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MIKE TIPPING: Rebuke of Clean Elections funds use should focus on voter outreach

Democratic Rep. Cynthia Dill of Cape Elizabeth caught some flack from Maine Republicans last week for sending an e-mail to fellow Democratic legislators, in which she discusses using campaign funds to partially pay for a laptop that she continues to use.

Dill claims the attack is payback for publicly opposing the election of Republican Speaker Robert Nutting on the grounds of his pharmacy's overbilling of MaineCare in the 1990s and subsequent failure to repay the funds.

The issues raised on both sides are legitimate, but another aspect of this scuffle hasn't received the attention it deserves. By that, I mean the actual subject of Dill's e-mail; the importance of online campaigning and its relationship to traditional methods of voter outreach.

The background: Dill wrote an open letter to Nutting on her personal blog in which she expressed her moral reticence to vote for him as speaker.

"You made a very large mistake as the owner of a business that made millions of dollars overcharging for supplies sold to poor people," she wrote. "You have not repaid your debt to society, are not taking personal responsibility for your actions, and are nevertheless being elected to be the Speaker of the House."

This was followed by a post on the website www.AsMaineGoes.com, which reprinted a note Dill had sent to a private e-mail list for Democratic legislators that discussed her use of technology in her campaign.

[AsMaineGoes.com](http://www.AsMaineGoes.com) faulted Dill for taking advantage of a clause in the Clean Elections Act that allowed her to retain ownership of a laptop bought by the campaign by reimbursing the Clean Elections fund for at least 40 percent of its cost.

The attack on Dill was quickly repeated by the Maine Republican Party in a press release and by the Maine Heritage Policy Center in a blog post.

No traditional media sources picked up the story, likely because there's not much to report. Dill, legally, did nothing wrong.

Her use of Clean Elections funds to purchase technology products for her campaign and then sell the laptop to herself after the election for a reduced cost is specifically allowed by Maine campaign finance law.

Dill is one of four candidates, representing all three of Maine's official political parties that took advantage of this provision this year.

There is a legitimate discussion to be had about whether 40 percent is a reasonable minimum amount to repay. In my opinion, it should be higher, but that's a technical and legislative issue that shouldn't lead to the kind of public indictment of Dill or the Clean Elections system that was attempted by the GOP and the Maine Heritage Policy Center.

In fact, according to Jonathan Wayne, executive director of the Ethics Commission, his staff will suggest this year an amendment to the current rule that would increase the minimum repayment percentage. The commission originally had pegged repayment at 75 percent in 2009, but the Legislature (without opposition) amended the amount to bring it down to a minimum of 40 percent.

Another part of Dill's e-mail really got my attention: She said she hadn't knocked on a single door during her campaign, spending her time instead on other things, such as online outreach.

I'm usually the first one to support online civic engagement, but it should never come at the cost of good, old-fashioned person-to-person connections. Talking to people door-to-door is the best way to make those connections, especially in Maine, with the state's strong history of local civic discussion.

A wealth of scientific studies show that talking to someone at their home is the best way to engage people in their democracy, and it's certainly the most cost- and resource-effective way for legislators to meet their constituents and hear their concerns.

A review of studies of voter contact methods by Donald Green and Alan Gerber in the book "Get Out The Vote" found that door-to-door campaigning is head and shoulders more effective in increasing election turnout than any other way of contacting voters.

They found that, on average, for every 14 voters contacted at their homes, one more voted who wouldn't have otherwise.

Dill won with a healthy margin, and she says she did engage in other activities that brought her face-to-face with voters, such as setting up a coffee table at the town recycling center on Saturdays and attending local football games. She also said she has gone door-to-door in previous elections.

Her failure to do so this year, however, amounts, I believe, to campaign malpractice. A few hard-working, door-knocking candidates on one side or the other have often made the difference in which party controls Maine's Legislature.

Mike Tipping is a political junkie. He writes the Tipping Point blog on Maine politics at DownEast.com, his own blog at MainePolitics.net and works for the Maine People's Alliance and the Maine People's Resource Center. He's @miketipping on Twitter.