

Maine bills would curb tax dollars to campaigns

By Glenn Adams
Associated Press / February 16, 2011

AUGUSTA, Maine—Maine should abandon its system of financing gubernatorial campaigns with taxpayers' money, a legislative committee was told Wednesday during hearings on several bills to scale back public campaign funding.

While the Clean Election Act was intended to remove the influence of special-interest money from elections, "it does the exact opposite," Rep. Tyler Clark, R-Easton, told the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee. "It makes elections less clean."

Tyler and others told the panel that even with public financing, millions of dollars in "independent" advocacy and issue advertising, often from out state, continues to come into the state during campaigns, effectively nudging up the funding for candidates who are eligible for public financing.

To be eligible for public funding, candidates must collect a minimum number of checks or money orders for \$5 each to show a basic level of support, but agree to forego private contributions. The eligibility rules differ for legislative and gubernatorial candidates.

Maine taxpayers have spent \$7.4 million since the state's Clean Election system kicked in more than a decade ago on gubernatorial campaigns, yet no "clean" gubernatorial candidate has won or even come close, said Tyler, who acknowledged that he has received taxpayer funding in his last three legislative races.

Republican Gov. Paul LePage, who won the November election through private financing, is supporting the bill to disqualify gubernatorial candidates from public funding.

LePage legal counsel Dan Billings told the committee that the public system has not limited the amount of money that's come into the state. He said LePage's own experience, in which he was outspent by a Clean Election candidate last fall but still won, leaves him skeptical of the public financing system's premise that big money always wins elections.

Billings also said the governor questions the use of state money for campaigns during tight fiscal times, when there are other priorities deserving funding. But eliminating public financing for gubernatorial campaigns would not produce any savings until the 2014-15 budget cycle, noted

Jonathan Wayne, executive director of the Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices.

Opponents said the existing law works well and that it serves as a model for other states that want to diminish the impact of special interest money on Maine politics. They also dismissed assertions that the system wastes money.

"In Maine, there's a strong public interest in separating private money from the public money" in elections, said Alison Smith of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections.

Another bill, sponsored by Republican Rep. Gary Knight of Livermore Falls, would bar distribution of Clean Election funds to candidates in uncontested legislative or gubernatorial primary elections.

While saying the intent of the Clean Election system is "admirable," Knight told the committee that \$500 distributions give candidates in uncontested primaries an unfair advantage over their general election rivals. He said 280 legislative candidates in the last election cycle received such funds while they were unopposed.

Smith of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections opposed the bill, saying the present system is "viable" and "popular." Smith said Knight's proposal would create a "blackout" period for unopposed primary candidates by denying them a chance to buy advertising using relatively small amounts of taxpayer money.

Another bill directs the secretary of state to develop a system that allows voters to choose among independent candidates for the Legislature and for governor to determine which independent candidate should receive public financing under the Clean Election Act.

The legislative committee also took up a voting bill, which would require photo identification for the purpose of voting.

The committee scheduled further sessions to review details and make changes in the bills before they are voted out.