



Safeguarding our Clean Election Act

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The decision by the Maine Ethics Commission to deny public funding to Democratic gubernatorial candidate John Richardson offers evidence that the integrity of Maine's 1996 Clean Election Act is safeguarded by the commission's vigilance and insistence that the letter of the law must be met — no excuses allowed.

Given Richardson's prominence as a former House speaker and, more recently, commissioner of the Maine Department of Economic and Community Development, cynical political observers might have expected the commission to cut him some slack.

That didn't happen, and that's reassuring.

Jonathan Wayne, the ethics commission's executive director, made clear in his April 22 letter denying Richardson's request for certification as a Clean Election candidate that his staff found no evidence of wrongdoing by the Brunswick candidate himself.

Richardson, in an emotional press conference Monday morning announcing his withdrawal from the gubernatorial race, offered the additional detail that he had immediately contacted the Maine Ethics Commission upon learning in early April of potential problems with some of the \$5 qualifying contributions submitted by his campaign to reach the 3,500 threshold necessary for receiving public funding.

That's to Richardson's credit, as is his decision not to appeal the Maine Ethics Commission's rejection of his bid to receive as much as \$1.8 million in public funds. He is correct in his analysis that an appeal would be an unwelcome distraction from the significant issues facing this state and would neither serve the people of Maine nor this party.

In accepting the commission's ruling and giving up his rights to an appeal — which, he admitted during his press conference, was "one of the hardest decisions I have ever had to make" — Richardson has paid a high price for the apparent failings of a few unnamed campaign workers. The buck stopped with him, he accepted his ultimate responsibility for his campaign's failure to abide by the high standards of honesty and integrity required by the Maine Clean Election Act.

In itself, that should serve notice to all Maine candidates that the privilege of receiving public funding carries an absolute responsibility to conduct campaigns with the highest ethical integrity.

Wayne's 13-page letter to Richardson, likewise, expresses in unequivocal terms the commission's absolute adherence to the letter of the law.

"An important duty of the ethics commission is to assure the integrity of the Maine Clean Elections Act program," Wayne wrote. "Candidates for governor seeking public funding must be held to the standard of organizing their campaigns in such a way that grassroots-level workers — whether paid or volunteer — are following the procedures spelled out in law to qualify the candidate for public funding."

An investigation by the Maine Attorney General's office into the specific violations cited in Wayne's letter would offer additional reassurance to Mainers that our Clean Election Act is doing what it is supposed to do.

Although we disagree with Rosa Scarcelli, a Democratic gubernatorial candidate who did not seek public funding, that an "outside independent counsel" should be appointed instead of using the AG's office to investigate further, she makes a valid point that "we must not sweep this situation under the rug and just move on."

She's right in saying questions about abuse and fraud must be answered in order to reassure Mainers that our 1996 clean election law is "beyond reproach."

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