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## [Maine Voices: Clean elections fund broadens choices](#)

**People who never could have run for office on their own become successful with taxpayer support.**

By ALISON SMITH

PORTLAND - This year marks 10 years of Clean Elections in Maine, and there is plenty to celebrate. Citizens led the effort to pass this landmark voluntary full public funding system, and in doing so we set the standard for state campaign finance systems.

Since the first cycle in 2000, Maine candidates and voters from across the political spectrum have embraced the system. Now we are well into our sixth election cycle under the law, with robust participation in both the gubernatorial and legislative races.

We are proud to say that Maine's Clean Election system is working better than ever.

Clean Elections made headlines recently when Democratic gubernatorial candidate John Richardson withdrew from the race after being denied public funds. His campaign worked hard to meet the goals that the qualifying process demands, and met some of them.

But on other measures, the campaign fell short. When the Ethics Commission scrutinized the paperwork provided by the campaign, it discovered that some campaign workers broke the rules, submitting documentation for qualifying contributions that were never made.

The attorney general will investigate the matter further, but in the meantime it is clear that the Ethics Commission did its job by upholding the Clean Election Act's high standards. Fabricating a qualifying contribution to demonstrate support where there is none violates the spirit and the letter of the law, and such behavior is rightly considered a deal-breaker when it comes to qualifying for public funds.

Since Maine citizens initiated and passed the Clean Election Act, several other states have followed, but Maine remains the strongest and most resilient system of all. Every candidate for state office has the opportunity to run without relying on private fundraising or personal wealth. This has created opportunity for a broad range of candidates from across the state.

Many legislators, including some in leadership positions, say they would never have run without the opportunity provided by Clean Elections. Others say that public funding is simply a better option because it cuts the connection between private money and public office.

All participating candidates appreciate that they are able to run campaigns with maximum voter contact. Instead of dialing for dollars and spending time with donors, Clean Election candidates get out and connect with voters.

Maine voters enacted the Clean Election system, and they continue to support it. Making qualifying contributions to candidates they support, by checking "Yes" for Clean Elections on their income tax forms, and by electing large numbers of Clean Election candidates to office -- 85 percent of the 124th Legislature -- Mainers keep the system going and affirm its value.

Since it was enacted in 2000, the Legislature has been diligent about modifying the law to ensure it remains strong and viable. Changes made in the last legislative session added tools to the Ethics Commission's tool kit to ensure the integrity of the system.

Requiring signatures from those collecting qualifying contributions, mandatory candidate training with Ethics Commission staff, and requiring signatures on both money orders and qualifying contribution forms were all changes approved by the Legislature to increase accountability and safeguard public funds.

National polls show that people across the country want what Maine already has -- a campaign finance system that puts a premium on small donations and diminishes the influence of special interests. And, we need effective reforms now more than ever.

The struggles over legislation dealing with Wall Street, health care and climate change all point to the pressing need to curtail the big money special interests so that Congress can clear its vision and do its job.

As Maine has shown, the Clean Election system is a good idea that works in practice and passes constitutional muster. Here's to the next 10 years of Clean Elections!

*- Special to the Press Herald*

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Alison Smith** of Portland is co-chair of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections.

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