

November 29

TONY PAYNE: Time to end Maine experiment of Clean Elections law funding

Public financing for Maine's elections, the practice of using taxpayer money to pay for campaigning, began in 1996, giving the public more than 10 years to judge its impact.

By some measures, the Clean Elections law experiment is working. About eight out of 10 legislative candidates in Maine choose the path of least resistance and get their campaign funds from the taxpayers. Democrats, Republicans, Greens and unenrolled candidates avail themselves of the public treasury.

The law also has created the perception that special interests or wealthy individuals are out of the equation and have been thwarted from exerting financial influence over publicly funded candidates. Other measures of performance, however, also deserve attention.

First is the cost. In this recent election, about \$6 million in taxes were used to pay for staff, bumper stickers, advertising, printing and related campaign activities. It's a lot of money. Unfortunately, a great deal of that taxpayer money went out of state to national consulting firms, printers, direct mail vendors and pollsters.

Second, the bar has been lowered for those wishing to receive public funding. Their only requirement is to collect a relatively low number of \$5 contributions to qualify for public funding.

Asking someone for five bucks to get thousands of dollars in tax money is a fairly simple task and doesn't encourage much scrutiny or conversation compared to soliciting \$50 to a few hundred dollars from someone's hard-earned paycheck.

Whether the low threshold to qualify for public funding has improved or diminished the caliber of candidates is unknown, but the question is worth asking.

Something also is lost when you remove the direct financial connection between the candidate and contributors. Having to pitch your political positions to earn a contribution for your campaign is a challenge. It requires the candidate to understand the interests of the contributor.

And for the contributor, it's important to understand that democracy doesn't come for free. Democracy must not become another publicly funded entitlement program, but rather something we constantly have to earn and pay for.

Despite public financing, the money that once was raised and contributed directly to candidates hasn't dried up. It simply has found new ways to flow into the system behind the facade of "clean elections," an insidious term used to differentiate between the presumably virtuous taxpayer funded candidate and privately funded candidates.

Where is the money going? Hundreds of contributions go to political action committees (PACs) of people who aspire to leadership posts in the state Legislature. These potential leaders spend the money to support rank and file candidates who, in turn, will support them in their leadership quest.

A look at the 2010 financial reports filed with the Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices (www.maine.gov/ethics) shows a list of highly regulated businesses who want access to those who set the agenda and have contributed to those aspirants.

Drug companies, advocacy groups, developers, insurance companies, banks, lobbyists, unions, utilities or their executives are listed on the state's website as contributors to leadership and party organizations.

Some of these entities have no political ideology other than self-interest or self preservation. Others are philosophically aligned and simply want to ensure a fair shake.

Either way, it is OK and legal. I know, as I have been the administrator of the business-friendly Maine Prosperity PAC. It would just seem to be less expensive and more transparent if public financing were repealed and contributions went directly to rank and file legislative candidates rather than their leaders, who serve as intermediaries for the money.

The years between 1996 and today have not been wasted when it comes to this issue.

We now know more about its impact, costs, benefits and shortcomings. We need to restore the visceral connection that has been severed in a fully transparent and accountable fashion.

I wouldn't call publicly funded campaigns ugly, but they certainly aren't attractive enough to continue the same course without critical analysis and conscious decision-making. Removing this imposition will encourage us to earn the democracy we deserve and starve the entitlement mentality that has replaced our sense of engagement and civic obligation.

What do you think, and what are willing to do about it?

Tony Payne is a lifelong resident of Maine who is active in business, civic and political affairs. E-mail: tpayne@midmaine.com