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City can lead on election reforms

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Imagine an election where all citizens had one vote but those who controlled a corporation could cast a second ballot, and then vote again, multiple times, if they owned multiple businesses. Most Canadians would consider that grossly undemocratic, and rightly so.

Yet that is the arrangement that governs election donations in Ontario. Acting in the names of their companies, business owners may repeatedly give the maximum permitted contribution to the candidate of their choice. Everyone else is allowed one such opportunity.

Union leaders have a similar advantage.

A bold move is afoot to correct that inequity by banning corporate and union donations in next year's municipal election campaign, at least in Toronto, which alone among Ontario municipalities has the power to change its election rules. The move deserves support from the city's executive committee at its meeting on Tuesday. Simply put, allowing these donations unfairly distorts our democratic system.

A company or a union isn't considered a person for the purposes of an election; it can't vote or run for office. Yet a company or union may make the same political contribution as any voter. This, in turn, dilutes the impact of individual donations.

Some Toronto councillors worry it will be harder to raise money without access to corporate and union donations. But that's precisely the point: candidates will have to go out into the community and seek contributions from ordinary voters. It might even be necessary for them to pay more attention to these voters.

Individually, Toronto residents are limited to a maximum donation of \$750 for any particular candidate in a municipal campaign, except in the mayoral race, where the cap rises to \$2,500. Anyone owning a business may donate at least double that amount. And make no mistake, money matters.

Defenders of the status quo argue that election contributions are kept at such a low ceiling that receiving an extra \$750 from a company or union wouldn't move any politician to switch his or her vote. And they're probably right. But the money flows to favourably disposed candidates, thereby boosting their odds of winning, especially in tight ward races where even relatively small amounts of extra cash can make a difference.

Fourteen of 44 Toronto councillors received more than half their election funding from corporate and union sources in 2006. Six garnered more than 60 per cent of their money from such sources. On the other hand, Mayor David Miller and eight councillors won election after voluntarily forgoing any corporate or union contributions. For the sake of enhanced democracy, and a level playing field, all candidates should be held to the same high standard.