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Maine Voices: Clean Election law not dead yet

The public purposes it serves remain valid, so it needs to be improved – which it can be – and not discarded.

PORTLAND - Earlier this summer, the U.S. Supreme Court under Chief Justice John Roberts issued yet another ruling that hampers efforts to reduce the influence of special-interest money in elections. It looks like the erosion of federal campaign finance laws will be a lasting legacy of the Roberts Court.

What the recent decision means for Maine is that our groundbreaking, citizen-initiated Clean Election Act will have to operate a bit differently in the future. What was lost was the matching-funds system that has been a part of the law from the beginning.

While we agree with The Portland Press Herald's editorial of Aug. 22 that matching funds were a critical aspect of the law, we respectfully disagree that our law requires a dramatic overhaul or that the whole program will be lost.

Matching funds were valuable because they provided some assurance to Clean Election candidates, whose spending is limited, that adequate resources would be available even in the event of a hotly contested race.

Under our matching-funds system, the spending of independent groups or a high-spending opponent triggered additional funds -- matching funds -- that ensured that the voice of Clean Election candidates could also be heard.

Fortunately, the court's decision kept most of our Clean Election system intact, only ruling that the payment of matching funds cannot be based on someone else's spending. That means that Maine must find another way to ensure that Clean Election funding is adequate for candidates in targeted races.

Maine Citizens for Clean Elections is working closely with the state's Ethics Commission and other stakeholders to craft the best alternative to our matching-funds system.

We have looked into other models for public financing, and we are exploring some new ideas that could be a good fit for Maine. Several good proposals are on the table, and we expect a solution to be in place for the 2012 legislative elections. And, we believe the Clean Election system will be stronger than ever.

Although the matching-funds system served Maine well for the first decade of Clean Elections, it was not perfect. Sometimes expenditures were made and reported so late in a campaign that matching funds were distributed too late to be used effectively.

Now we can fix that problem and give candidates a little more certainty about what funds will be available to them, and when.

When all is said and done, the Clean Election system will still:

- Provide limited public funding to qualified Maine candidates who agree to limit their spending and who raise no large private donations.
- Allow candidates to focus on voters during their campaigns, and will never force them to cultivate political donors in order to run for office.
- Provide opportunity for diverse Maine people to run for office, engage in public discussion about the issues of the day, win elections and serve their constituents without being beholden to any special interest.
- Impart transparency so that voters will know who is behind the messages they see and hear in the election.
- Ensure that Clean Election office-holders continue to have a different relationship with the lobbyists who line the hallways and fill committee rooms in Augusta -- a relationship that does not include the promise of a future campaign contribution or the threat of withholding the same.

Maine people initiated Clean Elections, Maine voters endorsed the law at the polls, and today more Mainers support the law than ever. Several polls conducted this spring proved that huge majorities of Maine people think it's important to continue to have Clean Elections.

About 80 percent of candidates for the Legislature use the system when they run for office, and they are from all over the state and across the political spectrum.

In its 10-year history, the Maine Clean Election Act has proven its worth, and Maine people do not want to go backward. That's why it's so important that we keep working to strengthen our law.

Today's problem is not the first, nor will it be the last. It is just one more opportunity for Maine people to come together to fortify our democracy and make sure we have a government "of the people, by the people and for the people."

- Special to the Telegram

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