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## **MAINE COMPASS: Unfair to change rules governing Clean Elections 75 days before vote**

In 1996, Maine voters initiated and approved campaign finance reform, popularly known as the Clean Elections Law. It had one goal — get big money out of Maine politics.

Now, a lawsuit has been filed in federal court to put “big money” back into our democratic process. The Maine Heritage Policy Center, along with out-of-state, big-money advocates, have filed suit in the U.S. District Court to overturn Maine’s Clean Elections Law, a law already ruled constitutional by that same court in 2000.

I am proud to be the first Democratic nominee for governor to run as a Clean Elections candidate. As such, I spend my time talking with Maine voters, not big donors. I listen to these Mainers’ stories of struggle and triumph. We share ideas about how to brighten Maine’s future. There is a real sense of emancipation in this experience — counting opportunities instead of corporate donations.

The law Maine voters created works well. When I signed up to run as a Clean Elections candidate, I did so with the understanding that a set of rules was in place.

Now, out-of-state think-tanks and my conservative opponents want to change the rules in the middle of the campaign.

Let me tell you, I believe politics — not any reverence for the rule of law — motivates this lawsuit. Just look at the timing: I am 75 days away from Election Day with no apparatus to change from candidate to contribution solicitor. Clean Elections means limited spending: I agreed to a cap on my spending, even while my wealthy opponents spend all they want.

But fair is fair, and it is not fair to change the rules at the last minute.

The perpetrators of this lawsuit claim the Clean Elections system somehow “chills speech,” whatever that means. If this were their true concern, why did they not file the court challenge in 2006 when Republican Chandler Woodcock ran as a Clean Elections candidate? Why did they not file the suit when candidates began qualifying for Clean Elections funding last spring or immediately after the primary?

They chose to wait until the general election was in high gear and their case, if successful, would be most disruptive to my campaign.

These opponents of Clean Elections had another chance to address their problems with the system: in the Legislature.

Republican Rep. Andre Cushing of Hampden, a plaintiff in the lawsuit, claims his rights are being limited by Clean Elections. This must be a new concern of his. In June 2009, he had the opportunity to vote against a bill that addressed the Clean Elections system; he didn’t. Instead, he remained silent and the bill passed the House, 131-0.

Maine voters created the system to reduce the influence of money in politics, and it has worked. Clean Elections candidates are free from special-interest contributions.

Furthermore, the law is rooted in Maine values — grassroots campaigning, direct accountability and accessibility to those who seek your vote. Candidates spend their time with voters at festivals and fairs, going door to door, and walking in parades.

The system allows candidates to get out of back rooms and into their communities.

Those pushing this lawsuit want to do three things:

- Remove the limit on contributions to privately financed candidates, now \$750.00, so the wealthy can give more to their chosen candidate.
- Lift restrictions on independent expenditures.
- Eliminate state matching funds that allow Clean Elections candidates to have some parity with the wealthy or privately funded candidates.

I prefer to focus on other things. People cherish Maine’s quality of place; they want opportunities to keep their jobs, to build their own businesses, to educate their children, and to own their homes. My campaign is about how we increase those opportunities.

The plaintiffs’ goal, evidently, is to increase the influence of the wealthy. Interestingly, no voter has suggested that as a burning

concern during my campaign conversations. Changing the rules in the middle of the game, and opening campaigns to big money, caters not to the voters, but to those wealthy enough to divert themselves with filing suits such as this. It does not promote democracy, but rather plutocracy. It is contrary to the very values that make Maine a special place.

Senate President Libby Mitchell of Vassalboro is the Democratic nominee for governor. She is the only Clean Elections candidate in the five-way race.