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[MAINE COMPASS: Clean Elections law not perfect, but pretty good](#)

Commentator Tony Payne called for an end to the Clean Elections “experiment” (column, Nov. 29). He claims he wouldn’t call it “ugly,” but nevertheless uses the word to some effect.

“Ugly” is in the eye of the beholder. And where does Payne find beauty?

His preferred alternative to Clean Elections is money from (in his own words), “Drug companies, advocacy groups, developers, insurance companies, banks, lobbyists, unions, utilities or their executives ... highly regulated businesses who want access to those who set the agenda and ... (who) have no political ideology other than self-interest or self-preservation.”

Payne argues that, because the Clean Elections Law hasn’t completely done away with the influence of deep-pocket, special-interest money, the law should be abandoned.

In a perfect world, legislative leaders who run their own campaigns using Clean Elections money would not turn around and solicit private dollars for their PACs. Payne, however, lets the perfect be the enemy of the good.

What good has Clean Elections done?

It has enabled many citizens to run for elective office who could not otherwise, unless they were willing to become indebted to those groups that Payne finds so attractive.

About 80 percent of legislative candidates from both parties use Clean Elections funding.

Incumbent legislators have a built-in fund-raising advantage over challengers. But Clean Elections funds help level the playing field. It is likely that Clean Elections funds enabled Republicans to take control of both houses of the Maine Legislature for the first time in two generations, ending the long-standing dominance of the Democratic party.

Payne belittles the effort it takes to demonstrate the breadth of support required of a candidate seeking Clean Election funds. A candidate for the House must persuade at least 60 fellow citizens of the worthiness of his or her candidacy; a candidate for the state Senate nearly three times that, and a candidate for governor more than 3,000.

The dollar amount of these contributions is intentionally small, so the candidate is not beholden to any one or a small number of contributors.

Payne says “Something ... is lost when you remove the direct financial connection between the candidate and contributors.”

Yes, something is lost — the direct connection between large private donations and candidates for public offices. Cutting the connection between special interests and those who regulate them is the great benefit of public funding. And candidates do retain a financial connection, through \$5 qualifying contributions that come from actual constituents.

Perhaps what bothers Payne is that they are not big financial contributions from powerful interests.

The audacious action of the U.S. Supreme Court in overturning 100 years of legal precedent in the case of *Citizens United v. Federal Elections Commission* seems to have emboldened apologists for the wealthy and powerful, such as Payne.

The case stands for the proposition that elections should go to the highest bidder. We have already seen its effect in Maine.

Wealthy, out-of-state contributors unleashed \$400,000 late in the campaign to influence just five Maine legislative races. To their credit, many of my Republican friends were nearly as appalled by this exercise of fiscal muscle as were the Democrats who were its victims. So crude and heavy-handed was this effort that in some cases the ads didn't get the names right of either candidate.

In urging repeal of Clean Elections, Payne seeks elections conducted in “a fully transparent and accountable fashion.”

With the end of reasonable restraints on fiscal might in elections combined with new vehicles for keeping contributors anonymous, however, how can throwing out Clean Elections possibly achieve that goal?

Whom do Mainers want influencing their elections—wealthy interests from “away” who don't know the candidates, or Mainers who do know the candidates?

Where is the “the direct financial connection between the candidate and contributors” that Payne wants, when anonymous, uninvited strangers spread lots of money around, never having met the candidates?

What else has Clean Elections done?

It has made the life of lobbyists like me more difficult. I cannot count on a legislator's vote simply because my client or I have given a sizeable contribution.

Instead, thanks to Maine's Clean Elections law, I have to convince them of the merit of my client's position.

I submit that is a good thing for the people of Maine. Payne thinks it is “ugly.”

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