May 15, 2012

The Hon. Joseph Lieberman, Chairman  
The Hon. Susan Collins, Ranking Member  
Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs  
U.S. Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

End Pay-to-Play Politics Through Transparency

Oppose S. 1100 that Would Keep Political Spending in the Shadows

Dear Senator:

Our 14 civic organizations write to you in solid opposition to S. 1100, the so-called “Keeping Politics Out of Federal Contracting Act,” and urge the Senate to reject this legislation that would block public disclosure of campaign contributions and spending by government contractors.

This effort to keep the campaign money of government contractors in the shadows runs afoul of the honesty of our elections and the integrity of the government contracting process. Disclosure is the solution, not the problem.

The organizations writing in opposition to S. 1100 include: Campaign Legal Center, Center for Media and Democracy, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, Common Cause, Democracy 21, Demos, League of Women Voters, MapLight, New Progressive Alliance, Project on Government Oversight, Public Citizen, Sunlight Foundation, U.S. PIRG and Union of Concerned Scientists.

“Pay-to-play” is the all-too-common practice of a business entity making campaign contributions or expenditures in support of public officials with the hope of gaining a lucrative government contract. The timing and targeting of campaign contributions demonstrates that contractors seek access to politicians with oversight of contracting,1 and interviews with contractors reveal that they believe this access helps them win contracts.2 Just how frequently such pay-to-play corruption takes place is a matter of dispute, but there is no disputing that the public perceives this problem is widespread.

S. 1100, sponsored by Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME), would create a very dangerous obstacle to reining in pay-to-play abuses in government contracting.

Pay-to-play corruption thrives in the shadows. As long as the public is generally kept in the dark as to how much a corporation is spending on behalf of public officials and their respective parties, pay-to-play can be an exceedingly effective tool in winning government contracts.

Though it is extraordinarily difficult for the public to connect the dots of which company is spending how much in support of which candidates, contractors and their lobbyists are not at all shy about selectively informing officeholders and party officials who they are supporting and who they oppose.

While officeholders generally know their financial benefactors, the public is routinely left in the dark. This dichotomy between what politicians know and what the public knows about contractor campaign money is the greatest single recipe for pay-to-play abuse in federal contracting.

One of the single most important means to rein in this type of pay-to-play abuse in government contracting is to create a system of full disclosure so that the public also knows which contractors supported which officeholders. This transparency in contractor campaign spending would provide the public with the means to discern when contracts are being awarded based on money rather than merit – and a powerful tool to check pay-to-play abuses in government contracting.

There is nothing new about the idea of requiring government contractors to disclose their campaign financial activity. More than a dozen states already impose special disclosure requirements on government contractors, and federal contractors have been disclosing their PAC contributions for decades.

Full disclosure of money in politics is overwhelmingly supported by the American public, and it is one of the most effective means to ensure that the integrity of the government contracting process is not being compromised by the campaign money of “insider” influence peddlers.

We strongly urge you to vote against S. 1100.

Sincerely,

Campaign Legal Center
Center for Media and Democracy
Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington
Common Cause
Democracy 21
Demos
League of Women Voters
MapLight
New Progressive Alliance
Project on Government Oversight
Public Citizen
Sunlight Foundation
U.S. PIRG
Union of Concerned Scientists