

The soapy art of clean elections

By [Bob Higgins](#)

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For anyone that has ever looked into the process of making soap, it really comes close to the elements of politics. Add water, the fat of land animals, and lye (or lie, if you will) and boil the resultant mixture for a bit.

Take the resultant sludge that starts to solidify, slap some essential oil and fragrances in it to make it smell pretty, chuck it into a mold and dry it.

Sounds like an election to me. Hard to believe we ever tried the “saponification” process of having clean elections.

Originally, the idea was based on the whole “get big money out of politics” concept. As noble as the idea of putting a bell on a cat is to the rest of the mice, someone has to do the deed and deal with the resultant claws. As someone who has actually had to deal with the process of bathing a cat for a “flea dip,” the resistance and howling to a federal judge tossing out sections of the law sound familiar.

This week, when the Maine House decided to use what some called the “do nothing” option, leaving the court opinion unchallenged and stripping the Maine Clean Elections Act of the matching funds option, it was if the cat had been given an icewater rinse.

There are those on both sides that think the idea of tossing out clean elections entirely is tossing out the relatively clean new baby with the nasty bathwater. Money has always been a huge part of politics, ever since Ug The Caveman jumped up on the first big rock he saw to “run” for leadership of the tribe. Those who wanted things done their way paid larger portions of tribute.

Little has changed since Ug. Whether it be the knuckleheads at Americans Elect, The RNC/DNC, Right-Wing groups, Left Wing groups, or just plain old rich folks, money pours into political campaigns.

I’m going way out there on a limb. The money isn’t the problem. The biggest problem is the lack of chasing it back to the source.

Conventional wisdom from around the turn of the 20th century said that the definition of an “honest politician” is one that “stays bought.” Sure, it’s crass, but the influence of money in politics is about as predictable as that of the moon on the tides. You can chart it years in advance.

Maine could take the NEXT step, and resubmit some hastily worded but quickly overturned by the courts band-aid to fix the mess. A smarter idea would be to scrap the whole thing and start over.

Picture a law, consisting of two sentences. “No donation of any kind shall be made to a political campaign without an accompanying Social Security number. EIN/Tax ID numbers shall not qualify under this statute. All money donated to any campaign, by any individual, shall be registered with the office of the Secretary of State no later than 10 days before any scheduled election.”

No last minute money. No 501c (4) corporate untraceable donations. No beleaguered state treasury on the hook for potential matching funds.

As a candidate, do what you wish with the money. The reporting of every dime spent on postage is sort of ridiculous. Possibly keep the filing requirements, just to show your donors you were responsible with “their” money, as that might be a fairly good indicator of how they’ll spend everyone else’s money if they get elected.

So there is is. Do we scrap the whole system and start over, mindful of the inevitable challenge from monied interests, or take the path of least resistance and let politics Hoover up as much as it can? Make the process individually accountable, and it just might work.

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