

Sun Journal

Preserving citizenship leadership

By Editorial Board
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On Monday, legislative leaders will meet to discuss Maine's options in bringing our Clean Election Act into compliance with a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling on matching funds provisions.

Our options are to either preserve or maim clean elections, a process by which qualifying state candidates have access to public money to fund campaigns. Maine was the first state in the nation to adopt this citizen-friendly campaign option 15 years ago, and it has worked well to populate our Legislature with proud, working-class people.

We don't have a Legislature filled with millionaires who are out of touch with their constituents. We have a Legislature filled with lawmakers who can relate to their neighbors because they share social and economic similarities.

Clean elections gave us that.

On Monday, talks among leadership will be centered on three options: The first would establish fixed clean election payments with maximum limits for House and Senate candidates; the second also sets maximum limits, but allows candidates to collect additional funds if they do the footwork to collect additional qualifying contributions; and the third would be to do nothing, which would eliminate matching funds altogether, all but killing any candidate's interest in seeking funding.

Of the three options, the second makes the most sense, since it allows campaigns to seek additional funding in hotly contested races.

Maine can't ignore this dilemma.

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Arizona's clean elections law, ruling that state's matching funds provision violated the First Amendment because it limited free speech by restricting campaign contributions.

As a result, states that had similar laws — all stemming from Maine's original initiative — are now forced to align with the high court's ruling.

Since June, lawmakers were aware they had to act by early 2012, and talks that began in earnest over the summer have recently stalled.

Given the fact that nearly 80 percent of legislative candidates from varying parties in the last round of elections used clean election funding, the stalled talks should frighten anyone of ordinary means who may be considering a run for office.

The clean election process of candidate funding is not akin to getting free money. Candidates have to put enormous effort into getting qualifying signatures, accompanied by a \$5 check from each of those signatories, before they get a dime of public funding. It means motivated candidates can mount a reasonable campaign, instead of watching from the sidelines as wealthy Mainers win office and wield power.

Public financing evens the much-cliched playing field, allowing voters to concentrate on a candidate's character absent the gloss and hype of a monied campaign.

And isn't that what we want? To encourage people who have workaday experience to seek office and set public policy?

None of the options on the table require additional appropriations, according to the nonpartisan Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices, so this is not a budget dilemma. It's a question of what kind of Legislature we want seated in Augusta, the kind filled with Maine people of varying economic means and life experiences, or the esteemed elite among us who have the personal financial means to adopt lawmaking as a hobby.

We already have a Congress filled with mega-millionaires who, collectively, do not have the trust and confidence of rank-and-file Americans.

Is that the kind of Legislature we want in Maine? A microcosm of our current Congress?

That's a haunting thought for Maine's leaders to consider when they meet on Halloween.

We strongly urge lawmakers to drive that specter away, and resolve to protect and preserve public financing and continue Maine's tradition of citizenship leadership and everyman representation.

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The opinions expressed in this column reflect the views of the ownership and editorial board.