

June 11, 2010

[Our View: Court should not limit 'Clean' candidate funds](#)

A ruling in an Arizona case could put publicly funded candidates in Maine at risk.

The U.S. Supreme Court has issued a stay on a provision of Arizona's election statutes that threatens Maine's Clean Election law. The court appears ready to make another in a line of decisions on free speech issues that could result in more speech for some and less speech for others.

This would be a setback for places like Maine that have tried to limit the impact of money on political campaigns. It would also be a step back for the nation in its attempts to make our political system less beholden to special interests.

At issue is a provision of Arizona's law that automatically gives money to a publicly financed candidate when a privately financed opponent over-spends a cap. The law, which also exists in Maine, is designed to put both candidates on an equal footing when it comes to getting their message to the public.

Two years ago the court struck down what was known as the "Millionaire's Amendment" in the McCain-Finergold campaign finance reform law, which lifted the maximum donation limits for a candidate whose opponent reached into his own pocket to spend lavishly. Justice Samuel Alito wrote that the amendment was a "drag on free speech" because it provided a disincentive for a candidate to spend his own money.

If the court were to apply the same reasoning in the Arizona case, that could threaten a key protection that keeps publicly financed candidates from being drowned out by rich opponents. This creates an unfair advantage for wealthy candidates who can spend their own money.

That would be a mistake. Maine people created the Clean Elections fund and support it through voluntary contributions on their tax returns.

The money is used to keep candidates where they should be -- talking to voters -- and not stuck in a dark room talking to donors, who may not even be residents of the state.

The automatic payments do not stifle a self-financed candidate's speech; they facilitate more speech, which is healthy for the process. Giving one candidate the ability to get his message out while his opponent is forced to be silent would not favor a free exchange of ideas.

The court should stay out of Clean Election systems like Maine's if it wants to promote free speech.