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[MIKE TIPPING: State of Maine politics has changed — not for the better](#)

MS Opinion



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Elections in a bad economy are expected to be bad for incumbents. Policy and ideology aside, an electorate in a tight financial spot is likely to adopt a “throw the bums out” mentality.

Rarely, however, has populist anger been channeled so effectively by corporate dollars and corporate media toward a single goal, and rarely has it had such an effect in Maine.

If recent polls are right, Maine is about to elect [Paul LePage](#) as our next governor. A few months ago, few would have thought LePage, viewed as one of the most extreme candidates running for governor in the country, would find that kind of support here, where voters are known for their moderation.

It's true LePage might not be winning if the two other major candidates in the race — Democrat [Libby Mitchell](#) and independent [Eliot Cutler](#) — weren't fighting for the same pool of voters, while Republicans are mostly in lockstep.

What's new about this situation, however, isn't the fragmentation of the middle and left (an ex-Democrat turned independent and a Green Party candidate together took about 30 percent of the vote in the last election and Democratic Gov. [John Baldacci](#) still won), it's the hardening of conservative opinion and support.

The first signs of this polarization came when Tea Party activists and LePage supporters swamped the Republican state convention and dramatically altered the party platform, creating a document that calls for the elimination of the Department of Education and rails against the “global warming myth” and “efforts to create a one-world government.”

The strength of this new hard right was confirmed when LePage won the Republican nomination by a wide margin while spending so much less than his six opponents.

This backlash has been fueled conservative media, such as Fox News and talk radio, and found strong sponsors in corporate interests. Tea partiers rallied against health-care reform, but they couldn't flood the airwaves with ads.

Those were mostly paid for by big insurance companies, the ones with the most to lose.

We've seen that same kind of spending in Maine in this election.

An out-of-state group founded by Karl Rove called the Republican State Leadership Committee has recently dumped almost \$400,000 into five tight state Senate races in a last-minute attempt to swing the Senate to the GOP.

If LePage becomes governor, he couldn't implement his agenda without support from the Legislature, and that's what this group is attempting to provide.

The PAC, according to public records, is funded by the most reviled kinds of corporate interests — insurance, tobacco and oil companies — and has been found by state ethics regulators to have violated state law by spending so much late in the election without reporting the expenditure.

This kind of right-wing corporate effort undermines the principles of the Clean Elections Act, a law passed by Maine voters in a 1996 referendum and now used by a large majority of candidates in both parties.

The act is meant to keep our elections fair and transparent, but that idea is now threatened by this unprecedented level of corporate spending.

This conservative resurgence threatens more than just the transparency and fairness of our election process.

The theme of cutting government, which has been a refrain of the right for decades, has recently taken on a new tone. Now the demands for eliminating community programs and our social safety net are being voiced in the angriest way.

They seem to be against not just government, but the idea of governance itself, the process of creating coalitions, finding of common ground and working together for broader goals.

This idea of good governance is being replaced with polarization.

When LePage flares his temper or casually jokes about punching somebody, I'm disappointed not just because of how it could soon reflect on the state of Maine, but also because of what acceptance of this lack of basic courtesy and compromise means for the future of our political discourse.

Instead of New England-style moderate Republicans, there's the tea party. Instead of clean elections, there is rising of corporate influence, instead of civility in campaigns there is have anger and aggression.

The way Maine does politics is changing, and not for the better.

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.