

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Clean Election program popular because it works

By Ed Youngblood, Special to the BDN
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I am disappointed that Gov. Paul LePage [has proposed eviscerating](#) Maine's citizen-initiated Clean Election program through drastic budget cuts.

This last election made it clear that there is too much special interest money in our elections. The last thing we should do is gut an effective, important and popular program that reduces the overall influence of those same special interests, and has the strong support of Maine's electorate.

I agree with the governor on the need to balance the budget, and that certainly means finding savings throughout state government. I disagree that eliminating Clean Elections will help. The voters I spoke with during and after my campaign think they are getting a good deal with the [Clean Election program](#). It costs less than \$2 per Mainer each year, and that tiny investment helps to ensure that the State House belongs to voters, not special interests.

Just what does \$2 purchase? First of all, it removes a barrier to running for office, opening up an avenue for public service to the broadest possible range of Maine people. To run with Clean Election funding, a candidate does not need personal wealth or ties to wealth or be a well-connected member of a political party. He or she does not need to go on bended knee to folks with a vested interest in the outcome of legislation in Augusta and ask for money.

Instead, Clean Election candidates rely on voters within their district to voluntarily provide another modest financial contribution — only \$5 — to prove grassroots support and demonstrate the candidate's viability.

That allows Clean Election legislators to have a different sort of relationship with lobbyists in the State House, one that is based on mutual respect rather than campaign cash. In other state capitols, and in Washington, D.C., too often that relationship begins with a campaign contribution and continues with either the promise of another or a threat to withhold.

It also allows lawmakers to have a different relationship with constituents. Since voters are at the center of the Clean Election system, there is no confusion about who sent the elected official to Augusta. This ability to represent constituents without ties to private money has real value to Maine people, and that's one reason voters like Clean Elections so much. This might be why 70 percent of the current Legislature used Clean Election funding to finance their campaign.

When contemplating budget priorities, one consideration is that the Maine Clean Election Fund — the fund that provides financing for legislative and gubernatorial candidates who use the Clean Election program — was created and funded by a citizen initiative. The voters enacted an annual \$2 million General Fund allotment, the \$5 qualifying contribution system and the ability for Maine people to donate \$3 of their taxes by checking off the Clean Election box on Line 1 of annual income tax filings, among other, smaller streams of revenue.

Maine people have certainly done their part in providing voluntary revenue to augment the public funds called for in the statute. Tens of thousands of Mainers write \$5 checks and check the Clean Election box on the 1040 state tax form.

Unfortunately, successive governors and legislatures have not honored the will of voters over the years, dipping into this dedicated fund to pay for completely unrelated state programs.

Rather than gutting the Clean Election program further, we must take steps to strengthen it. Bad policy decisions over the years have chipped away at the system, and when the court struck down our matching funds system — the provision that provided a level playing field for participating candidates — it was clear that action was needed to keep the system viable.

The 125th Legislature failed to replace this important component, and Clean Elections suffered as a result. Fewer candidates used the system in 2012, which means that the role of private money in our elections is now growing, not shrinking.

I am proud to sponsor legislation that strengthens Maine's first-in-the-nation Clean Election law. I will advocate for a return of all funds that have been improperly taken from the Clean Election Fund so that adequate financing is available for the 2014 elections.

Maine people want clean elections, and I pledge to do my part to make sure that voters and future candidates benefit from a healthy Clean Election system.

Republican Sen. Ed Youngblood of Brewer represents Senate District 31 and is a member of the Energy, Utilities, and Technology Committee and Government Oversight Committee.