



Clean Elections must be restored in Maine

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By **ANDREW BOSSIE** | Op-Ed

In the final weeks of the election, our 238-year experiment in self-governance is on display – warts and all.

With political signs cluttering our roadsides, advertisements filling our airwaves and glossy mailers stuffing our mailboxes, we are bombarded with messages pulling us in all directions. The radio, the TV, community centers and social media are full of candidates and others arguing about what's best for Maine.

Despite the noise and clutter, nothing could be more important. Elections and voting are at the very center of our political system – our republic, in which our government derives its power from “we, the people.”

We Maine voters take our job seriously. We don't just vote. We actively engage in campaigns for candidates and for ballot measures. We do our best to sort out fact from fiction, though that's not always easy. Sometimes, we take it upon ourselves to create a new law and solve a problem that the Legislature has been unwilling or unable to address.

This year, Maine voters have taken the lead on an issue that is at the heart of our election system here in Maine – Clean Elections. Our successful Clean Elections system has been a model for the nation for more than a decade, but in recent years it has been weakened by the courts, legislative inaction, program cuts, and chronic underfunding. That is simply not acceptable, and so Maine voters have launched a new Clean Elections Initiative to strengthen the law.

Like the original ballot measure that created Clean Elections, the new initiative is an effort of, by, and for Maine people. It is a great example of democracy at work, and there is room for every Maine voter to participate.

A little history: Back in the 1990s, Maine voters created the first full public funding system for state candidates, giving all qualified candidates the opportunity to run for office without relying on private donors. The aim was to reduce the influence

of big money in our elections and in our government, encourage qualified people from all walks of life to run, and sever the connection between private money and public office. Mainers devised a system that relied on a high number of tiny, individual contributions from Maine voters, turning conventional campaign fundraising upside down.

Clean Elections put voters in the drivers seat, and the system worked well. At its peak, 85 percent of legislative candidates used the system, which greatly reduced the amount of private money passing through the hands of the candidates. Candidates liked it because it freed them to spend time with voters instead of dialing for dollars. Voters liked it because they could be sure that their legislators would not be beholden to special interests in Augusta.

But, the news for campaign finance reformers in the last few years has not been good. The U.S. Supreme Court has rolled back many important campaign finance laws, opening up elections to big money interests from coast to coast and undermining Clean Elections in the process. Special interest money is dominating many Maine races, and it is often hard to know who is behind the spending. Predictably, participation in Clean Elections has sharply declined due to the Court's damage and our legislature's and the governor's unwillingness to repair it.

That's why we need the Clean Elections Initiative. Not only does it restore and strengthen Clean Elections, it adds more transparency and increases accountability. That's good for Maine.

This Nov. 4, I will do more than vote. I will Devote the Day to Democracy, along with hundreds of other Maine voters. We will be at polling places in every region of Maine to offer fellow voters the opportunity to sign the Clean Elections Initiative petition.

Join us. The best way to make sure that the Clean Elections Initiative petition is at your polling place is to sign up to volunteer yourself. Only Maine voters may sign and circulate petitions, so it really is up to us.

Devote the Day, or at least a couple of hours, to democracy. Lend a hand to this important, citizen-led effort. Go to mainecleanelections.org to learn more and sign up.

— *Andrew Bossie is the executive director of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections.*