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'Clean' can be squeaky

Maine's Clean Election system — the first of its kind in the nation — has seen problems in the past

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John Richardson's withdrawal from the gubernatorial race marks the latest twist in the 10-year history of a law that ushered in public financing of state elections.

Maine voters set the first-in-the-nation public financing system, the Maine Clean Election Act, in motion in a 1996 referendum. Legislative candidates started receiving public money in 2000.

In 2008, 81 percent of legislative candidates participated, according to the Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices.

"It's opened the door to lots of candidates who would not have run for office," said Alison Smith, co-chairman of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, which helped put the measure on the ballot.

The three gubernatorial candidates who have qualified for public funds this spring -- Democrats Patrick McGowan and Elizabeth Mitchell and Republican Peter Mills -- will receive \$400,000 each to cover primary costs. They'll be eligible for more in matching funds if the ethics commission determines their opponents and third-party interest groups outspend them.

If the eventual Republican and Democratic nominees are Clean Election candidates, they'll receive \$600,000 to start, with the possibility of \$1.2 million more, depending on opponents' spending. They cannot collect any other contributions.

House and Senate candidates can receive public campaign funds whether their races are contested or not -- but only after they've met a series of conditions laid out in state law.

"They need to demonstrate not only grassroots support among voters, but also viability," Smith said. "It's a pretty high hurdle, but rightfully so."

Would-be Clean Election candidates must collect seed contributions of at least \$5 each from at least 3,250 registered voters, up from 2,500 in 2006. House candidates need 60 such contributions and Senate candidates need 175, according to the ethics commission.

The fraud alleged against Richardson's campaign comes four years after the ethics commission denied public funding to independent gubernatorial candidate John Michael.

At the time, the panel said fewer than 2,000 of contributions Michael submitted were legitimate. As in Richardson's case, some alleged contributors said they hadn't given Michael's campaign any donations.

Clean Election rules changed in 2007 after the Michael campaign's falsified donor signatures. Campaign workers collecting contributions now have to sign documents acknowledging they collected money; money orders have to be signed by contributors; and candidates and their treasurers have to review the process with ethics commission staff.

Smith said those added measures have strengthened the law, as evidenced by the Richardson case.

"The system works and the ethics commission did its job," she said.

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