

QUODDY OPINION

Clean elections in Maine

How has Maine's Clean Election law worked since it took effect 10 years ago? Looking at candidate participation in using Clean Election funding, one has to conclude that the measure to remove special interest money from the election process has been embraced by candidates, with 80% of candidates for state elected positions participating in the process. And polling indicates that approximately 75% of Maine voters support Clean Elections.

The group Maine Citizens for Clean Elections is celebrating the 10-year milestone of the law's implementation. Maine was the first state in the country to pass a Clean Elections law, and its success should help convince other states and the nation to pass similar measures.

The law has helped to break the connection between candidates for public office and special interest money; has placed contribution limits on privately funded candidates; and has allowed more candidates to run for office, including more women, young people and working people, and provided them with the chance to run competitive campaigns, even against well-financed opponents. There are now fewer uncontested races in the state, and Maine has the lowest spending gap between winners and losers in state elections of any state in the country. The cost of campaigns has not risen in Maine as it has in other parts of the country, and candidates for office have more time to talk with and listen to voters, instead of spending their time with wealthy donors, political action committees and corporations. These indicators all show that the law is working well.

The Maine Clean Election Act provides a voluntary system of full public financing for candidates for state elected offices. Rep. Anne Perry of Calais, who has used Clean Elections funding for all four of her runs for the state legislature, says, "I would never have thought about running without it." With no political connections when she first ran for office, she remembers it as being very daunting to think about how to raise money and run a campaign. "With Clean Elections, it gave me

the opportunity to think about running."

Rep. Perry believes that citizens now end up with better representation, noting that the \$5 qualifying contributions that candidates collect from citizens give "people sense that they have a say, that they have some power. It provides greater empowerment to citizens."

Across the aisle, a former state representative, Republican Ian Emery of Cutler, is united in agreement with Democrat Anne Perry. "It creates an opportunity for people who otherwise couldn't finance their own campaign," he says. He remembers that, as a young man who had just started a family, he wasn't sure how much money he could raise to run a campaign. "It took the pressure off for me."

At present the law is facing challenges, both fiscal and legal. The legislature and governor have in the past used Clean Elections funds for other state programs, but Rep. Perry notes, "When economic times are tough, that's when it's needed more than ever, so that elections are not taken over by special interests" that have deeper pockets than most citizens.

One of the legal challenges has been a lawsuit on the issue of disclosure of the names of donors. The lawsuit argues that the disclosure of donors' names places a chill on the political participation of donors, but a judge has ruled that the candidate disclosure law is constitutional. Another lawsuit asserts, because a Clean Election candidate receives dollar-for-dollar matching funds if his opponent spends more than the Clean Election candidate's spending limit, that the law infringes on a candidate's free speech rights. Maine Citizens for Clean Elections believes the law does not place a chill on speech and that there is plenty of campaign spending by candidates. They maintain that the intent of the law is to create a level playing field for the candidates.

We agree. The Clean Election law costs Maine people around \$2 per person a year. That is a small price indeed to achieve better representation, freed from special interest money.

Edward French