

February 18, 2011

[Our View: Governor's races should stay in Clean Elections](#)

If opponents want to make more than minor improvements, they should go to the voters.

We would never accuse politicians of playing politics with election law, but excuse us if we are a little skeptical about the latest attempt to revise the Maine Clean Elections Act. A bill before the Legislature would repeal the law that provides public financing for candidates -- but not for everyone, just for people running for governor.

Well, if you were looking for votes from the 85 percent of lawmakers from both parties who benefited from the program in their recent campaigns, you probably wouldn't get too far proposing a bill to take away their financing.

And since Gov. LePage paid for his campaign by traditional contributions, he might be willing to sign a law that would make it harder for his next opponents to fill their war chests.

But while there are ways in which the Clean Election Act could be modified and improved, this isn't the way to do it. If public financing doesn't belong in gubernatorial races, it doesn't belong anywhere. There is no reason why legislators are a more appropriate destination for public support than the candidates vying to be chief executive. Exempting the governor's race from public financing would not be an improvement. There are plenty of places lawmakers could look if they wanted to make the law more effective.

The first should be the "Leadership PACs" that allow publicly financed legislative candidates, who are supposed to forgo all private fundraising for their own campaigns, to solicit private contributions they can use to help get other legislators elected.

And those are not the only PACs worth examining. Looking at the last gubernatorial race, it was clear that spending by political action committees, which collect and spend contributions that help or hurt candidates, was at least as important as the spending reported by the campaigns.

We have supported the Clean Elections Act since its inception, and we still do. But after more than a decade in place, we think it's worth examining the law to see if it is doing what it was intended to do. Chopping out gubernatorial candidates, however, wouldn't provide that kind of insight.

This was a citizen-initiated law, so, ultimately, it should be up to the people to decide its future. If the sponsors of this bill think they have the support for repeal, they should go to the voters. If they don't, they should learn to live with it.