

Portland Press Herald

October 14, 2012 – Editorial

[Our View: Campaign spending spree calls for new referendum](#)

Lawmakers and judges have weakened the program. The people should restore it.

One of the ironies of this election cycle is that the influence of money on legislative races is much greater today than it was when the Maine Clean Election Act was passed to limit the influence of money on politics. But this is the year the Legislature chose to weaken the public financing system.

It's too late to change things before November, but if people don't like the unrestricted spending by both major parties drowning out Clean Election candidates with a waterfall of out-of-state money, they should consider another referendum campaign, like the one that created Clean Election in 1996.

The Clean Election program never limited campaign spending, but it did give candidates who qualified a fighting chance to compete against well-heeled opponents.

Now, privately funded campaigns and unrelated but sympathetic political action committees are spending many times over what both sides in a typical legislative race would have spent only a few cycles ago. Six-figure advertising buys are replacing what used to be operations that were run for a few thousand dollars, where shoe leather and hard work were more important than how much money there is to spend.

And lawmakers who agree to live by the rules of the program are not eligible for matching funds, as they were in the past. That provision was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court, but Maine lawmakers had an opportunity to create an alternative, and on a largely party-line vote, the Republican majority said no. Candidates could qualify for public funds, but if they get outspent, there is nothing they can do about it.

This is a great system for incumbents, but a lousy one for challengers, so it's easy to see why a party that wants to keep its majority would like it. It's too much to expect that a lawmaker who makes it to office would see anything wrong with the process or want to change the system that brought them to power.

So, the changes that are needed probably won't be coming from the State House. It's time for another non-partisan reform effort, like the one that created the Clean Election Act in the first place.