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Clean Elections money should be hard to get
The requirements are tougher, but that gives the public-financing system more credibility.

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You wouldn't expect the candidates to like it. Raising the eligibility requirements for Clean Elections funding will make life difficult for them, and may mean fewer of them will qualify for public money in the upcoming governor's race.

But that's just why the voters, especially those who believe in publicly financed elections, should like it a lot.

Changes to the system should make it healthier and more effective in years to come.

The Clean Elections Act was created in 1996 by voters who were fed up with the influence of big money on politics and wanted to hear a broader range of voices at election time. Under the system, qualified candidates don't have to spend all their time raising money and can instead go out and talk to voters, while still holding their own in expensive media exchanges.

It has been extremely successful at the legislative level, with 81 percent of candidates using Clean Election funds in 2008.

The record is less clear at the gubernatorial level because it has never been used by a winner. Clean Elections funding won't survive, and probably shouldn't survive, if it is not seen as a legitimate path for serious candidates.

If it becomes a million-dollar taxpayer-funded free ride for losers and cranks, it will and should disappear.

This year the Legislature changed the requirements to raise the bar and reserve the public funds for real contenders. In the past, candidates were allowed to raise seed money to spend on organization during the period before public funding became available. Now, it is mandatory to raise at least \$40,000 in seed money from Maine voters, with a \$100 cap on donations, as a test of a candidate's appeal.

The qualifying threshold of individual \$5 donations for gubernatorial candidates has been raised from 2,500 individual donors to 3,250, also to ensure that the field is made up of people with the skills needed to make a real run for the Blaine House.

Some candidates are already grouching. State Sen. Peter Mills, R-Cornville, an announced candidate who plans to seek public funding, said the new requirements are not really a test of broad-based support, but a test of a candidate's ability to "hassle" people. He called the new \$5 donation threshold "nothing to sneeze at."

Mills is correct, but the money candidates receive from the public is nothing to sneeze at either.

Candidates who qualify will be eligible for up to \$400,000 in the primary and \$1.2 million in the general election.

That is enough to get them in the game with campaigns financed from private donations or personal wealth. But it should be distributed carefully.

Maine voters and the future of the Clean Elections concept require that the public financing system stay credible. That means only real contenders should receive public funds, and one of these days, it's also going to mean that a "clean" candidate has to win.