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Another View: Speaker way off base in Clean Election column

The system used by more than 80 percent of lawmakers gives voters more choices.

By ALISON SMITH

House Speaker Robert Nutting is completely off base in his recent column about Clean Elections (Maine Voices, "Clean Elections may not be best use of public money," March 19).

The speaker and other legislative leaders preside over the first Legislature to significantly weaken clean elections since Maine's citizen-initiated law went into effect. They have squandered the opportunity to renew and strengthen our Clean Election law after the U.S. Supreme Court -- the same court that brought us Citizens United -- invalidated one part of our law.

Prior legislatures, when faced with various problems, have responded with responsible, effective and bipartisan action in order to keep the people's law strong. But not the 125th.

Today's problem -- the loss of our Clean Election matching funds system -- stems from a disappointing and wrong-headed ruling by the Supreme Court. In this case, the majority found that matching funds, which Clean Election candidates receive in the event they are outspent by well-funded opponents or expensive independent-expenditure campaigns, somehow "chilled" the free-speech rights of those high-spending opponents.

In Maine, we viewed matching funds as more speech, not less. Maine people were committed to finding a policy alternative that would comply with the law and uphold the core values of the Clean Election system. The alternative, put forth by the nonpartisan state ethics commission, was an innovative, budget-neutral and workable solution that would have strengthened the voices of Maine people over the big-money corporate interests that increasingly dominate our elections.

Rather than fight back against the expanded role of special interest money in elections, the 125th Legislature has embraced it by failing to replace matching funds. That takes Maine backward, just when the need for forward-looking leadership is most critical. What a shame.

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