

Cleveland Plain Dealer

Public dollars, public trust

Posted by [Joe Frolik](#) September 24, 2008 16:34PM

Categories: [Opinion](#)

Ethan Strimling likes to "run clean." He thinks politicians in Ohio might, too.

Strimling is a state senator from Maine, where he is finishing his third two-year term. Since the 2000 election cycle, Maine has offered public financing for legislative and gubernatorial candidates.

The system isn't mandatory -- two-term Democratic Gov. John Baldacci didn't take the public money in either of his races. And Strimling concedes that it's not perfect, either -- any system that equalizes expenditures is going to give incumbents an edge.

But Strimling thinks Maine's Clean Elections Act has increased public trust in the political process. He was in Greater Cleveland on Wednesday for two speeches organized by a coalition of good-government groups that hope at least to start a discussion of public campaign financing in Ohio.

There are obvious differences in scale between the two states. The Maine Senate has 35 members in a state fewer than 1.4 million people; Strimling and his colleagues each represent around 37,000 people. Ohio has 33 state senators, with roughly 350,000 constituents each. The House of Representatives in Maine has 151 members, each with about 8,500 constituents. In Ohio, it's 99 state reps, with 117,000 people per district. Maine also doesn't elect judges or statewide executive officers other than the governor.

Each state senator gets up to \$25,000; state representatives get \$8,500. If candidates opt out of the public financing system, any opponents who "run clean" -- as they say in Maine -- can get up to three times those amounts. That acts as a check on spending because candidates who aren't in the system know their opponents will automatically get more, too.

Strimling says \$25,000 was plenty in his Portland district. He spent most of it on direct mail and campaign literature; the district is so small that television wouldn't have been cost-efficient anyway. As a result of talking public money, he says, "I don't spend my time on the phone talking to

donors. I spend my time on the phone talking to voters or I knock on doors. And when the campaign is over, no one can call and say, 'Hey, I gave you a thousand bucks and now I need your help.' "

Strimling has observed life from the other side, too. He gave up his safe seat this spring to jump into a six-way Democratic primary when Congressman Tom Allen opted to challenge incumbent GOP Sen. Susan Collins. Strimling raised more than \$600,000 and finished fourth; the winner out-raised him by almost \$1 million.

Money for the Maine system comes from the state's general fund. In tough economic times, that means lawmakers have to choose between preserving the system and cutting elsewhere. That's not always easy, Strimling says, but so far, they've done it.

"These are public elections -- like public education or a public hospital," says Strimling, 40, who'll go back to running a social-service agency in Portland when his term expires. He says you have to look at it as "a long-term investment in our democratic system."

Right now, only three states -- Connecticut and Arizona are the other two - - have extensive public campaign funding. Do-gooders in Ohio have been talking about it for years with little success. If there's interest, it's probably in judicial races, where almost everyone gets queasy -- or should -- at the sight of would-be judges with their hands out.

Strimling hopes people elsewhere will look at Maine and realize it doesn't have to be that way.

Click [here](#) to read more about the Maine Clean Elections Act and financing system.