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Ann Luther: We must fight big money in politics

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The governor's biennial budget proposes to completely de-fund Maine's Clean Election program for 2014. That is the latest in a string of tactics led by Gov. Paul LePage to weaken Maine's ground-breaking, first-in-the-nation system for publicly financed elections.

Nothing could be more shortsighted.

Our democracy needs Clean Elections now more than ever. Here is why:

Today in this country, there is more concentrated wealth and income than at any time since the beginning of the last century.

Research at the federal level shows that legislators and policy makers are vastly more attentive to the interests of the affluent than they are to those of everyone else. Researchers call this "representational inequality." That's the notion that, although we each get one vote, we are not all represented with the same vigor.

Affluent donors generally get what they want. The rest of us get what we want as long as we happen to want what they want.

Worse, when big-moneyed interests spend in political campaigns, they create a feedback loop in public policy that further advances their own interests, deepening the chasm between themselves and everyone else.

Some argue that the concentration of wealth fuels investment in growth, and that overall growth benefits everyone — that a rising tide lifts all boats. But new research from the International Monetary Fund and others demonstrates just the opposite: extreme inequality contributes to financial instability and leads to shorter periods of growth. That means less growth over the long term, not more.

If we allow big money to dominate elections, we can expect public policy that benefits only one small minority of our citizens — the donor class — while failing to serve the needs of the vast majority of citizens.

Publicly financed elections such as the Maine Clean Election Act are a big part of the answer. Here is a system that does not recognize the difference between rich donors and everyone else. Everyone can participate — we are all in the donor class. Maine people elect those who represent the interests of the many, not the elite few. And elected officials can serve the interests of their actual, diverse constituency without damaging their chances for re-election.

Public financing provides a bulwark against the "representational inequality" that permeates most of the political system.

The threat against Clean Elections is real. Gov. LePage has made it clear that funding Clean Elections is not a priority. He failed in some earlier attempts to undermine Clean Elections, but he succeeded in advantaging privately funded gubernatorial candidates by doubling contribution limits. His office

discouraged the Legislature from strengthening Clean Elections after a court decision dismantled the level-playing field provisions, and those important provisions have not yet been replaced.

The bottom line is, the governor likes elections to be financed by private interests. If he has his way, large private donations will fuel future Maine campaigns.

But that is only if he gets his way.

Clean Elections appeared on the ballot in Maine in 1996, a presidential election year when Maine ranked No. 1 nationwide in voter turnout, and the measure passed with more than 56 percent of the vote. More Maine voters voted “yes” on that ballot question than have voted for any winning gubernatorial candidate in the past 20 years.

Today, Mainers’ support for Clean Elections is even higher. Polls consistently show broad support through all demographics. Mainers want Clean Elections in both gubernatorial and legislative elections. Mainers want to move forward, not backward, to reduce the influence of big money in elections.

Failure to retain Maine’s public financing system would be not only a breach of public trust but also an enormous loss to the public good. Fully funding a robust Clean Election system for both legislative and gubernatorial candidates costs people less than \$2 apiece each year. It’s worth every dime.

For the sake of democracy, the public must fight big money in politics. It may be a never-ending endeavor, but we can’t afford to give up.

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