



GEORGE SMITH

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### **GEORGE SMITH: 'Clean elections' system doesn't stop influence of campaign cash**

I never liked the term "clean elections." The obvious implication is that candidates who choose not to use taxpayer money for their campaigns are "dirty."

At the state Capitol, there is no difference in the way these legislators conduct themselves. Public funding of political campaigns has not removed money from politics, eliminated negative campaigns, or made it any easier for challengers to defeat incumbents.

Incumbency still rules. It's nearly impossible to defeat incumbent legislators, no matter how much money the challengers spend. In fact, incumbents love the clean elections system, because it guarantees that their opponents can't outspend them.

And over the years, many opinion polls found that the sources and amounts of campaign cash made no difference to voters.

Here's what you need to know: Those who use Maine's clean elections fund often get additional campaign help from others outside the system, via "independent expenditures." The candidates are not supposed to know about these "independent" efforts made on their behalf. Wink, Wink.

After more than 40 years in politics, I can assure you that money always will find its way through the nooks and crannies of election laws to influence votes.

You can't blame legislative candidates for choosing to use taxpayer money for their campaigns. Eighty percent did in 2010. Most do not enjoy asking their friends and family for money. The real hypocrisy in the system, however, comes when we pretend that the clean elections system has removed the influence of money from the electoral system or legislative process.

Here's one really good example. Legislative leaders -- and those who aspire to leadership -- organize their own privately funded political action committees, and spend that money on the campaigns of their party's candidates. So does each political party. And so do others, including organizations and corporations. Increasingly, national groups insert themselves into Maine politics, often outspending all other interests.

Given our rights of free speech, it's difficult to limit this activity.

Maine's clean elections system took a hit from a recent decision of the U.S. Supreme Court, losing its ability to provide special additional funding to candidates whose privately funded opponents outspend them.

Republicans and Democrats at the Legislature couldn't agree on a fix for this, so this year, that additional funding won't be available. It probably will cause some candidates to forgo clean elections funding, but not many. The amount of money provided to each candidate is based on the average campaign spending over the previous two years and is ample to run a campaign. Much of this campaign cash is wasted.

Your tax money paid for large pumpkin heads on the top of gubernatorial candidate Jonathan Carter's campaign vehicles, a candidate's spouse to manage her campaign, and laptop computers for numerous candidates.

In 2010, \$6.3 million was provided to legislative and gubernatorial candidates. Less than 13 percent came from private matching funds raised by the candidates. The rest was tax money.

You still may think this is a valuable expenditure of your tax money, helping elect governors who are free of the traditional tug of private interests. Think again! No clean elections candidate has ever been elected governor.

Well, perhaps clean elections is essential to bringing integrity to the legislative process. Wrong again!

Sen. Bill Diamond, D-Windham, is a good example. Bill is widely respected for his integrity, honesty and dedication to the public good. His campaigns are privately funded.

The Maine Legislature is open and available to every citizen. Even those who don't donate to candidates.

Some charge that the Legislature's Republican majority has gutted the clean elections system by refusing to respond to the U.S. Supreme Court's decision with changes that would help publicly funded candidates get around that decision.

In fact, the sky has not fallen. In 2010, House candidates received only \$298,758 and Senate candidates \$545,964 in extra funding to match the spending of their opponents. If that \$844,722 of tax money is essential to electing people of integrity to the Maine Legislature, we're in trouble.

The most effective -- indeed the only essential -- tactic for a Maine legislative candidate is to go door to door throughout the district. That doesn't take a lot of campaign cash.

Two things are essential to truly "clean" elections:

- \* Complete reporting of expenditures and donations by all who are participating in an election campaign
- \* Thorough and extensive media reporting of this information (including through new media such as blogs and social media).

But then again, most of you don't care who gives the money or how much they give.

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