



Thursday, April 18, 2013
Opinion

Two Campaigns, One Goal

Judging by the unanimous positive testimony at the Appropriations Committee hearing and numerous letters to editors and editorials, support seems strong and bipartisan for strengthening and funding Maine's Clean Election system. Maine's first-in-the-nation Clean Elections Act was passed at the polls in 1996 following a citizens' initiative ballot petition. In the years since, a large majority of legislative candidates of all persuasions have paid their campaign expenses with Clean Election funds, i.e. with public money, while agreeing to spend no more than the system provides. Clean Election funding has made running for the legislature a possibility for more people. Candidates like it. Voters like it. It works.

Clean Elections is in the news now for two reasons. First, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the part of the Act that gave additional funds to a Clean Election candidate being outspent by a privately-funded opponent or a third party. Supporters in the legislature are proposing changes to the law which will help level the playing field and be acceptable to the courts. Second, Governor LePage has proposed defunding Clean Elections completely in favor of other budget needs.

So, a generation in, many of us are rethinking and recommitting to the Clean Elections path of separating money from electoral politics.

At the same time, we need to not take our eyes off the sister campaign to reverse the Citizens United U.S. Supreme Court decision with a U.S. constitutional amendment. This January 2010 decision struck down limits on corporate money that can be spent during elections in support of or in opposition to candidates and ballot questions. We all saw the result of vastly more spending of this sort in 2010 and in 2012.

Citizens across the political spectrum have been coalescing around "Move to Amend" campaigns ever since the decision was handed down. Huge, often untraceable amounts of corporate money in our elections are in no way compatible with citizen self-government.

Eleven state legislatures so far have endorsed resolutions calling on Congress to pass a constitutional amendment and send it to the states for ratification. Language has just been crafted for a Joint Resolution which would see Maine become the twelfth state to do this. The sponsor is Senator Richard Woodbury (U-Yarmouth). Among the early co-sponsors is Rep. Jeff Evangelos (U-Friendship). A public hearing date and L.D. number will be set shortly.

It is now time to ask your legislator to co-sponsor this resolution and bills that strengthen the Clean Election Act and enhance transparency in election spending. Details for LD 770, LD 1271 and LD 1309 are at www.maine.gov/legis. Supporters of all will rally at the State House 10 a.m., Monday, April 29.

Meanwhile, hundreds of large and small municipalities have passed similar resolutions, including 31 in Maine. This has been done either by vote of their governing bodies or by voters at town meetings. Locally in recent months, Camden, Thomaston and Friendship have done this.

Volunteers for the nonpartisan Maine Citizens for Clean Elections (www.mainecelelections.org) have gathered signatures in support of an amendment to reverse Citizens United from voters in Owls Head, Rockland, St. George and Rockport. They would welcome hearing from a few voters who would move the resolution process forward in those towns particularly.

We are seeing two campaigns: one to free candidates from being dependent on large private donors and the other to regulate large and not necessarily local or traceable spending by third-party interests. Together their goal is to craft ground rules that will give us elections which are more than fundraising contests.

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Owls Head