

March 17, 2013

Editorial

Our View: Maine Clean Elections should be preserved

A program to ensure that all candidates have a chance to be heard matters more now than ever.

These are dark days for people concerned about the influence of money in politics.

Thanks to a string of court decisions, more money is spent to affect elections, with less disclosure about the donors since the Watergate scandal led to a series of sweeping reforms in the 1970s. Shadowy groups accountable to no one flood the airwaves with scurrilous attack ads that cheapen and distort our politics.

And just when we needed leadership, President Obama put aside his campaign finance reform rhetoric and took a beat-'em-at-their-own-game approach, breaking fundraising records and setting new precedents for tactics that will be considered the norm in the future.

This is not just a national problem. One state Senate race attracted \$450,000 in outside spending last year, almost all from groups independent of the campaigns. This kind of spending has been shown to work, so expect to see more of it in the future.

With so much wrong, it's worth taking a moment to reflect on something that works. The Maine Clean Election system, which provides public financing for qualified candidates, lets people run for office and win elections by talking with voters, not special interest donors.

For more than a decade, candidates from both major parties, as well as those with no party affiliation, have used the system to run for office and win election to the Legislature.

The system has not been immune from attacks. The Supreme Court struck down matching funds -- the automatic allocation of public money that prevented a "clean" candidate from being outspent by a traditionally financed opponent -- saying that outspending was a First Amendment right.

Last year's Legislature responded by giving publicly financed candidates no recourse from being outspent, making a clean candidacy a calculated risk. The governor's budget would strip money out of the fund, making it even less of a desirable option.

At a time when big money is distorting the process and our leaders in Washington are not fighting the assault, the Clean Election law, a common-sense, nonpartisan reform that was enacted by the people of Maine, should not be weakened any more.

The Legislature should maintain support for the program and restore a mechanism for publicly financed candidates to compete with well-heeled opponents. A bill that would create a way for candidates to qualify for more funding by collecting more \$5 checks from district voters is a good way to fix the problem.

But most important would be recognizing that the Clean Election Act is a still-working part of a system that's breaking down. Our national elections would be better if they were more like Maine's. Now is no time to bring Maine's elections to a lower standard.

Lawmakers should look for ways to make the Clean Election system better, not ways to tear it down.