

Improving Clean Elections

By any measurement we can think of, Maine's pioneering Clean Election Act has proven itself over a decade's worth of elections as a law that works.

Wednesday, April 20, 2011

Public support?

In each election cycle, tens of thousands of Maine voters freely write \$5 checks to help a favored candidate qualify as a Clean Election candidate. Tens of thousands of Maine taxpayers also check "yes" on their Maine income tax form, thereby directing \$3 to the Maine Clean Election Fund (without adding to their tax bill or reducing their refund and adding several hundred thousand dollars to the fund each year).

Obviously, Mainers value the guiding principle of the Maine Clean Election Act — namely, that public financing of campaigns for state offices offers greater assurance that winning candidates are beholden to the voters and not to special interests, corporations or wealthy donors seeking to buy influence.

Participation by candidates?

In six election cycles, there have been approximately 1,600 Clean Election campaigns. Participation has grown from roughly 60 percent of candidates using the fund in 2002 to almost 80 percent in 2010. In last year's elections, 94 percent of Senate Republicans and 82 percent of Senate Democrats used Clean Election funding; in House races, the breakdown was 68 percent/Republicans and 89 percent/Democrats.

Obviously, candidates prefer to spend their time meeting with voters rather than chasing after money to fund their campaigns.

Other benefits that have been identified include fewer uncontested races and more people running, particularly women, who would not have sought elected office without public funding being available.

These tangible benefits, we believe, provide sufficient cause for lawmakers to reject LD 659, "An Act to Repeal the Maine Clean Election Laws." For 10 years we've limited the influence of big money in state elections. Why would we want to change that?

That's not to say the Maine Clean Election Act can't be improved. As they've done in the past, lawmakers in this session have drafted more than a half dozen measures to revise the law. Some of the proposals fall in the category of finetuning the public financing system to make it better; others, we believe, run the risk of weakening it and jeopardizing its guiding principle of keeping special interest money out of our state elections.

Two bills that received "strong support" endorsements by Maine Citizens for Clean Elections at the March 28 Clean Elections public hearing hosted by the Joint Standing Committee on Veterans and Legal Affairs, deserve passage:

— LD 814, a bill that proposes limits on contributions to political action committees that target candidate races, which increasingly have been used to skirt contribution limits imposed on both privately and publicly funded candidates.

— LD 848, a bill that recognizes the possibility that a pending U.S. Supreme Court case involving Arizona's Clean Election "matching funds" provision could affect Maine's system as well. If adopted, this bill would require the Maine Ethics Commission to study the Supreme Court decision and make recommendations on what resulting steps, if any, would be required to protect Maine's matching funds system. This step makes more sense than several other bills that seek changes based on speculation about what the Supreme Court decision might be.

LD 120, a bill that seeks to end taxpayer-funded campaigns for gubernatorial candidates, would return our state's highest office to a race limited to candidates funded largely by personal wealth and private special interest money. Instead of giving up and conceding that as a foregone conclusion, we should look at how public funding of gubernatorial campaigns could be improved.

Lawmakers, by their own experience, should recognize the value of keeping Maine's Clean Election Act strong and viable. It accomplishes what voters have consistently said they want: A level playing field, with candidates no longer beholden to big money and special interest influence.