

**Online Qualifying Contributions for Clean Election Candidates**

**Maine Ethics Commission**

Digital Government: Government to Citizen Category  
State of Maine

## **Executive Summary**

The State of Maine's online Qualifying Contributions for Maine Clean Election Candidates ([www.maine.gov/online/ethics/cleanelections](http://www.maine.gov/online/ethics/cleanelections)) is a first-in-the-nation political candidate contribution service. In the State of Maine, candidates are able to fund their campaigns for Maine State Senate, Maine State House of Representatives, and Maine State Governor with private funds or the candidate may register for public funding available through the Maine Clean Election Program. In order to qualify for public funding through the State, candidates must show that they have a threshold of community support. This is accomplished by the candidate securing a minimum number of \$5 qualifying contributions made to the Maine Clean Election Act on the candidate's behalf.

Prior to the online service, candidates were required to physically canvass their districts for these \$5.00 contributions. The candidate was required to collect either cash or a paper check from the donor and have the donor sign a "receipt and acknowledgement" form that certifies that the donor contributed to the candidate using their own funds. This process of physically canvassing is costly both in time and in candidate resources. Thanks to the online service, candidates are able to reach out to their supporters on a larger scale through radio or television advertisements, email, political rallies, and other targeted events. At the Republican and Democratic conventions in 2008 for example, candidates directed large groups of people to the online service to pledge their support rather than waiting in line to sign the "receipt and acknowledgement" form and supplying their payment directly to the candidate.

The State of Maine launched the online contributions site in February 2008, allowing citizens to make a contribution to a candidate in their district using a credit card payment. Of the nearly 400 publicly funded candidates, 238 candidates from 213 different Maine cities, towns, townships and unorganized territories received donations using the online service in the 2008 election year. Donors are also given the option to donate directly to the general fund for the Maine Clean Election program. This is garnering additional support for the overall Clean Election program at the same time as it exposes a wider audience to local politics in Maine.

Since Maine's Clean Election Program allows candidates to secure public funding for their campaigns, the online service has the potential to impact all publicly funded candidates and citizens in Maine's roughly 480 municipalities.

## **Description**

This service is the first of its kind in the nation. It provides a successful model for combining Internet technology with government politics in a way that encourages democracy and citizen involvement in the election process. Through the service, any Maine registered voter is able to contribute directly to the Clean Election Program or to support a Clean Election candidate. Additionally, the service facilitates any Maine citizen's pursuit for a seat in the Maine House of Representatives, Maine Senate or Maine governor as it allows candidates an easier venue to receive qualifying contributions.

The service takes a complex manual process and simplifies it for all parties involved, including the candidates, the contributors, and the Ethics Commission. First, the service benefits candidates in several ways. It allows candidates to create targeted campaign strategies including email, print, television, or radio ads which will direct potential contributors to the website to make a credit card contribution - in contrast to a contributor having to physically sign a "receipt and acknowledgement" form and supply a check or cash in person for the donation. Online contributor data is saved in an administrative database that can be accessed by the candidate for state verification requirements and for use in petitioning voters in future election cycles.

Secondly, the service helps to ensure that contributions are made to the correct candidates. The Clean Election program requires that contributions come from voters in the candidate's district. Political districts are often hard to figure out, and even the savviest of supporters may not be certain of their district. To remedy this problem, the online service uses the address/district data from the Maine Central Voter Registry (CVR) to determine the contributor's district based on the street address and town supplied. The system then displays only the candidates from that district for the user to select and make a contribution to.

Thirdly, in order for a contribution to be counted against the candidate's contribution requirements, the candidate must verify with the municipal voter registrars that the contributor is indeed a registered voter in the candidate's district. For paper contributions, the candidate supplies the municipal registrars with handwritten, signed "receipt and acknowledgement" forms. The online service simplifies this by providing an administrative online function for the candidate to view contributions, download a file of contributor information, and generate forms listing contributors sorted by town. These printed, sorted lists are easier for the candidate and municipal registrars to verify.

Lastly, the online service provides online administrative reporting for the Ethics Commission, allowing them to easily track contributions per candidate. Special reporting functions also allow the Commission to identify potential fraud or multiple contributions from a single individual.

The Qualifying Contributions for Maine Clean Election Candidates online service was created in partnership with InforME, the state of Maine's eGovernment portal, at no cost to the state or citizens. The value of the project development services provided by InforME is approximately \$25,000, though this cost was absorbed by InforME rather than charged to the Ethics Commission. In addition, InforME provides ongoing hosting and maintenance at an approximate value of \$8,000 annually.

InforME is managed by Maine Information Network, LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of NIC. InforME was created by Maine state legislation to be the Internet gateway to government services and information under a self-funded, no appropriations model.

## **Significance**

The State of Maine is uniquely positioned to allow all Maine citizens with an interest in running for Maine Senate, Maine House of Representatives, or Maine governor, to receive public funding for their campaign if that candidate can demonstrate a minimum threshold of community support. Because this program is available to every Maine citizen, the Commission registers approximately 400 candidates each election cycle. Any registered Maine voter is able to assist a candidate by making a contribution on the candidate's behalf or to the General Clean Election fund.

Because the Clean Election Program targets such a broad audience, many hours are spent maintaining, tracking, and collecting candidate and contributor information using the paper method of receiving donations. For example, a representative from the Maine Ethics Commission must manually track each candidate's collection progress. After the candidate has reached the minimum number of qualifying contributions, the candidate's status is changed from "accepting donations" to "qualified for funding". The Maine Ethics Commission is a very small agency with few staff members.

This time-consuming process for the Ethics Commission is even more time-consuming for the candidate. To collect contributions through the paper process, the candidate must carefully locate all roads within their district and physically canvas that area. If the candidate meets a person who is willing to contribute, the candidate must have that person sign a "receipt and acknowledgement" form and supply the candidate with a check or cash payment. A municipal registrar must verify these forms, and then the forms and money delivered to the Ethics Commission. The online service removes nearly all of this manually processing for the contributions that are received online.

The service was developed at no cost to the Ethics Commission, using no state appropriations, and is provided free to citizens and candidates (aside from the actual contributions paid through the service).

## **Benefits**

The online service saves approximately two hours of time for every contribution processed online rather than by paper, considering timesavings for the agency,

candidate, and contributor. This means that the 3,250 contributions processed online in 2008 saved candidates, contributors, and the Ethics Commission at least 6,500 hours that could be devoted to other Commission functions, campaigning, and other tasks. This efficiency and cost-savings is expected to grow dramatically during the 2010 election cycle since the seat of Maine State Governor will be up for election and more candidates will be seeking funding.

In addition to the tangible resource savings, the online service is also very user-friendly; this makes contributing to the Clean Election Program convenient for citizens. The system identifies the correct voting district and eligible candidates, and allows payment by credit card from anywhere with Internet access. Additionally, the service has made canvassing and tracking donations much easier for candidates and the Ethics Commission.

An additional benefit is that the online contribution service facilitates participation by citizens with disabilities in the democratic process. It gives citizens the ability to contribute online at any time/location convenient for them rather than tracking down their candidate to physically supply a check or cash and sign the paper form. Secondly, the online service interface is fully compliant with the state's Web Accessibility Policy and federal standards for accessibility, allowing disabled individuals to contribute online independently.