

Bar Harbor Times

Guest column

Maine's Clean Election Act works, and deserves support

By Nolan L. Reichl | Jan 26, 2012

Last Saturday marked the two-year anniversary of the Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*, which opened political campaigns to unlimited corporate and union spending.

In the intervening time, politicians and pundits have had much to say about *Citizens United*, but it seems that it is only now — as the people of Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina have been inundated with ads from so-called “Super PACs” — that voters are learning the real meaning of the decision.

And that meaning is clear: *Citizens United* is emblematic of a federal campaign finance system that is broken. Unlimited corporate and union money means that federal candidates outsource their negative ads to Potemkin groups with empty names like “Restore Our Future,” “Winning Our Future,” and “Red, White and Blue.”

Meanwhile, the fundraising arms race escalates as the President and members of Congress must spend more time raising ever-greater amounts of money and less time fixing America's problems. Why? To combat all of those nasty attacks ads from outside groups, of course.

Indeed, fundraising now has become such a central part of getting elected that both parties seek to recruit “self-financers” who can afford to bankroll their own campaigns — to the exclusion of Americans from broader walks of life.

What kind of representatives do we get for this system? Extremely wealthy ones who, if you ask Americans, are not very good at their jobs. The median net worth of the members of Congress has climbed to more than \$500,000, nearly five times that of the average American.

And yet, over the past couple of months, Gallup has recorded historically high disapproval of Congress as an American institution of power; identified historically high anti-incumbent sentiment toward members of Congress; and awarded Congressional service the worst honesty and ethics rating of any American profession ever evaluated by Gallup at any time, surpassing the ratings previously given to car salespeople and telemarketers.

The irony is that, like Dr. Frankenstein at work in his laboratory, Congress created the very system that now threatens its legitimacy, but it doesn't seem to know or care how to reverse the damage. There is a solution, however. Policymakers in Washington should take a look at Maine's voter-centered campaign finance law.

In 1996, the people of Maine passed our state's groundbreaking, first-in-the-nation Maine Clean Elections Act by a resounding 56 to 44 margin. Under Clean Elections, qualified candidates forgo special interest-funneled donations and pledge to limit their spending in exchange for public funds to run their campaigns.

Though entirely voluntary, this system has been adopted widely by Democrats, Republicans, Greens, and unenrolled candidates, with more than 80 percent of Maine state office seekers in the 2010 election cycle choosing Clean Elections.

And the system works. Clean Elections allows qualified candidates from all across the political and socioeconomic spectrum to represent their communities. It has helped to create a political environment in Maine where our elected officials have greater motivation to respond to their constituents rather than to special interests.

Political scientists who have studied Maine's system have determined that, since the passage of Clean Elections, campaigns for the Maine legislature have become more competitive, as incumbent reelection rates have dropped and races have become closer. On top of that, in 2010, Maine led the nation in voter participation.

In short, more Maine citizens are watching their lawmakers more closely — and making clear that they will get rid of the ones they don't like. These conditions raise the incentives for legislators to address the true needs of the people they represent, and lower the incentives for legislators to cater to special interests with niche agendas.

However, for Maine to continue to lead, policymakers in Augusta must take the steps necessary to update Clean Elections after the Supreme Court effectively struck down one aspect of it earlier this year. Unfortunately, some members of the legislature see this as an opportunity to diminish the system, and have recommended doing nothing to ensure its continued success.

This would be a step backward, would make our campaign finance system more like the broken and unpopular federal system, and would make our legislature more like the broken and unpopular Congress. That's the wrong direction. Maine's lawmakers should move forward, embrace the success of Clean Elections, and adopt legislation that will preserve both the high level of candidate participation and the ability of candidates from all tax brackets to mount competitive campaigns.

Maine's lawmakers can be national leaders in campaign finance reform but, first, they have to continue leading Maine.

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