

Column
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Bill Nemitz: Bottom line is Mainers like Clean Elections

AUGUSTA — It was not, as public demonstrations go, a State House show stopper: a dozen or so hardy Mainers, most shivering in a stiff northerly wind, huddled around a podium pleading their cause to an audience of, well, one.

But make no mistake about it -- Maine Citizens for Clean Elections are ready to fight for the state's publicly funded campaign system. And it looks like they've got the numbers to back them up.

"We are Republicans, Democrats, Greens and independents, but we are Mainers first," said Alison Smith, co-president of the grass-roots group that launched the Maine Clean Election Act back in 1996 and has protected it from harm ever since. "And we call upon Governor LePage and the 125th Legislature to respect the will of Maine voters -- expressed over and over again, year after year -- and keep clean elections intact."

First, the bad news -- at least for those who think it's a good idea to level the playing field between candidates for whom money (their own or someone else's) is no object and those who are eager to serve without selling their souls to special interests.

One bill now before the Legislature, L.D. 659, would repeal Maine's Clean Election system outright. It's sponsored by freshman Rep. Aaron Libby, R-Waterboro, who won last fall as a privately financed candidate.

Libby said in an interview Tuesday that he opposes "welfare for politicians" because it costs too much and, with all the end-around schemes these days for influencing a publicly funded race with outside money, "clean election" is fast becoming a well-intentioned misnomer.

Libby, to be fair, has a point on that last one -- although it's hard to see how repealing the Maine Clean Election Act would improve matters. Better to add some much-needed transparency to all that cash flowing in from away so that voters at least know its original source.

Another bill, L.D. 120, would eliminate public financing for gubernatorial candidates. It's sponsored by Rep. Tyler Clark, R-Easton, who has twice run and won a trip to Augusta aboard a taxpayer-funded campaign.

(Clark, by the way, has plenty of company. According to the state Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices, 80 percent of our current lawmakers relied on Clean Election funding last fall -- proof, if there was any, that the system is actually working.)

Finally, there's Gov. Paul LePage's "Change Package," which aims to plug a \$164 million hole in his proposed biennial budget by, among other things, shifting \$3.3 million from the Maine Clean Election fund back into the General Fund.

At the same time, LePage (like Clark) wants to put the kibosh on Clean Election funding for gubernatorial candidates and force them to sink or swim in the private-money pool -- just as he did.

To be sure, it wouldn't be the first time the Clean Election fund has been raided for some quick cash. Over the years, Democrat-controlled legislatures have dipped into it, then dutifully put the money back in time for the next election cycle.

But the bottom line is that this time around, a public-financing system once lauded as a national model is threatened not just because money is tight, but because at least some Republicans now in control in Augusta want to put a philosophical torpedo through it.

Which brings us to the good news: They'll do so at their own peril.

In a recent Pan Atlantic SMS Group poll of 401 active Maine voters, 82 percent said they consider it very important (61 percent) or somewhat important (21 percent) that Maine continue to provide Clean Election funding.

Just under 77 percent said public financing for gubernatorial candidates should be left intact.

Sure, some will argue that because Maine Citizens for Clean Elections paid for the polling, it must be politically skewed.

But dig into the weeds and you'll find that polling sample includes almost equal numbers of Democrats, Republicans and unenrolled voters. And you'll see that while the Democrats supported Clean Election funding by a whopping 91 percent, it got a thumbs-up from 76 percent of the Republicans and 78 percent of the unenrolled.

In other words, 15 years after they passed the Clean Election Act by a 56 percent majority, Maine voters apparently have grown to like it even more.

So now what?

Well, Libby's bill calling for a full repeal appeared all but dead after it emerged last week from the Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee with an 11-2 ought-not-to-pass recommendation.

But Libby said Tuesday that he's attaching a last-minute floor amendment to the measure, requiring another statewide referendum before a repeal could take effect -- meaning the voters, if necessary, would at least get the final say.

Clark's proposal to yank public financing from future gubernatorial campaigns, tabled since early March, is scheduled for a committee work session today.

That leaves LePage's latest spending package, which includes a one-time, \$1.5 million raid on the Clean Election Fund (currently at \$3.4 million) along with a permanent reduction, from \$2 million to \$1.1 million per year, in the state's mandatory Clean Election allotment.

Those cuts, according to ethics commission Executive Director Jonathan Wayne, would likely make it impossible to fully fund qualifying legislative candidates in 2012.

"It would be a big departure in how the program was designed and how it has worked in previous years," Wayne said. "We'd be moving to a hybrid system for 2012 -- a mixture of public funding and campaign contributions -- which was not how the law was designed to work."

That, when it's all said and done, is why Smith and the other good citizens who planted this seed were standing out there in the cold breeze Tuesday morning.

And why, if you're among those Mainers who have come to like the fresh smell of a clean election, it might be a good time to call your local legislator (or governor) and say so.

"People are so far ahead of politicians on this -- and that's been true for years," noted Smith. "People like what public funding can do."

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