

# Sun Journal

## Democracy relies on the voices of citizens

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The Clean Election system can deliver good government that works in the best interest of Maine people.

The Sun Journal April 17 editorial, “Voices of many diminished by money of a few,” set out the ills of the current federal campaign finance system very well.

Thanks to the recent U.S. Supreme Court rulings that rolled back a century of laws aimed at limiting the influence of big money, that system is worse than ever. Enormous sums are changing hands each and every day, and it is clear that money buys access and influence.

Here in Maine, we do things a little differently. Since 2000, every candidate for every state office — House, Senate and governor — has the opportunity to forgo the money chase, skip the dialing-for-dollars, and participate in a whole new way of funding political campaigns.

Thanks to the citizen-initiated, voter-approved Clean Election Act, Maine candidates during the past decade have largely turned their backs on private money, choosing Clean Election public funding instead.

Rather than going where the money is, Clean Election candidates go where the people are. The system relies on many tiny contributions from local voters, rather than large contributions from a handful of big donors.

The Maine Council of Churches has long supported the concept of clean elections because we believe it reflects the moral values shared by the vast majority of Mainers of all parties: fairness, accountability and encouraging genuine public service by our elected leaders.

We believe clean elections enhances the relationship between elected officials and their local constituents while helping to hold the line against undue influence by large, wealthy, out-of-state and other special-interest groups.

We believe a strong and broadly supported clean election system allows more diversity among candidates and elected officials and, therefore, increases the chances that the concerns of people of all walks of life will be taken seriously in the halls of the Legislature, especially our most vulnerable neighbors — those living on no or low incomes.

We believe that the Clean Election system can deliver good government that works in the best interest of Maine people. But to do that, clean elections and all of Maine’s campaign finance laws must remain strong.

Unfortunately, the 125th Legislature and Gov. Paul LePage have taken steps to weaken clean elections and increase the importance of large donations in Maine’s elections.

That is the wrong direction for Maine, and will make the state government operate more like the pay-to-play system in Washington described in the editorial.

According to a recent poll, seven in 10 Maine voters think we should continue to have clean elections in Maine, and 80 percent think it is very important that candidates for governor have that option.

But Gov. LePage sought and received a doubling of contribution limits for privately funded gubernatorial candidates, giving wealthy individuals, corporations and political action committees the ability to give twice as much as before. At the same time, the governor advocated unsuccessfully for the outright repeal of the Clean Election Act in the gubernatorial race.

Action was needed in this legislative session to renew the Clean Election program after a Supreme Court ruling overturned the matching funds system — an important provision in the law. Unfortunately, the Legislature failed to deliver.

The Council supported the sensible “requalifying option” recommended by the state ethics commission as the best approach. This alternative preserved the intent of clean elections to give Maine voters greater influence in the election process, allowed participating candidates to keep pace in hotly contested races, and sought to keep our election system open and fair.

The Legislature also failed to take up the important issue of PAC reform.

PACs remain a conduit for unlimited special-interest money and, despite the introduction of several promising bills that were supported by rank-and-file legislators, no progress was made. As in prior legislatures, legislative leadership was largely hostile to reform.

“As the power of a few increases exponentially, the voice of the many is certainly diminished.” That is how the editorial summed up the problems in Washington. We agree, and we don’t want to see Maine go down this path.

Neither do Maine people.

In the same poll mentioned before, voters were asked to choose between a statement calling for a roll-back of campaign finance laws and one calling for more reforms to limit the influence of big money. The answer was clear: More than 81 percent said more reform, and less than 16 percent said roll-back. And 85 percent of the poll’s respondents said it is important that candidates address the issue of money in politics this year.

Robust campaign finance laws will increase the ability of all voices to be heard within the political process. We must raise our voices now, asking each and every candidate this year, “What will you do to reduce the influence of big money in Maine elections?”

The future of our democracy depends on it.

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