

Why Ban Corporate and Union Contributions in Municipal Elections?



(reverse side: questions and answers)

1. Other jurisdictions have already adopted this ban. Corporate and union contributions are illegal in federal elections, provincial elections in Manitoba and Nova Scotia, and provincial and municipal elections in Quebec, and City of Toronto elections.
2. Healthy democratic elections should be voter-centred and voter-driven. Corporations and unions are not voters and do not have the right to hold office, and should not be financing candidates' campaigns.
3. The ban means candidates will have to be voter-focused in their fundraising. If local voters believe they have done or will do a good job, those candidates will be able to raise adequate funds. If incumbents have done a poor job, then they will have more difficulty raising funds for re-election.
4. Large donations from businesses and other organizations with significant financial resources, particularly when they are aggregated, can have an undue influence on who decides to run and who gets elected.
5. By allowing corporations and unions to make campaign contributions the individuals who control these organizations are granted more rights than other citizens because they can contribute as individuals and again in the name of corporations or unions.
6. These contributions can give incumbent politicians an unfair advantage over challengers because incumbents have a greater ability than other candidates to raise these funds.
7. Elections must not only be fair, they must appear to be fair in the eyes of the public. As long as corporate and union contributions are allowed, it gives the impression that some elected officials would be unduly influenced by these interests.
8. Voter turnout is dropping and public cynicism about politics is growing. To help reverse this damaging trend, citizens need to see our elected officials leading rather than impeding democratic reform.
9. If this ban is adopted for all provincial and municipal elections in Ontario, putting it in line with federal election regulations and those in Quebec, Manitoba and Nova Scotia, it will help create momentum for similar changes in all other jurisdictions in Canada, making this a national standard.
10. A substantive reform of this nature will also create momentum for broader electoral reform.

Why bother with a ban if corporate and union leaders can make individual contributions anyway? How will that alter their influence?

This is about making elections as voter-centred as possible, with a level playing field. Everyone has one vote and everyone can make contributions up to a modest limit - no one can have extra votes and no one should have the right to make extra contributions that exceed the individual limits.

Some people may have more or less influence in the political decision-making process, based on their positions or persuasive abilities. But this ban is specifically about the electoral system - the process by which citizens choose their elected representatives. In that arena, we have to do everything possible to make the process as equitable and democratic as possible and this is one very important step in that direction.

Won't the ban simply push these practices underground?

There will always be some people who look for loopholes or who choose to break the law. But that is no reason to oppose reform. Some people run stop lights and exceed speed limits, but that is no argument to do away with traffic safety laws.

Public records of contributors will still be available and open to scrutiny. (In the US, contributors are also required to disclose their occupation, employer and mailing address.) Loopholes can be fixed, public attitudes will sharpen and those who choose to violate the ban will have to consider the legal, political and public consequences.

Won't this remove an important source of campaign funds, give more advantage to incumbents, and lead to more wealthy self-funded candidates running and winning?

The ban will mean that those candidates who excel at building grassroots voter support are most likely to excel at campaign fundraising - making the election campaign more voter-centred and voter-focused, as it should be.

Most self-funded candidates do not win elections. Just four of 122 candidates who paid for their entire campaigns won elections

in 10 GTA cities in 2006. In fact, most are self-funding because they have no widespread base of support. In the last election, quite a few winning candidates demonstrated that voter-based fundraising, without corporate and union donations, can be successful.

Municipalities should also review and consider the range of public funding programs various cities use in Canada and elsewhere.

Why push businesses and unions out of the election process when they play important roles in cities and towns?

Corporations and unions are not being excluded from public discussion and debate during elections. Businesses, unions, community groups and individuals should all be engaged in those public discussions. Business and union leaders, employees and union members can all participate as individuals.

Won't this increase other types of spending by businesses in support of some candidates?

Municipal elections, unlike those at the federal and provincial levels, do not have rules to control third party spending, often used for anonymous media campaigns to support or oppose some candidates. The province should create rules to control anonymous attempts to sway voters. These types of campaigns should have spending limitations and require disclosure of the identities of funders and organizations so that voters can fairly evaluate those messages.

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