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EDITORIAL

Budget is no place to make election policy

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The Maine Clean Election Act benefits voters too much to fall victim to state government's lingering fiscal problems. The voter-approved public campaign financing system should be considered on its merits as a tool for democracy, not as a state budget line competing for scarce government funds.

Jonathan Wayne, executive director of the Maine Ethics Commission, [warned the Legislature's budget-writing Appropriations Committee last week](#) that Gov. Paul LePage's proposal to cut a total of \$4 million in state funding for the Maine Clean Election Fund in the two-year budget that begins July 1 would eliminate the option of public campaign financing for legislative and gubernatorial candidates in 2014.

That change likely would limit voters' choices in 2014 legislative contests. During the decade before the 2000 implementation of the Clean Election Act, incumbents in an average of 31 legislative districts (out of 186) ran unopposed for re-election, according to a [2007 report completed for the Legislature's Veterans and Legal Affairs Committee](#).

In 2004 and 2006, that number had dropped to an average of 2.5 districts, the report shows. The number of uncontested races rose slightly during the past three legislative election cycles, but it remains a fraction of what it was before the public campaign financing option was available. Of the 14 [legislative races in 2012](#) for which the Maine Democratic or Republican parties could not recruit a candidate, the Clean Election Act made it possible for nonparty candidates to appear on ballots in seven districts.

In addition to increasing competition for legislative seats, the Clean Election Act has diversified the field of candidates, fostering a system in which more women — almost 100 in 2012 compared with 70 in 1990 — and independent candidates can participate. Seventy-one percent of female candidates surveyed for the 2007 study said public funding was important in their decision to run.

For those reasons, and because it allows candidates to devote more time to meeting with voters rather than potential campaign donors, the Clean Election Act benefits a state that values its citizen Legislature.

The state's public election financing system does have flaws that need to be addressed: The Clean Election Act has done little to promote competition in gubernatorial elections. [Federal court decisions in 2011](#) that deemed the matching funds component of the law to be unconstitutional further dilute its effectiveness as a tool to open the governor's race to candidates who can't raise millions of dollars through private means.

Discontinuing gubernatorial candidates' access to the Clean Election Fund would recognize the fiscal realities of running for governor and help ensure continued public financing for legislative races. The Legislature should consider making that change.

We recognize that some Mainers, including LePage, believe the best alteration to the Maine Clean Election Act would be to make it go away. They should be able to present their arguments in an open forum that specifically addresses the future of public campaign financing in Maine. Instead, the governor effectively relegated consideration of the way Maine conducts its elections to a line item on a two-year budget.

Proposing legislation to eliminate the Maine Clean Election Act would have been a more direct and appropriate way to initiate that debate. A shortage of money in state coffers should not be the excuse to gut a program designed to reduce the influence of money in Maine's electoral process. The Legislature should reject LePage's proposed cuts to the Maine Clean Election Fund.