

Sun Journal

Richard Bennett: Keeping Maine values in Maine elections

By Richard Bennett
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All qualified Maine people should have access to run for office.

There are two things that I love about Maine. One is the natural beauty of the state and the enthusiasm Maine people have for enjoying it. The other is the robust culture of civic engagement and the willing participation in politics that goes along with it.

I was pleased to see that, last week, Maine's environmental community adopted the defense of the Maine Clean Election Act as one of its top priorities this year. While some might be surprised that environmentalists would take on a campaign finance issue, I think it speaks volumes about the strong links between their civic culture and their love of the natural world.

Environmental protection and preservation of Maine's outdoor heritage have always been broadly shared values here. Growing up in Maine, I was in touch with my natural surroundings, and I can't imagine raising my own kids anywhere else. Clean air, clean water and the chance to be in nature — these are some of the things that make living in Maine so special.

In Maine, we value what is outside our doors. We hike and we swim. We hunt and we fish. All through the year, we head to the ocean, a lake, the mountains, or a river to enjoy what each season has to offer. And this is true whether we are Republicans, Democrats or independents.

If we want our children and our grandchildren to enjoy a quality of life that includes enjoyment of the outdoors, then it is up to us to keep Maine's air and water clean. It's up to us to provide access to the woods, water and other special places. It's up to us to make sure that the state's abundant natural resources are not squandered.

This is a fundamentally conservative notion. In his book, "The Conscience of a Majority," Barry Goldwater wrote, "While I am a great believer in the free enterprise system and all that it entails, I am an even stronger believer in the right of people to live in a clean and pollution-free environment."

A decade before Goldwater published his book, Dwight Eisenhower addressed the nation at the end of his presidency. He expressed the importance of this ethic of responsible stewardship, saying, "As we peer into society's future, we — you and I, and our government — must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious

resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage. We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent phantom of tomorrow.”

In order to preserve what’s best about Maine — its natural surroundings and the civic culture — it’s up to us to make sure that the laws uphold these fundamental values.

My enthusiasm for Clean Elections is rooted in my belief that all qualified Maine people should have access to run for office, and they should have the ability to run competitive campaigns. The best way to ensure that Maine values prevail in Maine government is to encourage a broad cross-section of Maine people to run. For more than a decade, the citizen-initiated Clean Election Act has provided opportunity to candidates and choices for voters. It has been good for our democracy.

The Clean Election program needs an adjustment now that the U.S. Supreme Court has struck down the matching funds that allowed candidates to compete against well-funded opponents. It is important to provide candidates enough resources so that they can run vigorous campaigns and, up until now, the system was able to deliver that. Not every candidate needs additional funds, but it is not realistic to think that a one-size-fits-all approach will work for all races.

Keeping Clean Elections healthy is important, for we need good people to run, win and serve. And there is another thing we must do to keep Maine’s political culture in tune with the people’s values. We must reduce the influence of corporate money in state elections.

The problem is that corporations are organized to maximize profits. Corporations minimize their costs wherever possible in order to maximize shareholder wealth. And historically, corporations externalize their environmental and social impacts, leaving the rest of us to clean up after them.

When corporations fund political campaigns, it’s a business decision, which makes for a loss of the values that are such an important part of our identity. Ultimately, state systems are meant to serve people, not corporations. I think it would be difficult to find a Mainer — liberal, moderate or conservative — who disagrees with that.

For the sake of all that we love about Maine, let us get to work to shore up the Clean Election system and get corporate money out of state elections.

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