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[Our View: Changes will damage Clean Election system](#)

A hard limit on what a publicly financed candidate can spend creates a disadvantage.

We knew that House Speaker Bob Nutting was a skilled politician, but we didn't know he was a mind reader.

That's why we were surprised to hear the speaker declare that he could divine what the voters were up to when they created the Clean Elections Act by referendum in 1996.

"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," Nutting said.

That's funny, because paying for campaign expenses like signs and advertising seemed to be just what the voters had in mind when they created the system of public financing, which was designed to reduce the influence of money on our elections. The citizen-initiated law has been popular with lawmakers from both parties and makes it easier to recruit candidates who are too busy to raise money or can't afford to finance a campaign out of their own pockets.

That might have been a concern for Republicans in the past, when they were in the minority in the Legislature, but now that Nutting's party is trying to hold on to a five-vote majority in the House, recruiting high-quality challengers doesn't appear to be on the forefront of the speaker's mind.

We're not mind readers either, but we would guess that what has changed here is not the voters' minds.

The Legislature had to do something since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a publicly financed candidate can no longer be entitled to matching funds if he is outspent by a traditionally financed opponent. It was part of a string of decisions, which, in the name of free speech, have created new ways for money to flood in and influence our elections.

In 2010, a national group spent \$400,000 on just seven Republican state senate candidates, completely upending campaign calculations about how much a race might cost. A publicly financed challenger can expect to see his message drowned out by a free-spending opponent and would have no recourse.

Some people will decide not to run. Some will opt out of the Clean Election system. Either way, the goal of reducing the influence of money in politics, which is what we think the voters were really up to in 1996, will be dealt a setback.