wisconsin

League of Women Voters of Wisconsin
Wisconsin Democracy Campaign
Wisconsin Nurses Association
Wisconsin Public Interest Research Group
Wisconsin Retired Educators’ Association