

COLUMN

Money in politics

"Politics has got so expensive that it takes lots of money to even get beat with nowadays." Will Rogers, the cowboy-humorist, told that joke more than 80 years ago.

With every other commercial on TV being a political ad, with our snail mail being full of political fliers, our email inboxes being full of urges to donate to this political campaign or that one, and with candidate's faces and banners literally popping up in front of us on websites, Rogers' witticism about the cost of an election is as true as ever.

Money and politics. Politics and money. The words have become wedded in our American election system.

Every advertisement is a reminder that millions of dollars are being spent to prod us toward this candidate or that. Every pop-up ad, every mailer, and every TV message that some candidate approves of costs something.

Campaigns are costing more every year, and they may be costing us our democracy. Who are the people bankrolling these campaigns? Who is paying for these ads? Whose voices are we really hearing on those commercials?

Historically, Maine has led the way in campaign finance reform, helping to separate special interest money from politics and put people first.

The Maine Clean Election system, passed overwhelmingly by voters via a ballot initiative, has both provided a publically funded option for candidates running at the state level and ensured a high level of transparency in candidate races. Since 2000, the Clean Election system has allowed 80 percent of Maine's state house and senate candidates to run for office without relying on special interest money.

The law was upheld in a court challenge and worked well for 10 years. Today, under a very different federal Supreme Court, the act is not quite as strong. High Court decisions have allowed outside money to gain tremendous traction and power, more than ever before. To make matters worse, the court overturned the matching funds system that was part of the law since its inception, taking away Clean Election candidates' capacity to respond to outside spending. And SuperPACS, the shadowy tools used to elect and defeat candidates that resulted from court decisions, are shielding the source of campaign money from the public.

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Each year, more and more out-of-state corporations are opening their checkbooks

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If Maine is to keep voters at the center of elections, then steps must be taken to strengthen our public funding system and deal with the reality of today's PACs. Because there are no limits on the amount of money any one corporation, union, or individual donor may give to a PAC, the voice of the average Mainer is at risk of being drowned in a flood of cash from wealthy individuals and special interests. The numbers are staggering. Over the past 10 years, state legislators from both major parties raised \$12 million for political action committees (PACs) that they control. Each year, more and more out-of-state corporations are opening their checkbooks in the hope of driving policy decisions in our state. Instead of attempting to tackle these problems,

earlier this year a majority of Republican state legislators—most of whom were elected using Clean Elections funding—voted to weaken our popular and effective Clean Election system. With less Clean Election funding available for candidates, more candidates are opting to raise money privately rather than accept the strict spending limits. PACs and political parties are spending more than ever, as are national partisan groups.

How do we reverse this trend and continue to reduce the influence of moneyed interests? One answer lies in bolstering our homegrown Clean Election Act and fully funding it for both legislative and gubernatorial candidates. At the federal level, we need to either convince five justices on the Supreme Court that unfettered political spending does not equal free speech—or we need a constitutional amendment that protects the freedom of

speech and enables reasonable and effective reform. I intend to question all candidates about this when they ask me for my vote, and I hope you will, too.

Maine people do not want to return to the bad old days of huge war chests and never-ending fundraisers. With the right changes to strengthen our Clean Election program, we can continue to have a people-powered campaign system. Keeping the system strong will ensure that our citizen legislature reflects the people it represents, and does not become a club for the independently wealthy or the exclusive domain of special interests.

Without campaign finance reform, not only will it continue to cost a lot of money just to get beat in an election, it will cost us our democracy.

(Will Everitt is a resident of Portland.)