



Outlook dire, says report on Maine PACs

Editorial Board

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A report issued last week raises serious questions about the future of campaign financing in Maine.

While a recent survey shows Maine voters think reducing the influence of special interest money and leveling the playing field for candidates are very important, our state may be doing the opposite:

- * Increasing special-interest money and influence in Maine elections, and
- * Leaving more candidates unable to compete because of special interest spending against them.

This will likely increase the power of unions, business interests, wealthy individuals and out-of-state political groups.

That prospect was outlined in a report last week from Maine Citizens for Clean Elections.

The report specifically examines how PACs have raised millions of dollars over the past decade to bypass campaign spending limits set by Maine law.

"While Maine's legislative campaigns are generally fueled with small donations, the opposite is true for legislator PACs," according to Andrew Bossie, MCCE executive director.

"PACs remain a conduit for unlimited contributions from special interests," he said in a release.

Here's how it works: Privately funded candidates can only receive a maximum of \$350 from any single donor.

Clean election candidates can accept up to \$100 from any one donor as "seed money" early in the campaign. They then receive a set amount of public money depending upon the office they are seeking.

However, they could, up until last year, obtain more public financing if they were being outspent in a race.

That began to change in June of 2011 when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the portion of Arizona's campaign finance law that provided matching funds to candidates.

That was followed by a Maine District Court decision in July striking down the matching-fund portion of Maine's law.

Now, publicly funded candidates will not have money to respond if a special interest group decides to drop a bundle of money to influence a race.

The Clean Election matching system wasn't perfect, and that became abundantly clear in the last election cycle when a national Republican Party PAC spent \$400,000, an unheard of amount of money, on four state Senate races just days before the election.

The candidates had no time to respond to the attacks, a shortcoming of the matching-fund law.

Now, without the matching money, look for that to happen more often and with even larger sums of money.

This isn't necessarily a partisan issue. For instance, Donald Sussman, a wealthy Democrat and owner of three daily newspapers in Maine, has spent \$379,000 on Maine elections in the past 10 years.

The Washington-based Republican State Leadership Committee is the largest political PAC, spending \$796,000 over 10 years. A similar Democratic PAC is second on the list at \$422,000.

Private firms, industry groups and their lobbyist lawyers — from unions to trucking companies to bankers to cigarette makers — have spent \$5.3 million over the decade, according to the MCCE report.

Law firms, health care companies, banking/finance firms and drug makers have done the most commercial PAC spending, \$5.3 million.

Tellingly, these groups often contribute across the aisle, to Republicans and Democrats alike.

Still, at this point, the PAC spending does not dominate Maine elections, but it is significant.

Total candidate spending in the 2010 race was about \$43 million, while PACs spent about \$5.2 million, according to the Maine Commission on Governmental Ethics and Election Practices.

But it will not bode well for clean elections in Maine if that number increases from this point forward.

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The opinions expressed in this column reflect the views of the ownership and the editorial board.