

# Arizona Daily Sun

## [Clean Elections doesn't deserve GOP attempts to make it illegal](#)

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Another legislative session, another attempt by Republican lawmakers to kill Arizona's system of public campaign financing known as Clean Elections.

This time, they are couching it as a referral to the voters under the ballot name "No Taxpayer Subsidies for Political Campaigns Act." Not exactly subtle, but then again, neither is "Clean Elections."

Somewhere in the middle is a system that voters ratified in 1998 in the wake of the AZScam scandals that caught lawmakers taking bribes. The idea was to free candidates and elected officials from depending on special interests to finance their campaigns. The funds are raised with surcharges on traffic fines and civil and criminal court fees, along with tax credits on income tax returns.

Candidates for legislative and statewide office raise a minimum amount of funds themselves through \$5 contributions, then collect state money for primary and general election races up to maximum, depending on the office (see the table at bottom). No one is forced to take the public money, but if they don't and spend more than the Clean Elections candidates, the latter get matching funds up to three times the base public amount.

Currently there is a legal challenge to the matching funds provision that will get a hearing before the U.S. Supreme Court later this month. The challengers -- mainly candidates who can finance their campaigns themselves or through special-interest contributions -- contend the provision has a chilling effect on their free speech. They argue they are inhibited from spending more money on advertising if their Clean Elections opponents get to match them dollar-for-dollar.

So far, the appeals courts have not bought that argument -- not a single appellant said they turned down campaign funds or spent less because of the matching funds trigger. Also, judges have noted that the main impediment to robust speech would occur if privately funded candidates got to spend their extra ad dollars unrebutted. That's what sometimes happens in states without public campaign financing, especially to underfunded challengers who are overwhelmed in the final days of the campaign by attack ads from better-funded incumbents.

Is Clean Elections perfect? No, and we've said so before. Our biggest reservations are with the relatively low thresholds to qualify for public financing in legislative primary races and with little accountability over how the money is spent. The primary system already is encouraging too many extremist and fringe candidates, who take advantage of the relatively low turnout by like-minded voters to push moderates off the general election ballot.

An alternative, if Clean Elections is not changed, is to hold an open primary in which only the top two finished advance to the general election, regardless of party. A broader voting base in the primary would likely result in more votes for moderates, and in that case, the more candidates who could be convinced to run with Clean Elections financing, the better.

So if you haven't filled out your state income tax form yet, consider those "free" tax checkoffs that pay for good causes without costing us any more in taxes owed.

One checkoff with a double bonus is the Clean Elections Fund Tax Reduction, on lines 23 and 24 on Arizona Form 140. Check one box if filing singly, two if filing jointly, then take either \$5 or \$10 off your state tax liability while giving \$5 to the Clean Elections program. It will be a vote of confidence that should show Republican lawmakers just how far off base they are in wanting public financing of campaigns outlawed.

Public funding for various offices:

Office primary general

Governor \$707,477 \$1,061,171

Secretary of state \$183,311 \$274,967

Attorney General \$183,311 \$274,967

Treasurer \$91,645 \$137,468

Supt. of Public Instruction \$91,465 \$137,468

Corporation Commission \$19,465 \$137,468

Mine Inspector \$45,838 \$68,757

Legislature \$14,319 \$21,479

Note: all limits subject to tripling based on spending by privately funded candidates.

-- *Source: Citizens Clean Elections Commission*