MIKE TIPPING: Comprehensive polling shows wide support for clean elections

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At the beginning of the current legislative session, a wide range of bills was proposed that targeted Maine's Clean Elections system for full or partial repeal.

Most of these attempts to eliminate or chip away at Maine's public financing system for political campaigns now seem destined for the trash heap, victims of lopsided committee votes against their passage.

The threat to the Clean Elections Fund from Gov. Paul LePage also seems to have been stayed, at least temporarily. The administration originally had proposed eliminating funding for the program in the budget, but backed off from those cuts a week later.

Why does the program seem to be surviving, in spite of the current climate of rollbacks and cutbacks? In part, because it is popular among lawmakers. Eighty percent of the members of the Legislature used Clean Elections Funds in 2010, and they know firsthand the value of not having to appeal to big-money donors or corporate interests to fund their campaigns.

A more important factor for its continued existence, however, may be how popular it is with the general public. That popularity has just been reconfirmed by three new public opinion polls.

Over the past few weeks, Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, the group that helped to create the program through a public referendum in 1996 and still works to support it, has engaged in a nearly unprecedented level of research into Maine public opinion.

The group worked with three separate organizations to ask the public 11 questions about the Clean Elections Fund. The telephone polls were conducted by Pan Atlantic SMS, Critical Insights and the Maine People's Resource Center. The polls ran from April 25-May 8 and each was conducted and analyzed using different methods.

(Full disclosure: I work for the People's Resource Center and was involved in developing the poll.)

The pollsters were given leeway to shape the questions as they saw fit to get the most accurate representation of public thought. This latitude led to slightly different questions and a few of the same questions asked in slightly different ways, guaranteeing a wide-angle look at what Mainers think about campaign finance.

The three polls each had between 401 and 600 respondents and margins of error of between 4.9 percent and 4 percent, at the 95 percent confidence level.
If their results are combined and averaged based on the number of people surveyed, as can be done for some nearly identical questions, we're even more likely to be able to accurately gauge public opinion.

In general, the polls found overwhelming majorities in favor of the Clean Elections Fund system. The combined results of the Pan Atlantic and the People's Resource Center surveys on the question of whether Clean Elections should be repealed, for instance, found only 17.5 percent of respondents favored repeal. Critical Insights asked a similar question and found only 16 percent in favor of total repeal.

Critical Insights and Pan Atlantic both asked similar questions about how important Clean Elections are and returned an averaged result of 84 percent describing the system as either somewhat or very important (65 percent said very).

The People's Resource Center's survey found that even a solid majority of self-expressed supporters of the tea party favored continuation of the program.

The question from the surveys that may be the most important in influencing immediate legislative action, however, is the one that asked if respondents would support repealing just the portion of the law that allows candidates for governor to access Clean Election Funds.

It is relevant because one of the bills voted "ought-not-to-pass" by the committee seems likely to come to the floor for a vote anyway, where an amendment will be offered to put the gubernatorial portion of the law to a statewide referendum.

Pan Atlantic and the People's Resource Center found a combined average of only 12.6 percent of Mainers favored repeal of only the gubernatorial portion of the law.

That percentage doesn't bode well for the success of such a proposal at referendum, even with the huge amounts of money corporate interests against Clean Elections Funds are likely to spend.

Mike Tipping is a political junkie. He writes the Tipping Point blog on Maine politics at DownEast.com, his own blog at MainePolitics.net and works for the Maine People's Alliance and the Maine People's Resource Center. He's @miketipping on Twitter. Email to writebacktomike@gmail.com