

Portland Press Herald

February 17, 2011

Bill targets Clean Elections Act

The sponsor says PAC spending makes public funding of Maine races for governor ineffective.

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AUGUSTA — Maine's landmark Clean Elections Act could be scaled back by a bill that calls for an end to taxpayer-funded gubernatorial campaigns.

The bill's supporters say the law, which Maine voters approved by referendum in 1996, works well for legislative races but has proven ineffective in gubernatorial contests because of spending by political action committees.

The bill's opponents say the Legislature should focus instead on improving the Clean Elections Act because it is the only vehicle for insulating candidates from the corrupting influence of money.

The bill, L.D. 120, was the subject of a public hearing Wednesday before the Legislature's Legal and Veterans Affairs Committee.

The Clean Elections program gives legislative and gubernatorial candidates the option of using public money for their campaigns, rather than money raised from private sources.

However, Maine allows political action committees to support or oppose any candidate -- including a publicly funded one -- as long as the activity isn't coordinated with any candidate.

In last year's gubernatorial campaign, PACs spent millions of dollars on behalf of candidates, including more than \$1 million aimed at helping Democratic nominee Libby Mitchell or hurting her opponents.

Mitchell used \$1.8 million in public money for her campaign.

State Rep. Tyler Clark, R-Easton, who is sponsoring the bill, said the Clean Elections program is a waste of money.

He said during the hearing that \$7.4 million in public money was spent in the past three election cycles, and that 70 percent of it was used by candidates who won less than 20 percent of the vote.

No publicly funded candidate for governor has ever taken more than 30 percent of the vote, he said.

"It was a noble idea, but it has an unachievable goal," he told the committee, which took no action on the bill Wednesday.

Gov. Paul LePage supports the bill, said Dan Billings, the governor's chief legal counsel. He noted that LePage was elected despite being outspent by other candidates in both the primary and general elections.

Billings said that experience has made LePage skeptical about the Clean Elections Act's premise that an even financial playing field is crucial for competitive elections.

But money does have a corrupting influence because it buys access to politicians, said Cushman Anthony, a former state representative from North Yarmouth.

Most state House and Senate candidates use public funding because citizen legislators don't like to spend all of their time raising money, he said at the hearing.

He said the Clean Elections program should continue to fund gubernatorial campaigns because a governor has so much power.

"This bill is moving backwards, especially in a world where we have too much special-interest money," he said.

Eric Johnson, co-chairman of Maine Citizens for Clean Elections, said Maine is a model for states where efforts are under way to pass campaign finance laws. Johnson said the bill's passage would begin a "shameful" dismantling of the Clean Elections Act.

He said the spending on the program ultimately saves the state money because lawmakers who get elected with public funding can't feel obligated to pass laws that benefit campaign contributors.

"Some things are worth owning, and democracy is one of them," Johnson said. "Citizens have the opportunity to own democracy in this state. Don't give it away."

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