



**Testimony of Evan Preston, Director
Connecticut Public Interest Research Group (ConnPIRG)**

**To the Appropriations Committee
Opposing Cutting Watchdog Agency Budget and Independence**

Chair Bye, Chair Walker, Ranking Member Kane, Ranking Member Ziobron and members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Cutting enforcement of election law and the watchdogs who ensure government accountability is no budget solution. We cannot balance a budget by making government less accountable. I write you today to urge the committee to restore the funding, management independence and budgetary independence of government watchdog agencies.

The people of Connecticut live in the shadow of prominent recent examples of public corruption. Due to the breaching of campaign finance law among other issues, elected officials from both major political parties in Connecticut have served, and in the case of former Governor John Rowland, are going to serve yet more time in correctional institutions. An even more profound problem than the particular wrongdoing of individual officials is the spreading lack of faith in the integrity of our democracy due to the influence of large campaign contributions from special interests. Voters from across the political spectrum agree that big money dominates politics, particularly at the national level, and that we should take measures to amplify the voices of small donors.

A decade ago, Connecticut led the country by passing the Citizens' Election Program to empower small donors and provide a platform for candidates who did not want to depend on special interest contributions. The State Elections Enforcement Commission is an essential part of ensuring public confidence in the integrity of our elections and allows Citizens' Election Program to operate. Cutting into the abilities of the State Elections Enforcement Commission, as substantial proposed budget cuts do, thus denies the public its voice in preventing corruption and empowering ordinary voters. I urge the committee to reject budget these cuts to the State Elections Enforcement Commission.

Providing for the management and budgetary independence of watchdog agencies ensures that there is no perceived or actual interference in the performance of their public service. Transparent budgeting that demonstrates clearly to the public the funding going toward

watchdog agencies and the ability of those watchdog agency heads to directly control this funding is integral to the principle of accountable government. For this reason, I urge the committee to reject any proposal to eliminate funding through specific agency staff budget lines for the State Elections Enforcement Commission or other watchdog agencies. I also urge the committee to reject any proposal to convert watchdog agency funding into block grants for the same reasons of maintaining clear funding independence.

Connecticut can only retain its reputation of having recovered from the darkest days of corruption if the General Assembly adequately funds clean elections and ensures the independence of watchdog agencies. Voters in Connecticut and around the country are clamoring for solutions that decrease the dominance of special interest influence. People in Connecticut benefit from measures that are the envy of people in other states trying to counter special interest dominance. However, if we do not preserve the full functioning of institutions such as the Citizens' Election Program and the State Elections Enforcement Commission we could move from a positive example of good government leadership to a cautionary tale of backsliding on government accountability.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

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