

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Clean election check-off

Editorial

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Maine's system of clean election funding is popular with the public and lawmakers, but it is in danger of running short of money. Taxpayers can show their support for the program — and help avert a decrease in funding to candidates — by using the Clean Election Fund check-off on their state income tax form.

Checking the box — it is the first question after your name and address on the 1040ME forms — diverts \$3 to the program. It does not reduce your refund or increase the amount you owe the state. Instead, each checkoff sends \$3 from the state's General Fund to the state's Clean Election program. Consider it as a way to tell Augusta that you fully support this election funding system, otherwise lawmakers are free to assume that the program is not that popular with the public and can be changed.

There are several proposals in the Legislature to change the Clean Election program. One would end the program for candidates for governor. Another would deny the funds to candidates without challengers.

Voters in 1996 approved a public financing system, believing it would free candidates from the burden of raising money, especially from lobbyists. The public funds come mostly from state appropriations — \$2 million a year by law. Smaller amounts come from the checkoff on state income tax forms — about \$200,000 a year — and the required \$5 contributions collected by publicly funded candidates, which totals about \$130,000 a year.

In 2002, 62 percent of the state's candidates took Clean Election money. In 2008, 81 percent of legislative candidates — and 85 percent of those who emerged victorious — did, highlighting the growing popularity of the program.

Lawmakers have seen the Clean Election Fund as an easy pot of money to raid to pay other bills, although most of the money has been returned. However, the fund often run perilously close to not having enough money to cover all the candidates who want to use public money for their campaigns. The fund has enough money to cover legislative races in 2012, but not the governor's race in 2014.

If the fund doesn't have money to fully fund qualified candidates, its only choice is to authorize candidates to accept some private funds, which contradicts what the public approved a decade ago.

To help avert this, supporters of the program should check off the Clean Election Fund box on their tax returns.

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