

# VILLAGE SOUP

## Clean elections and you

By Rep. Andy O'Brien | Jan 24, 2012

Four years ago, after a lively discussion with my family at a dinner table in Lincolnville, I made the decision to embark on a journey that would eventually define me. I became a "politician."

If you asked me five years ago if I would ever consider such an occupation I would have laughed. The word "politician" immediately conjured the stereotypical image of a grinning huckster in a suit, glad-handing, back slapping and saying just about anything to get a vote. Even now, when I walk into a convenience store, I still cringe when I hear some wag say, "Well, here comes the politician!"

These days, with a sputtering economy and so many struggling to make a living, the approval rating of many politicians measures right up there with black flies and deer ticks. Yet, whenever anyone asks if I'm enjoying it, I always say the same thing: I love it. It is the most challenging and rewarding job I've ever had.

I also learned that the politician stereotype is generally untrue. As a part-time, citizen legislator you are paid around \$10,000 a year plus benefits, so no one makes a real living at it. My colleagues are firefighters, businesspeople, teachers, construction workers, bankers, professors, mill workers, nurses, police officers, lawyers, park rangers, farmers and fisherman. Very few go in with the intent to make a career out of it — they just got tired of complaining and put their money where their mouths were.

Indeed, serving in the legislature usually does involve considerable financial sacrifice. The farmers on my committee are always eager to wrap up work in the spring so that they can get back to the fields. Owners of small businesses put a freeze on taking new clients until the session is over.

Others work night shifts, often going straight to the morning legislative session after they punch out. Many rely on a spouses' income to make ends meet, while they hustle for work in the off-months. Some states pay a full-time salary to legislators, but our system, though not perfect, ensures that the people we send to Augusta are not so removed from the struggles of working people in the community.

One reform that has enhanced the democratic nature of our political system in Maine is the Clean Elections Act, which voters approved by citizen referendum in 1996. This policy was crucial in my decision to run for the legislature, as it allowed me to spend my time meeting voters, rather than holding fundraisers and making deals with donors, some who may not even reside in the state, much less in my district.

The money I raised came from individual, \$5 contributions from voters matched with public funds. I was also prohibited from taking any extra money after the funds were allotted. The time not spent fundraising allowed me to go out and knock on thousands of doors during my campaigns. Whenever a tough vote comes up, those same voters call and email me.

My first thought before I press that red or green button is always "What do my constituents want?" In most other states and in the U.S. Congress, it's, "What do my constituents want?", and "What do my donors want?" — often, not in that order. Anyone who's been to Augusta knows that on any given day during a House session, the place is packed with lobbyists. They explain their positions and I listen to them, but in the end, I don't owe any special favors to anyone but my constituents.

But now our clean elections system is under threat. The 2009 U.S. Supreme Court's Citizen's United decision allows unlimited spending by moneyed interests in elections. A recent ruling by the court struck down part of the Maine Clean Elections law which triggered matching funds for the candidate to respond when an outside group pours money into the race.

As my constituents know, thousands of dollars have been spent in attack ads against me over the years. Often, we all have to wait with baited breath until the elections are over to find out who is behind them. This law should be strengthened to ensure transparency and accountability, but a current proposal from the governor takes advantage of the court case to simply eliminate matching funds. This would make it harder for the farmers, park rangers, school teachers and owners of small businesses to run for office.

A better policy is to allow candidates to collect \$5 contributions from constituents that would allow additional funds to respond to the political attacks. Otherwise candidates risk ending up as a punching bag for special interests, prohibited from spending any extra money not allotted in the clean elections funds.

If there's one thing I've learned during my work in Augusta, it's that ordinary citizens can — and do — make a difference in shaping public policy. No matter what your political philosophy or party affiliation, having a good working government that is accountable to voters and not special interests is what democracy is about.

One of our most valued parts of the U.S. Constitution is our freedom of speech, but those arguing for an end to clean elections have stated limits on campaign contributions restricts that freedom. Money may talk, but it shouldn't buy our democracy.

I encourage you to join me in calling for a much-needed national campaign finance reform to ensure that we all have a say in our government.

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