

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Saving Maine's Clean Elections protects independent thinking

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In these lean times, spending money to help politicians get elected seems imprudent. But without public financing for Maine's legislative candidates, voters will feel a chill when they try to influence their elected officials who instead cater to big donor interests.

Maine's Clean Election system was created in 1996 with 58 percent of the electorate endorsing it. It has an accountability factor that belies critics' claims that it is "welfare for politicians." To qualify, candidates must go to voters in their district and get endorsement signatures and then secure \$5 donations. It's worked so well that 80 percent of sitting legislators used the system.

The Clean Election system was replicated in Arizona, and from that state came a challenge to a component that released more money to "clean" candidates when an opponent or third party spent large sums late in the campaign. For Maine, that's not a hypothetical; late last fall a national political action group spent nearly \$400,000 to malign five Democratic state Senate candidates; in one race, \$100,000 was spent by the outside group. All five candidates lost.

Since the court found this late disbursement was unconstitutional in the Arizona case, Maine's Clean Election system now is in limbo.

Three options are in play for fixing it. One is to give candidates more money — up to \$7,716 for House candidates and \$33,617 for Senate candidates. A second option would give House candidates up to \$11,500 and Senate candidates up to \$55,000, but require them to get additional qualifying \$5 contributions to get that extra money.

The third option is to do nothing, which lets the later disbursement component the court struck down die.

State Democrats like the second option, which requires candidates to work for that extra money. So does Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, the nonpartisan group that worked to create the system. State Republicans, including Gov. LePage, like the third option — do nothing. Supporters of Clean Elections argue that doing nothing will eventually kill the program, because its lack of funding will leave candidates hamstrung when big money comes in on an opponent's behalf.

The Clean Election system helps Maine retain its citizen legislature — that is, a body not populated by sophisticated politicians for whom elected office is a primary vocation — because it allows truly independent-thinking candidates to run and helps them stay competitive. While they may be loyal Rs and loyal Ds, those candidates don't pander to big-buck special interests and do not owe their votes to those interests. They are more likely to break ranks with their party when conscience dictates.

The money for legislative Clean Elections — \$3.3 million — is in the budget the Legislature approved and the governor signed.

The gubernatorial version of Clean Elections is less attractive, but that debate will hold for another year or two. What won't hold is the fate of the 2012 legislative campaign. The Legislature's Legal and Veterans Affairs Committee must act soon to ensure the system voters approved 15 years ago works as it should.

[A majority of Americans](#) disagree with the Citizens United v. FEC Supreme Court ruling that ended limits on election advertising spending by corporations and unions. Some of those Americans are occupying Wall Street and other city centers, protesting the influence of money on elections. Keeping Maine's Clean Elections system working supports their cries for political equity.