

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 16, 2004

CONTACTScott Britton, Executive Director
(614) 469-1505**LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS SEEKS DEFEAT OF CAMPAIGN FINANCE BILL
Special session's changes to 'disclosure' proposal make legislation irredeemable**

COLUMBUS - Legislators acting in special session this week are scrambling to eviscerate Ohio's campaign finance laws under the banner of reform. In less than 24 hours, the Ohio House passed a much-amended House Bill 1, and the Senate Rules Committee sent its own version to the floor for a vote tomorrow morning. According to the League of Women Voters of Ohio, both versions prove worse than the original bill-and far worse than the oft-criticized status quo.

An unexpected amendment by the Senate committee would allow special accounts, called "Levin accounts," to accept corporate and union donations in even-numbered years for use in a variety of election-related activities. "It is unconscionable that they are reintroducing Levin accounts at this late date with no opportunity for public comment," LWVO elections specialist Peg Rosenfield said. "It presents yet another opportunity for corporate and union influence over elections."

The League called for defeat of the legislation by the Senate. "Even though witness after witness after witness has urged true reform, this legislature has ignored the public outcry," Rosenfield said. "Legislators and the Governor hope to trot out this legislation as proof that they made good on their promises to fix the problems that led to recent campaign scandals, but in fact they have mocked and denigrated public input throughout this rushed process."

"Renamed accounts, unlevel playing fields and sky-high contribution caps do not constitute reform."

Rosenfield noted that the bill ostensibly does away with county party "operating accounts"-the funds that gained notoriety this year when it was revealed that several statewide and legislative candidates had allegedly parked campaign money there in order to avoid contribution limits. In fact, these accounts will continue to exist in a disguised form, as the bill's sponsors have simply renamed them "restricted funds" and Levin accounts. "Don't let legislators tell you they are eliminating the nefarious operating accounts," Rosenfield said, "when all they're really doing is calling them by a different name."

The bill retains the hundred-year-old ban against direct contributions from corporate treasuries and union dues to candidates. Yet it allows corporate and union "gifts" to these so-called "restricted funds." According to Rosenfield, the move would appear to be "an end-run around a century of progressive safeguards that could give corporations and unions unfair-and largely unregulated-influence over our elections."

To be sure, the bill maintains limits, or caps, on contributions. But these caps have not simply been raised-they have been quadrupled. "This legislation invites more big-money influence in elections, further limiting the voice of ordinary Ohioans," Rosenfield said. Moreover, contributions to county party candidate funds have been modified to expressly permit corporate and union contributions, which can then be shuffled to other accounts. "If this bill were to become law, a union could make a \$10,000 contribution to 50 of Ohio's 88 counties, and so could each of that union's affiliates," Rosenfield said. "Just think of the ramifications if a large corporation were to make 50 \$10,000 contributions, followed by each of that corporation's subsidiaries making 50 \$10,000 contributions."

Beyond these sobering provisions, the bill contains confusing language and misleading definitions. "Legislators have mastered the art of double-speak in this bill," Rosenfield noted. "In their radical redefinition of the English language, gifts no longer count as contributions. In the lexicon of this legislation, day is night and night is day."

The League of Women Voters of Ohio would support a bill that simply expands disclosure requirements. The League urged the Senate to adjourn without passing this comprehensive watering-down of current law.

The League of Women Voters of Ohio, a nonpartisan political organization, encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government, works to increase understanding of major public policy issues, and influences public policy through education and advocacy.