

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Five steps toward better elections

By Amy Fried

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Unlike you, I don't know how the Nov. 8 election turned out — my deadline doesn't allow that — but, whatever happened, some reflection and action are in order.

Maine politics have been extraordinary. For a small state, Maine has produced an exemplary set of political leaders — thoughtful, productive and civil. Maine's uncommon practices such as Election Day voter registration and Clean Elections supported its political culture and produced high turnout and a well-functioning citizen Legislature.

Troubled by even the hint of corruption, Maine people have expected honest communication and have strongly disliked any funny business in politics. With these values and ways of behaving, campaigns that do not follow those norms were punished, no matter the political party.

But is Maine still Maine?

For years, as national politics became more toxic and more influenced by monied interests, Maine has largely maintained its special quality.

But now what has been precious is threatened.

Most recently, this threat can be seen in the politics surrounding Question 1, which included reasoned arguments but also some dirty politics.

The last five days of the campaign brought a deceptive ad from a shadowy group from away. Those Who Would Not Name Themselves followed a rule of dirty politics: late dirt is more effective. It took brazenness, real chutzpah to claim that they were defending Maine's ethics laws from out-of-staters. This deceit and nondisclosure was defended by a conservative advocacy group with a stated mission to promote transparency.

Moreover, the No on 1 campaign timed its efforts so that it could spend freely but not report who contributed until weeks after the election. Like the \$400,000 from the Republican State Leadership Committee that flowed into five state Senate races in 2010, the fine assessed was too small to stop this practice.

Indeed, none of this was new, not the late money, nor the late reporting, nor the deceitful messaging. And Maine finds itself the recipient of a trend of nationally coordinated attack politics in states.

Whatever election outcomes this year, if we believe Maine's political traditions are worth defending, we must act. Wringing our hands about dirty politics is not sufficient. Late money from shadowy funders, deceptive ads and shrewd presentations won't go away by themselves.

Five steps involving the press and Maine law can make a difference.

First, to help citizens assess advertisements and campaign statements, the state needs its own [Politifact](#). While most known in national politics, there are nine state Politifacts. With a very active campaign season coming in 2012, Maine's media outlets should find a way to cooperate to create this service — a single site with clear, credible information.

Second, Maine journalists should increase their knowledge of proper research practices and communicate this to readers. When an organization presents its claims as backed by research, those reporting on it should be able to recognize relatively simple mistakes such as comparing apples and oranges or **using data** that do not relate to the issue under consideration. Reporters should not pass flawed “studies” to readers without clearly identifying their errors.

Third, disclosure requirements should be tightened so that in the last weeks of the campaign, every contribution of \$100 or more is disclosed within 24 hours.

Fourth, penalties should be increased so groups no longer can consider campaign finance fines to be part of the cost of doing business. This year’s fine of \$3,251 for the No on 1 organization is an insufficient deterrence for future bad behavior. Fines should be much larger — at least as much as the amount spent by the group for the incident that led to the fine. That would have run to \$162,000 for No on 1.

Fifth, as the Clean Elections Act is revamped, clean candidates should continue to receive matching funds to enable them to compete. As political scientist **Mark Brewer** notes, without this, candidates will either need considerable money of their own or be “comfortable, or have more experience with, soliciting decent size amounts of money from others.”

Maine cannot be walled off from the noxious political trends outside of its borders. But we can act to preserve what we and others know is a better way Maine has governed itself.

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