

March 20, 2012

Maine Voices: Clean Elections may not be best use of public money

The Maine House speaker says taxpayers might have other priorities during tight fiscal times.

By REP. ROBERT NUTTING

I never claimed to be a mind reader, as your paper's editorial suggests ("Changes will damage Clean Elections system," March 16). But as someone who has been fortunate enough to serve the people of Maine as a legislator and now as House speaker, I do believe I've learned something along the way about the intent of Maine voters when it comes to the Clean Election Act.

Perhaps more importantly, I also understand the need to comply with a ruling from the U.S. Supreme Court.

Your editorial writers took issue with my statement, "I am quite certain that the intention of Maine voters was not to help politicians pay for campaign signs and negative TV and radio ads. That's especially true during these tight financial times when the state is struggling to pay its bills."

I stand by this statement. The stated purpose of the Clean Election Act was to mitigate the influence of big money in political campaigns and give candidates with limited financial means a chance to get on the ballot. Maine voters have been led to believe that they are getting this by virtue of a system where candidates receive \$5 contributions from individuals in their districts to qualify, followed up with matching funds from the Clean Election coffers in the event their opponent raises any additional money in the course of the campaign.

But that's not what they got.

I wonder how many of your readers realize that very little of this money comes from the Clean Election fund. They may be surprised to learn that only 13 percent of it comes from that pool of \$5 donations. The rest of it is taken out of the state's general fund.

Since the Clean Election Act took effect in 2000, Maine taxpayers have shelled out about \$23 million for the system. That's money that could have been used for education, public safety, heating oil assistance and countless other purposes. Instead, their money lined the pockets of those who produce what many consider to be overly ubiquitous, unsightly roadside campaign signs and sensational radio and TV ads that attack the character of candidates' opponents.

The money has also, at times, been used for undeniably inappropriate uses. In one example, a candidate used Clean Election funds to pay a campaign employee – who just happened to be her spouse. In another, the money was used to pay for a legislator's personal laptop.

Again, I'm no mind reader. But is this what voters had in mind when they passed the Clean Election Act?

Relief came last year in the form of a U.S. Supreme Court decision that ruled the matching fund portion of Arizona's clean election system was unconstitutional. The decision forced Maine to comply with the ruling. And last week, the Maine Senate and House passed a bill that simply removes the matching fund provision from Maine's Clean Election Act. It otherwise leaves the system intact.

Your editorial states "recruiting high quality challengers doesn't appear to be on the forefront of his (my) mind." Is the implication here that removing public money from the equation will result in a shortage of good candidates?

While many legislators from both sides of the aisle have chosen to run as clean candidates, others have not. House Majority Leader Phil Curtis, R-Madison; Assistant House Majority Leader Andre Cushing, R-Hampden; and Senate President Kevin Raye, R-Perry, from the Republican side ran as traditional candidates. On the Democrat side, Rep. Michael Carey, D-Lewiston; Rep. Henry Beck, D-Waterville; and Sen. Bill Diamond, D-Windham, were all also able to get elected without the benefit of public money.

Your editorial also states that a national group spent \$400,000 on Republican candidates for the Maine Senate in 2010. While I am unclear what this has to do with the Clean Election Act, I believe it's worth noting that the biggest contributor to political causes in Maine for that year was none other than Donald Sussman, the hedge-fund billionaire who is the husband of Democrat U.S. Rep. Chellie Pingree and is also now part owner of your publication. Since 2002 (two years after the Clean Election Act went into effect), he's spent \$3.6 million on various candidates and causes here in Maine. All of this spending happened, by the way, when the Clean Election system was in effect.

For those candidates who choose to use it, the Clean Election system remains intact. The only difference is it is now compliant with a Supreme Court ruling.

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