

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Maine has chance to lead the way to clean elections

By The Reverend Jill Job Saxby, Special to the BDN
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Because of the Maine Clean Elections Act, political power in Maine rests with voters, not big donors.

Earlier this year, the Maine Council of Churches voted to support the principles and the work of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections. The council was one of the original organizations to advocate for public funding of elections when Maine voters passed the Maine Clean Elections Act 10 years ago, and the demonstrated success of this innovative way of electing our leaders merits our renewed support.

Four election cycles later, political power in Maine rests with voters, not big donors, and most of our state legislators have been elected through our public funding system. Maine voters are justifiably proud of the success of the clean elections system and the role they have played in leading the nation in the adoption of this commonsense reform.

Mainers now have an opportunity to play a critical role in the effort to bring public funding of elections nationwide. The Fair Elections Now Act put forward by Sens. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., and Arlen Specter, R-Pa., would ensure that qualifying candidates are able to run for office without regard to their ability to raise large amounts of money. In addition, similar legislation has been introduced in the House by Reps. John Larson, D-Conn., and Walter Jones, R-N.C.

This legislation would enable our senators and representatives to spend more of their time to do the work of public service and leadership to which they are elected rather than constantly raising money for the next election cycle. Best of all, the proposed new federal system embodies many of the same positive reforms as our clean elections system that has been available to candidates for state office here in Maine since 2000. As a result of increasing bipartisan support in Congress and the support of voters across the nation, the opportunity to address reform of our election system through the adoption of public funding of federal elections in 2009 is a very real prospect.

Our state clean elections system enjoys strong bipartisan support among Maine candidates and voters. Out of every five current Maine legislators, four won their seat using the clean election system. In a recent poll conducted by Critical Insights, when Maine voters were asked if candidates for governor should use the clean election system, 82 percent of voters said yes, and 61 percent of voters said that they would be more likely to vote for candidates who used the clean election system. National surveys indicate that voters across the nation support public funding of elections at similar levels.

The Maine Council of Churches cares about this issue because we frequently speak out publicly on issues of economic and environmental justice and human rights. We often work in collaboration with nonprofit secular allies on issues that affect the poor and those with little or no voice in the public square. Public funding of elections increases the ability of all voices to be heard within the political process, enshrining the principle of free speech that is so cherished as part of the U.S. Constitution.

Consistent with our mission to seek the common ground from which we can all work for the common good, the council endorses public funding of elections as a way to strengthen our democracy. Public funding of elections puts the principles of good governance, fairness, diversity and access to the political system at the center of our democratic values, as they should be.

To reclaim our democracy, we need to change the way we elect our leaders. We hope Mainers of all walks of life will join us in urging our U.S. representatives and senators to support the Fair Elections Now Act. Once again, Maine can lead the way.

The Reverend Jill Job Saxby is executive director of the Maine Council of Churches.