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Maine's Clean Election system a worthy model

By Alison Smith

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Ten years ago I had the great pleasure to walk from Arlington National Cemetery to the U.S. Capitol with people from all walks of life and from all over the country. The occasion was the final five miles of Doris “Granny D” Haddock’s historic cross-country trek to Washington, D.C.

Granny D set out on her journey alone and ended 14 months and 3,200 miles later in a festive and rowdy crowd on the steps of the Capitol, celebrated by congressional leaders and regular citizens alike.

Why would a grandmother — 89 years old at the start of her walk — embark on such an unlikely expedition? And what were all these people so excited about it?

Campaign finance reform.

Granny D was a remarkable and deeply patriotic woman. She made this extraordinary trek to call attention to the need for campaign finance reform because she felt so keenly the erosion of our democracy over her long lifetime. She wanted Congress to pass the McCain-Feingold Act and rein in the special interest money that played an increasing role in every election cycle.

I joined Granny D that day because I toiled in the campaign finance reform field, too. I had worked for several years to pass and implement the Maine Clean Election Act which was just getting off the ground when Granny D arrived in Washington. For the first time, Maine candidates were asking their friends and neighbors for \$5 qualifying contributions so they could run a race free of special interest money and the influence that follows.

In Washington, the McCain-Feingold Act was stalled. To jump start the bill, the American people needed motivation; they needed a leader.

Granny D was that leader. On her walk, while she talked about campaign finance reform, she also did a lot of listening.

What did Granny D learn? People want breathable air. Clean drinking water. Safe schools. Good jobs. Fair taxes. Health care. Leaders who listen. Representatives who represent them.

Granny D found no constituency for polluted air, undrinkable water, or anything else that special interests routinely push upon Congress. She did find widespread anger at Congress and frustration with the deep disconnect between people's lives and the actions and inactions of our government.

From my own work, I knew that unless and until people connect the dots between the issues we care about and the way we finance elections, campaign finance reform would remain a back-burner issue. Now here was a feisty nonagenarian who had helped thousands of Americans connect those dots.

Congress eventually passed the McCain-Feingold Act, but the courts have been dismantling it ever since. The latest affront is the Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United* which overturned not only a section of McCain-Feingold, but more than 100 years of congressional attempts to rein in the influence of corporate money in federal elections.

Meanwhile, the fights over the big issues of the day — health care, financial reform, climate change, you name it — all point to the critical need to cut the connection between special interest money and our nation's leaders.

That is exactly what Granny D was fighting for and what we have achieved here in Maine. The Clean Election system that was in its infancy in 2000 turns 10 this year. We are in the sixth election cycle with Clean Elections, and the system is popular with candidates and voters. It has created opportunity for people from all walks of life to run for office, and it has leveled the playing field on which they run.

Maine's Clean Election system is constitutional, it works, and it is the model for the rest of the nation.

Granny D spent her last months trying to achieve the same for her home state of New Hampshire and for the United States Congress. She believed that the only way to save our democracy was through public financing of elections.

When Granny D passed away at age 100 in March, this tiny woman left some very big shoes to fill. Now it is up to the people she inspired, and whose stories inspired her, to carry on the fight.

Alison Smith is co-chair of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections. She lives in Portland.