

Notice of Judicial Campaign Contributions Would Enhance Public Trust

Written by League Women Voters WI, Andrea Kaminski
Saturday, 29 April 2017 09:08



League of Women Voters supports Assembly Bill 137 requiring notice of contributions made to the campaign committee of a judge or justice to parties in a pending case.

MADISON - The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin believes there are three important measures in establishing criminal sanctions. Society is protected from criminal acts by deterrence, incapacitation and reform of offenders. We have a justice system whose purpose is to review criminal acts and take appropriate action to protect society and help prevent further criminal acts. Ultimately our criminal justice system is in the hands of judges, and citizens in Wisconsin should have absolute confidence that judges will be fair and impartial.

We would certainly never suggest that campaign contributions automatically undermine a judge's neutrality. That would be an affront to the distinguished women and men serving on Wisconsin's bench. But we have seen that contributions supporting a judicial campaign can erode public trust, even if the judge may be acting fairly.

It is good that judges have campaign committees that handle the money, and are not allowed to accept contributions themselves. However, most people do not make that distinction, and that public perception is what we are concerned about. Any citizen who has to appear in court should have absolute confidence that a campaign contribution will not influence the judge's impartiality. In the unfortunate absence of objective recusal rules addressing this problem, notice of financial contributions to the campaign of a judge or justice by a party in a pending case is essential.

The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin supports AB 137, which requires notice of certain contributions made to the campaign of a judge or justice. This legislation provides that whenever an someone makes a contribution to the candidate committee of a court of appeals, circuit, or municipal judge or supreme court justice in a pending civil or criminal action or proceeding over which the judge or justice is presiding, the contributor must within five days notify in writing the judge or justice and the parties in the case of the date and amount of the contribution.

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Public trust is enhanced by openness and information. Requiring notice of contributions made by parties in a pending case is an important step in boosting public confidence in the courts in our state.