

Why Maine should value clean elections

By Wells Lyons

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Recently, Maine's system of publicly financed elections has been criticized as an expense Mainers can no longer afford. As the current economic downturn has resulted in declining state revenues, it makes sense to reexamine government expenditures, even for programs that enjoy broad public support. To determine the value of Clean Elections, three questions should be asked: what is the current cost of Clean Elections, what is the return on our investment, and what would state elections look like absent public financing?

As far as statewide expenditures go, the cost of Clean Elections is minimal — a mere two dollars per person per year. For about the price of a cup of coffee, the Maine Clean Elections Fund provides public financing to qualified candidates running for the offices of State Representative, State Senator and Governor. At only a couple of dollars per person, our first-in-the-nation campaign financing system requires only a modest expenditure.

So what exactly are we getting for our money? Frankly, a lot. Perhaps the best way to think of the Clean Elections system is as a firewall against corruption. Public financing allows legislators to govern free from the influence of lobbyist dollars, a benefit enjoyed by far too few lawmakers around the country. Constituents benefit in additional ways, since when legislators opt to use public financing, they spend less time seeking donations for reelection and more time meeting with and serving their constituents. Just as importantly, Clean Elections allow our democracy to be more representative of our state as a whole. It allows those of us without personal fortunes or networks of wealthy friends to run for office competitively. And when voters have a wider range of choices, it makes it easier for us to hold our representatives accountable.

Given these benefits to the candidates, constituents and the system at large, it should be no surprise that a full eighty percent of members of the legislature use Clean Elections. This eighty percent cannot accept private contributions, and thus are not beholden to special interests. They may not use their time in office to build a campaign war chest for use in their next election, as doing so would cause them to lose eligibility for public financing. Clean Elections simply do more than any other program to remove the influence of money in politics.

What would Maine's political system look like without publicly financed elections? The numbers behind national congressional races, which are not publicly financed, reveal a great deal. According to Harvard Law professor Lawrence Lessig, members of Congress spend as much as seventy percent of their time fundraising. Because a mere one-quarter of one percent of people contribute over two hundred dollars per election cycle, this means members of the United States Congress spend more time with that fraction of a percent than they do with the remaining ninety-nine percent of constituents. In effect, unless your name is on the fundraising list, don't expect a call from your Senator. And unless you're showing up with a check, don't plan on a meeting.

And this is perhaps most striking — unless you can raise the \$10 million — the amount it took to run a successful United States Senate campaign last year — don't bother running. (For the House, a successful race cost \$1.4 million.) In other countries, soliciting millions of dollars from interested parties to support your political ambitions is called corruption — only in America do we call it “fundraising.”

It's no surprise then that Mainers value their Clean Election system. These are the reasons we contribute in five-dollar amounts to the Qualifying Contributions fund, and the reasons we check “Yes” to support Clean Elections on our state income tax forms. Mainers have shown again and again that we stand behind the program we initiated. We stand behind our system of publicly financed elections for the simple reason that it works.

The benefits of Clean Elections are many, and the cost is small. Publicly financed elections allow a broader range of well-qualified citizens to run for elected office, and makes sure that those who win answer to their constituents, not special interests. The example of our broken federal campaign finance system provides a stark and corrupt contrast. Mainers have worked hard to pioneer a better system, but only with constant vigilance and support will we be able to continue to enjoy the benefits of Clean Elections. When challenges arise, as they have thanks to recent decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court, we must regroup and work together to strengthen and protect our program.

Clean Elections help all Mainers, whether Republican or Democrat, Independent or Green. Our democracy is better for it, and whether measured in terms of cost, benefit or possible alternatives, Clean Elections remain a resounding success. This success is something all of us should be proud of.

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