

# BANGOR DAILY NEWS

## Clean Elections system works

By Tina Baker and James Annis, Special to the BDN  
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Change is afoot in Augusta, and it's safe to say that we two former legislators — one Republican and one Democrat — are not always in agreement about whether these changes are good or bad for Maine.

But there is one proposed change that we agree should not be made by the 125th Legislature, and that is the repeal of the Maine Clean Election Act.

Maine people rightly feel a lot of pride in their Clean Election system. Maine residents initiated the law back in 1995, and a solid majority of Maine voters passed it into law the next year. Maine was the first state to pass a full public financing law so that candidates for the state's highest offices would never have to rely on special interests for funding.

Both of us tried out the brand-new system in 2000. That year, just one-third of candidates were willing to take a chance on an untested program. But, it worked so well that more and more candidates embraced it. Today the Clean Election system is used by 80 percent of Maine's legislative candidates, and it is popular among Republicans, Democrats and others.

Our accomplishment in Maine did not go unnoticed, and states around the country took notice. We both have traveled to other states to tell about our firsthand experience with public funding. Speaking with lawmakers about running campaigns and about the relationship that legislators have with lobbyists has only strengthened our commitment to keeping Maine clean. We have a system that puts voters first, which is right where they should be.

And voters in Maine have continued to embrace Clean Elections. No candidate can qualify for public funds without asking voters for their help, and in each cycle, voters from across the political spectrum and all around the state make qualifying contributions of \$5 to candidates they support.

Recent public opinion research confirms that Clean Elections are a priority for Maine people. Three separate polls tell similar stories — the numbers vary a bit, but in all three surveys, around three-quarters of Maine people say that it's important to continue to have our Clean Election program.

There is widespread agreement that the law should not be repealed, and even higher majorities object to repealing just the gubernatorial system. When asked whether candidates for governor should use Clean Elections, 64 percent of people in one poll, and 77 percent in another, said "yes."

Despite the unwavering support by Maine people of a popular citizen-initiated program, the 125th Legislature has seriously contemplated repealing Clean Elections. A handful of legislators and Gov. Paul LePage have publicly expressed their desire to eliminate the Clean Election option for future races for governor.

This would be a big mistake.

First, to do so would be to break faith with the voters who passed Clean Elections and who continue to actively support it.

Second, just because we have not yet elected a governor who used the system doesn't mean that we won't or shouldn't. We know from experience the benefits of the system, and they are many.

Clean Elections make for better, more inclusive campaigns, but the most substantial benefits emerge after the election.

As legislators, it was great to be able to take office in Augusta knowing that our only debt was to the voters who sent us there. We were able to build healthy relationships with the professional advocates in the State House because we knew those relationships would never be complicated by an offer of a campaign contribution.

If the 125th Legislature wants to improve Maine's campaign finance system it should leave Clean Elections alone and focus instead on political action committees, PACs, and the unlimited contributions that are funneled through them in each election cycle. Why should out-of-state interests be able to spend big to influence the outcome of elections here? Our PAC laws need some shoring up.

Maine people deserve a lot of credit for coming up with a sensible and pragmatic Clean Election system that has stood the test of time.

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