

# BANGOR DAILY NEWS

## Clean Legislature

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Maine's Clean Election system has encouraged new candidates, especially women, to run for the Legislature. Its record at the gubernatorial level is less clear.

That's why a bill to eliminate public funding for candidates for governor deserves close consideration. LD 120, sponsored by Rep. Tyler Clark, a Republican from Easton, is scheduled for a public hearing on Wednesday.

In 1996, Maine voters strongly supported creation of a system to publicly fund candidates who agreed to limit their campaign spending. After unsuccessful court challenges, the public funding first was available to candidates in 2000.

At the legislative level, public funding has had a largely positive impact. According to a 2007 review of the Clean Election Act at the behest of the Legislature's Legal and Veterans Affairs Committee, the number of candidates for House and Senate seats has increased since the law was passed. In a decade, there had been a 10 percent increase in legislative candidates, the report found.

The public funding also appears to have encouraged new challengers to incumbent candidates. From 1990 to 2000, there was an average of 31 legislative districts (out of a total of 186) where incumbents seeking re-election were unchallenged. In 2004 and 2006, that number dropped to an average of 2.5 districts.

The public funding was especially important in encouraging women to run for office. In 1990, there were 70 female candidates for the Maine House of Representatives; in 2006, there were 102 female House candidates. Seventy-one percent of female candidates said the clean funding was very important in their decision to run; 53 percent of male candidates said it was very important, according to a survey conducted by the study group.

As last year's election showed, however, the law hasn't taken private money out of campaigns for governor or prompted higher-caliber candidates to run. A candidate financed with public money has yet to win the Blaine House, which could mean that the experience of having to ask for financial support makes for stronger candidates in [statewide](#) races.

Worse, the fact that candidates who use the public funding still can raise money through political action committees, which can also spend money to support clean candidates, is a major loophole. This is especially true at the gubernatorial level, where large sums of money are needed to fund a campaign.

With the program perennially short on money — it currently has enough to fund legislative races in 2012 — limiting public funding to legislative races deserves close consideration.