

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Clean Elections: The people have spoken

By Edward Youngblood, Special to the BDN

December 30, 2011

There are those who say that, in tough economic times, Mainers cannot afford Clean Elections.

Nonsense.

Maine residents initiated Clean Elections, Maine voters passed it by a good margin in 1996 and extensive polling last spring shows that 80 percent of Mainers approve of Clean Elections. The Legislature must respect the clear will of the people.

Why is this program so popular? Because it reduces corporate and special-interest influence through big money contributions in Maine elections. It allows qualified people from all walks of life to run. It allows candidates to run voter-focused campaigns.

Most importantly, it gives our elected representatives the chance to serve in Augusta without the usual financial ties to special interests.

For about \$2 per Mainer a year, we can ensure that our elected officials answer to voters, not wealthy donors. We all agree that, whatever the economy, government doesn't have money to waste. Every agency and program must be tested for efficiency and performance. Excess bureaucracy and excessive regulations must be cut. Savings must be found.

However, it is precisely when times are tough that we need Clean Elections the most.

No moneyed special interest should ever trump the interest of Maine people. That's why we must cut the financial ties between lawmakers and lobbyists.

Let's be clear about this. Even in tough times, the State House hallways are lined with well-paid lobbyists advocating for positions on everything from health care regulation to gun rights to banking rules. Legislators rely on lobbyists to bring them important information and to share their expertise on relevant matters. But, unlike in almost every other state, most lawmakers here do not rely on lobbyists for campaign contributions.

Think of it: 80 percent of current legislators won their seats without raising money from special interests. As long as we have a strong and well-used Clean Elections program, offers of or threats to withhold campaign contributions will not sway our elected officials on how to vote on important legislative issues.

It wasn't that long ago when lobbyists handed out campaign contributions on the floor of the House and Senate chambers before important votes. Many improvements have been made, and today no lobbyist may make a campaign contribution while the Legislature is in session.

The Clean Election program has made the biggest difference of all. While even more must be done, the system has proven itself to work well at keeping our democracy in the hands of Maine people.

Maine people have done a good job of protecting Clean Elections over the years. Today, it must also be strengthened, thanks to a Supreme Court decision that eliminated one important provision.

I believe the way to do that is for the Legislature to pass a strong recommendation made by the Ethics Commission. It's called the "requalifying option," and it is the best way to keep the Clean Election program viable and attractive to candidates in all types of legislative races. Lawmakers should work to implement these changes immediately.

We must move forward in the fight against outside wealthy and corporate interests, not backward by allowing the system to wither on the vine. When some suggest that the program does not need to be amended despite the court's ruling, that is what they mean. To keep faith with the voters who passed Clean Elections and make good on its promise, we must insist that Augusta act to keep the system strong.

It will do no good to save a little money and lose the ability to protect our elections from undue influence. We have seen what happens on the national level. Over the past 12 years the fossil fuel industry has "donated" over \$43 million to members of Congress and senators. Make no mistake, that is a business decision, not a charitable one. The point is to push legislation favorable to the industry, and it is no wonder that Congress is trapped in a codependent relationship with this and every other moneyed interest.

Maine does better, but weakening our law will only allow outside interests more influence over our government. Maine voters didn't tolerate this in 1996 and they won't tolerate it today.

Mainers won't sacrifice Clean Elections to save a couple of bucks. Period.

Edward Youngblood served in the Maine Senate in the 120th and the 121st legislatures and now is a candidate for the Maine Senate. He recently completed two terms on the Maine Commission on Government Ethics and Election Practices.