

Illinois Chamber of Commerce Policy Position

Campaign Finance

The campaign finance system is a vital part of participatory democracy. It enables campaigns for public office to become vigorous forums for debate and education. While this discourse is not always as high-minded and civil as the public would like, it is nevertheless essential to the strength of our democracy. For this reason, the Illinois Chamber of Commerce encourages employers and the general public to participate in the campaign finance system of our state.

The Chamber also recognizes that the structure of the campaign finance system is a legitimate issue for debate. Honest differences of opinion exist between individuals equally committed to democratic ideals and effective government. To help further this debate, the Illinois Chamber states its support for the following principles:

Illinois' campaign finance system must:

- Honor and preserve freedom of speech;
- Encourage participation in the political system;
- Place a premium on transparency as the best defense against unethical behavior;
- Respect citizens' ability to organize and act collectively;
- Maintain a level playing field between diverse interests.

Specific Policies

Limits on Campaign Contributions

- There is a legitimate debate over limits on contributions to candidates as an effective tool to help maintain fairness in the system and to curtail the public perception of undue influence. However:
- Limits should be set at levels that do not curtail free speech;
- Limits should be designed to allow non-incumbent candidates to compete effectively;
- Limits must maintain an environment where non-self funding candidates can compete with wealthy self-funders;
- Legislators must fully realize that contribution limits will shift some money out of the transparent reporting system and into the largely unregulated and opaque realm of independent expenditures and voter education/mobilization programs.

Allowable Sources

- With strong transparency rules in place there is no compelling public policy reason to unduly limit the sources of contributions. This is especially true if reasonable contribution limits are in place.
- If sources are unduly restricted in the transparent campaign finance system, funding from restricted sources will shift into non-transparent spending at an accelerated rate.
- Limits on sources of revenue run a much greater risk of creating an unlevel playing field between diverse interests.

Aggregation Activities

- Freedom of association is a hallmark of democracy. Our campaign finance system should respect this basic right and not attempt to restrict like-minded citizens from organizing themselves for effective political action.
- Prohibitions on “bundling”, or other activities where citizens work together to raise campaign funds, risk an unacceptable constraint on participation in the campaign finance system.
- It is possible that a narrow restriction on bundling activities designed to address a behavior that has led directly to illegal activity may be acceptable.

Illegal and Unethical Behavior

- Policy makers should remain focused on the fact that the public scorn for the activities of former Governors Blagojevich and Ryan is the product of illegal and unethical behavior. The overwhelming majority participants in the campaign finance system do so ethically and in strict compliance with the law.
- Any attempt to address illegal and unethical behavior solely through the campaign finance system is doomed to fail. Abuse of campaign contributions is but one narrow avenue in which bad behavior is manifested.
- Any ethics reforms enacted by the General Assembly must include provisions that address other incentives and avenues for illegal and unethical conduct.