



For Immediate Release

June 14, 2013

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Bill to Strengthen Clean Elections Undercut by Biennial Budget

Maine lawmakers vote to strengthen Clean Elections law, but undermine its implementation by cutting funding and suspending gubernatorial program.

AUGUSTA, ME – Following a Senate vote on Wednesday, the Maine House today debated and voted on legislation intended to restore the Maine Clean Election Act following court-ordered changes and previous legislative action that weakened the program. However, a budget deal negotiated late last week and passed by both chambers yesterday would prevent any significant strengthening of the program and would suspend the gubernatorial portion of the program altogether for the 2014 elections cycle.

“While LD 1309 would restore Clean Election laws to the strong system voters intended, the deal struck in the budget undercuts the bill and only serves to strengthen the hand of special interests in our elections and policy making,” said Andrew Bossie, MCCE Executive Director. “We would like to be able to celebrate today’s vote, but last week’s budget deal renders this bill moot and leaves Mainers without a strong Clean Election program in 2014. The current budget proposal does not strengthen Clean Elections, but instead hacks away at laws put in place by Maine voters to keep government accountable to everyday people.”

LD 1309, An Act to Strengthen the Maine Clean Election Act, sponsored by Sen. Ed Youngblood (R-Penobscot), proposed a new supplemental funding option for Clean Elections candidates. LD 1309 passed overwhelmingly with a vote of 26-9 on the Senate Wednesday. The House followed suit today with a 84-55 vote. Attempts to strip the provisions that strengthen the gubernatorial portion of the law failed in the senate.

MCCE believes that a viable Clean Election program is critical for gubernatorial races, since the winner will hold the most powerful office in the state. According to Bossie, “Gubernatorial races in Maine are starting to resemble the national big money campaigns that the voters abhor. Candidates for our state’s highest office should have the option to use Clean Elections and rely on the voters for small donations, rather than using Washington-style fundraising tactics to raise big-money from out of state interests,” he said. Polling conducted by MCCE shows that support among Maine people for continuing gubernatorial Clean Elections is above 80%.

The bill passed today aims to restore the entire Clean Election public financing system to the level that voters approved by ballot in 1996, while also complying with the 2011 Supreme Court ruling that led to the weakening of the law. Under LD 1309 candidates may qualify for limited supplemental campaign funding if they gather additional \$5 checks, known as Qualifying Contributions, from voters in their district. The bill will soon move to the Appropriations table, where it is expected to die.

The budget compromise passed by the legislature and awaiting action by Governor LePage would appropriate \$2.8 million to the program over the next two years, far short of the \$4 million allotment required under the Maine Clean Election Act put in place by voters. In his original budget proposal, the governor eliminated all funding for the program.

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