

December 26, 2012 – Editorial

## **Our View: Outside groups distort campaign financing** **Campaign finance law should regulate money spent on behalf of candidates, not just by them.**

This year's Maine legislative campaigns were the most expensive in state history. And for the first time, outside groups outspent the candidates, raising real concerns about controlling the influence of money on government.

For a decade, Maine's legislative races were dominated by Clean Election candidates, who eschewed fundraising if they qualified for public financing.

"Clean" candidates were free to talk to voters, and although the system wasn't perfect, it worked for members of both parties. Candidates were more concerned about voters than donors, and only people who lived in the district could make a difference in the race. Now that is turned upside down.

Bankers on Wall Street or lobbyists in Washington may now have as much impact on a race as the people who cast their ballots, and candidates who are not well-connected can get buried in ads and mailings. Or even worse, they may choose not to get involved in the race at all.

Unfortunately, these groups have found that statehouse races are a cheap date and that they can influence public policy by influencing who controls state government. This is not a partisan issue. Republican groups surprised Democrats in 2010; Democrats appear to have surprised Republicans this year.

In 2014, it's unlikely that either side will be surprised or fail to attract outside money.

We don't like where this is headed. State lawmakers will end up owing more allegiance to the groups that bankroll them than to the voters who turn out every other November.

That's not the way state government has operated in Maine, and it should not be the way it operates.

Our campaign finance laws are built around the idea that most of the money will come in the form of campaign contributions to candidates, who are accountable under the law to how the money is spent. When only a minority of the money is spent by the candidates, there can't be as much accountability.

In the state and as a nation, we should revisit campaign finance reform to make sure that we have a system where no one is more important to a politician than the voters.