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Our View: Clean Elections law both popular and disputed

Some dislike it, and others see it as a pot of money, but voters and candidates think it's great.

It began as a referendum approved by a strong majority of Maine voters 16 years ago, but the state's Clean Elections law has been a political and fiscal football ever since.

Not for the first time, the money the state gives to candidates to run for office has become an issue in a time of scarce revenues.

Passed in 1996, the campaign public financing measure took effect in 2000. It was billed as a significant reform of what was seen by its sponsors as a flawed system of helping people run for office.

If candidates had to raise funds to buy advertising, hire staff and travel around their districts to get their message out, some of them would raise more than others, and other qualified people would be discouraged from running at all. The referendum's sponsors saw inequality of funding as a major problem, committed as they were to the fairness of the process.

The law proved popular, and in this year's campaign, more than 80 percent of legislative candidates, three gubernatorial primary candidates and one general election candidate for governor took public money, spending a total of about \$6.3 million on their races, about \$3 million of it in the governor's race.

The system has its flaws. While it undoubtedly helps candidates run for office who couldn't finance their own campaigns -- more legislative seats were contested this year than in previous races -- it still pays for races by people who have very little chance of being elected.

And federal laws allow outside groups to support candidates if their spending is not "coordinated" with the campaigns. The governor's race saw a significant amount of money coming from the national political parties, and even some legislative races had outside ads involved.

While the Clean Elections process provides extra money if an opponent spends more, it can come too late in the campaign to be effective.

And the law has one highly significant legislative loophole, in which candidates for top positions can establish "leadership PACs."

Those political action committees allow "clean" candidates to raise private funds to help other office-seekers get elected, with the obvious expectation that they will vote for their benefactors for leadership posts.

It's hard to call a process "clean" while that sort of thing is going on.

What's up in Augusta now, however, is directly focused on dollar signs. Power has shifted from the Democrats to the Republicans, who said both before and after Nov. 2 they plan to scrutinize state spending with an eye for anything that could be considered less than essential -- although many used Clean Elections money to run for office.

But unlike most other statutes, this one was approved by Maine voters. Their will should be respected, even in times when money is tight.

What's fair is fair, even when it hurts.