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Editorial | Insight

# Government by the people, not by special interests

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The face of Hawaii's democracy is shifting. Citizens' faith in government is dwindling, while vast and increasing amounts of money are pouring into elections and drowning out the voices of the people.

Hawaii's signature low participation rates are largely the result of public cynicism about the ethics of elected representatives, the influence of money on political decision-making, and a lack of transparency around the policy decisions our

lawmakers make. There are many fronts where transparency is still lacking. Too many decisions are made out of the public eye; bills are sometimes gutted and replaced with unrelated content; and those who cannot come to the Legislature in person have no way to participate remotely in hearings.

In recent years, legislators have:

- » Tried to pass a bill that would allow them to accept expensive gifts (which can often be used to influence a vote on a bill).
- » Passed a bill that exempted themselves from part of the State Ethics Code, allowing use of their positions to solicit or receive favors for themselves or others;
- » Killed a nepotism bill that would have prevented state employees from hiring family members.
- » Refused to hear most bills aimed to improve government ethics.

These actions overshadowed the few bills that will strengthen lobbyist regulations and increase government transparency that passed the Legislature and became law. In 2014, legislators passed a bill to help the public identify potential conflicts of interests from powerful boards and commissions. Despite the bill's unanimous support, the governor included this on his intent-to-veto list, then rescinded his decision a week later after public outrage.

U.S. Supreme Court decisions have:

- » Dramatically increased the ability of corporations and wealthy individuals to influence elections through widespread donations to candidates.
- » Enabled unlimited funding of "independent" ads promoting, or, more often, attacking a candidate. In the 2012 Honolulu mayor's race, citizens witnessed how significantly independent groups can influence voters. We will likely see more of this, especially with pesticide companies attempting to undermine the actions of the County Councils of Kauai and Hawaii to limit their use.

By 2016, these groups must list their top donors on political ads, thus giving the public more insight on who is trying to sway elections. Many candidates rely on donations from special interests to place ads to counter negative ads placed by independent groups. A better solution to counter the influx of special-interest money in politics would be to fund elections with specially designated public money rather than relying on large sums of donations from those with special interests. Candidates who opt-in to this program would be held more accountable to their constituents than special interests — the way it ought to be.

Despite the dire outlook on democracy, there are shining lights in our government. Hawaii's Campaign Spending Commission and Ethics Commission are proactive about

making campaign spending data and lobbyist expenditures public and accessible to citizens. Hawaii has the only Public Access office in the country (see: [Irbhawaii.org/par](http://Irbhawaii.org/par)), and the Legislature's website ([capitol.hawaii.gov](http://capitol.hawaii.gov)) has made legislative information more publicly accessible, including live-streaming and archiving of some committee hearings. Citizens can now learn who funds political candidates, and how candidates spend their campaign money through apps available at [civic.celerator.org/apps](http://civic.celerator.org/apps).

In the end, the public still has the ultimate power, and can hold politicians accountable at the polls — if they vote. By 2016, Hawaii's eligible voters will benefit from online voter registration, and starting 2018, election-day voter registration. With our high cost of living, many are busy juggling long hours and family responsibilities. These voting system upgrades will empower citizens who learn about candidates late in the election cycle the opportunity to vote.

The face of our democracy is shifting. We the people must exert our power through voting and advocating for publicly-funded elections and increased government transparency to counteract the large sums of special-interest money tainting our democracy.