Breaking Big Money's Grip on the Political Process

A packed auditorium of Upstate citizens considered the issue of Big Money in Politics, on October 28 in Greenville. Hodding Carter III was hosted by the Riley Institute at Furman University, as he discussed *Democracy Challenged: The Power of Big Money in Politics*. Carter is a professor at the University of North Carolina and was a former Assistant Secretary of State in the administration of President Jimmy Carter. He is currently a Director of Americans for Campaign Reform, a non-partisan group that advocates for voluntary public funding of federal elections.

Carter said that, along with the present bailouts of big business, we need a bailout of the democratic system to allow those without large sums of money to have a voice. In the 1970s, a typical Senate campaign cost \$1.3 million. Now, in a medium size state, it can cost as much as \$40 million. A member of the House of Representatives spends approximately 30% of his or her time raising money, a demeaning practice. He suggests that our system is corrupt, as evidenced by the fact that 1% of the population contributes 80% of campaign donations. Among the results, are lack of faith and confidence in the "system". Carter said that it is no coincidence that as price tags of campaigns have escalated, levels of participation in elections have dropped.

Americans for Campaign Reform is "campaigning" to enact voluntary public funding of elections for the US Senate, US House and the US Presidency. "It would be nice if deliberations on health care and climate change were taking place on a level playing field", said Carter. Instead, it is big money that buys influence and access in Washington, dominates policies and corrupts politics. While reform is needed, nothing is going to take the money out of politics, especially with the Supreme Court ruling that dollars are voices. This ruling has created even more urgency to develop a new approach to the financing of campaigns. Among those who know how corrupt and demeaning the current system is, are four former Senators who are co-chairing this national, bi-partisan organization: Bill Bradley, Bob Kerrey, Warren Rudman and Alan Simpson.

There is growing interest in the concept of public funding of elections, due partly to the evidence of its success in three states, Maine, Connecticut and Arizona. In these states, "there is a rush" for candidates to accept public funding. Current legislation called the Fair Elections Now Act is being considered in Congress. It is co-sponsored by 110 members of the House of Representatives.

There was a large representation from the League of Women Voters at the presentation. Those representing the Clemson area were Eleanor and Bill Hare, Charlotte and Paul Holmes, Ada Lou Steirer, Michelle Chin and Janie Shipley. They were joined by members of Leagues from Greenville and Spartanburg and LWVSC. There is much interest among League members in reforming our system of financing campaigns and this issue will continue to be discussed. Further information on the Americans for Campaign Reform can be found on www.youstreet.org. Ideas for how one can support the Fair Elections Now Act can be found at www.fairelectionsnow.org.

Editor's Note: In the October Voter, the LWVCA encourages citizens to write op-ed/editorial pieces for the local newspapers. Last month, we featured Holley Ulbrich's editorial on the Index of Taxpaying ability. Della Baker submitted a letter-to-the-editor on health care reform. And, Eleanor Hare's article on voting machines, that appeared in the Easley Progress, was also picked up by Verified Voting (http://www.verifiedvotingfoundation.org/article.php?id=6726 and by Voting News (http://votingnews.blogspot.com/ then scroll down to "S.C." to find the article). Congrats to all – and especially for the appearance of Eleanor's article in Verified Voting, an important venue, nationally, for discussions on voting! Writing editorials is an important way to "make democracy work"! Please let us know if you experience similar successes in voicing your views through the media.