

**Grand Forks Herald**

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## **OUR OPINION: Clean money means clean elections in Maine**

In Maine, it's all about the Lincolns.

That's the phrase the Boston Globe used in March when describing Maine's "Clean Election" law. And it still applies today in the wake of the resignation of a candidate for governor, who left the race over disputed "Lincolns" — \$5 election contributions.

North Dakotans and Minnesotans might want to learn more, because as mentioned before in this space, Maine's unique campaign-financing system works well. Thanks to a creative public-financing plan, Maine's system elegantly settles the "Big Money" dilemmas that have left so many voters so cynical.

In short, it's a system that seems tailor made for the upper Midwest and could work here as well as in northern New England. Local reformers should take note.

In Maine, public financing is available to candidates who secure a certain number of \$5 campaign contributions. For candidates for governor, the magic number is 3,250 contributions or \$16,250 in all.

That's the origin of the "all about the Lincolns" phrase:

"A system created to banish big money from politics has created a class of candidates who must first fixate on small money," The Globe reported in March.

"Those who choose to 'run clean,' as Mainers call it, say that their top priority early in the campaign is reaching that \$16,250 goal. It is a sum that candidates elsewhere can pull in during a single phone call or the first moments of a cocktail reception, but here it requires months, accumulated in bake-sale increments."

Maine takes this \$5 stage of the campaign seriously. Only two weeks ago, a Democratic candidate for governor — a former speaker of the Maine House — withdrew from the race because four of his 200 fundraising volunteers fibbed about the origins of some of the \$5 contributions they'd obtained.

"Another option (besides withdrawal) would be to run a traditional campaign," said the candidate, John Richardson, in a statement at the time.

“But I never really gave that idea too much thought. I have always believed in the Clean Elections process and this decision, while very painful, does not, and will not alter my faith in Clean Elections and my conviction about how important it is to our state.”

Of course, it’s not the \$5 angle that accounts for Richardson and other Mainers’ loyalty.

It’s the way the system encourages candidates — even millionaire candidates — to accept public over private financing.

In Maine, “those who agree to accept public funding must forgo any private contributions ... and run an entirely ‘clean’ campaign,” notes the website of the Minneapolis-based Institute for Local Self-Reliance.

“Participating Clean Money candidates also are given an additional one-for-one match if they are outspent by non-complying opponents or are the target of independent expenditures, such as ads produced by a group not associated with the opposing candidate.”

That’s the real key. The Maine match — the promise of matching funds, up to a limit — deeply erodes the advantage that rich or otherwise well-funded candidates can bring to a campaign. Again, the system inspires loyalty among Mainers and persuades  $\frac{3}{4}$  of state legislators to run as “Clean Money” candidates, Wikipedia reports.

North Dakota and Minnesota should take a look.

— Tom Dennis for the Herald

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