

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Campaign changes need debate

Editorial

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Pressure was high in Augusta this year to eliminate clean election, or public, funding for candidates for governor. Several bills to do this were introduced, and when they stalled, the governor briefly proposed to eliminate this funding as part of his budget change package. Now, the Senate has — without any public input — taken a backdoor approach and passed a revised bill to double contribution limits for gubernatorial candidates who don't use the clean election system.

Under the clean election system, candidates forgo raising private money in exchange for a set amount of public funding.

There may be good reasons for ending clean election funding for candidates for governor — it hasn't brought better candidates into the field, nor has it kept out money from outside interests, for example. But significantly changing the campaign funding law passed by voters in 1996 without a public hearing or any opportunity for public input isn't the right way to do it.

As originally written, LD 856 would have raised the individual contribution limit for county and municipal candidates to \$750. This was recommended for passage by the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee last month.

Gov. Paul LePage proposed ending clean election funding for candidates for governor and increasing the private contribution limit to \$2,500, the same as the limit for congressional candidates. The provision in his budget change package was quickly withdrawn and replaced with a plan to eliminate state funding for the Maine Public Broadcasting Network.

In the Senate on Wednesday, LD 856 was amended by Sen. Debra Plowman to raise the individual contribution limit to candidates for governor who don't use clean election funding from \$750 to \$1,500 per election. This means individuals could give \$3,000 to a gubernatorial candidate who won the primary and went on to the general election.

Maine's current contribution limits are very low, and a good case could be made for raising them. In 2009, individual contribution limits for candidates for the Blaine House were raised from \$500 to \$750. In fact, the Senate Republican Office presented the persuasive case that Maine has only three statewide elected offices — governor and two U.S. senators — so the contribution limits to candidates for the Blaine House should be similar to those seeking a seat in Congress. That case, however, should be discussed in public and time given to hear concurring and opposing arguments.

Holding a public hearing on contribution limits for county-level candidates and then passing a bill to double the contribution limits for gubernatorial candidates falls woefully short of the required public debate.

Lawmakers will have a chance to consider broader changes next year when a bill to end clean election funding for candidates for governor will be taken up again. Contribution limit changes for these candidates can wait until then.