

Editorial
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[Our View: Clean Election Fund not a piggy bank](#)

Voters should be given the final say on major changes to the public financing system.

Almost 15 years ago, voters went to the polls and said "yes" to public financing of campaigns for state office.

There is room for improving the Clean Election concept, but a proposal to trim \$3.3 million from the Clean Election Fund is the kind of drastic change that should go back out to the voters.

They didn't say, "Yes, unless tax revenues come in a little short."

But that's how Gov. Paul LePage appears to be reading the results of that referendum. His latest budget package makes up for part of lower-than-expected state revenues by trimming \$3.3 million from the Clean Election Fund, money that would otherwise be used to fund gubernatorial campaigns.

That's not what the people voted for, and that's not what the Legislature should do. Although they have the power to change state law without getting approval from the voters, it doesn't mean they should undo something that was created by the people.

Which is not to say that there isn't room for improving the clean elections concept. There are still built-in loopholes that should be closed, like the one that lets legislative leadership candidates collect public money for their own legislative races while raising money to privately finance their races for leadership posts. That money can be used to influence other legislative races, winning favors for the leadership candidate.

And Maine doesn't exist in a vacuum. Last year, national groups outside the campaign organizations played a significant role in the gubernatorial and legislative races.

There are innovations in ways that money can be raised and spent that were unknown to voters 15 years ago, before YouTube, social media and micro donations made it possible to nationalize a local race. It is just as easy to imagine a Maine campaign upended by independent spending by outside groups as it is to see big donors buying influence from the officeholders they helped elect, which is what the clean elections system was created to prevent.

These are all issues that the Legislature and governor should be considering, and there may be ways to modernize the program. It may even be true that it's time to make a change like the one LePage is suggesting, but with the goal of making a more effective election system, not just to fill a hole in next year's budget.

The Clean Election Act designed a program to create a level playing field between candidates in state elections, not to serve as a piggy bank when lawmakers need to fill some gaps in the budget. As a matter of policy, the Legislature should respect the referendum process and should go back out to the voters if it wants to so drastically change what the voters have created.