

MAINE VOICES

Time to put a tighter lid on PAC contributions in Maine

If Republicans can pour a quarter of a million dollars into a state race, something's wrong.

Maine leads the nation when it comes to campaign finance reform, with one big, glaring exception. Unlike the rest of New England and all but a dozen other states, Maine allows unlimited contributions from any source to flow through political action committees and into our elections.

Back in the 1970s, PACs were seen as a solution to the problems of big money buying undue influence in races for federal offices. The idea was to allow average citizens to pool their small donations in order to speak as loudly as moneyed special interests.

PACs were supposed to be a vehicle for more inclusive fundraising and an agent of disclosure so that Americans could see who was paying for campaigns.

But today Maine's lax PAC laws do not serve Maine people well, and this truth was clearly revealed in last Sunday's Maine Sunday Telegram article by Kevin Wack.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Allison Smith of Portland is the co-chair of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections.

In that article, Wack revealed that a business owned by a conservative businessman in Utah with close ties to Republican Governors Association chair Mitt Romney made contributions to the RGA's Maine PAC of a whopping \$250,000.

The RGA's Maine PAC used that money and more — \$714,000 in total — to run a high-profile TV ad campaign on behalf of Republican gubernatorial candidate Chandler Woodcock.

Woodcock himself was a Clean Election candidate, and thus was bound to abide by strict spending limits.

There was no question as to the motivation behind the RGA ads; Mitt Romney himself made public statements that the organization was committed to spending big to help Woodcock.

Those ads were the source of an Ethics Commission complaint and many news stories last September.

Quarter-million-dollar contributions are not the norm in Maine, but they are perfectly legal.

Contributions from out-of-state businesses are not typical

for Maine PACs either, but they are perfectly legal.

Donations from extraordinarily wealthy donors are not the majority of contributions to Maine PACs, but they are perfectly legal, too.

While there is some question about whether or not the RGA donations were reported accurately, it is safe to say that Maine law simply does not prevent such large and targeted donations.

This is just one example of many that could be offered to describe a single donor using the permissiveness of Maine PAC laws to radically alter the tone and quality of a Maine campaign.

There is no point in wringing our hands about how awful it is that big money and special interests have too much influence — it's time to take action

to make sure that Maine laws serve Maine people.

Maine Citizens for Clean Elections proposes a simple, three part solution that could and should be passed this year and put in place immediately — well before the next gubernatorial election.

First, we must limit the size of individual contributions to PACs. Our group proposes a limit of \$1,000 per two-year election cycle.

Second, there must be a limit to the amount one person may give to all PACs combined. We suggest a limit of \$10,000 per two-year election cycle.

Third, corporations should not be allowed to give any contributions at all to PACs. Corporate wealth is built with the regulatory assistance of government, and it is utterly inappropriate for that wealth to be used to

influence elections and potentially buy the influence of future lawmakers.

These simple reforms would end the distasteful but legal political activity that occurred in the 2006 governor's race. They are consistent with other state and federal laws and therefore constitutional. In addition, they do not require any new regulatory capacity here in Maine.

Ten years after passage of the Maine Clean Election Act, it is time to stake out the next wave of reforms.

There is no better place to start than by reining in the huge contributions that flow through Maine PACs, distorting our elections in the process.

Maine deserves better, and the time for the legislature to act is now.