

# OPINION

Nov. 7, 1874: Republican Party first symbolized as an elephant, in H

THE DAY EDITORIALS

## Public financing matters

Chris Coutu has become the poster boy of public financing in the state. His upset of seven-term incumbent Democrat Jack Malone in the 47th District has caught the attention of folks in the Citizens' Election Program. That is the program that provides public financing for state campaigns in Connecticut. This was the first year the program was in place for legislative races. Public financing will be available for governor, attorney general and other statewide elections in 2010.

One intent of public financing is to make our democratic process more competitive. Incumbents typically have a great advantage in raising funds privately, making it very difficult for an opponent to mount a challenge. Often no one even tries, producing uncontested races.

In the past election 75 percent of legislative candidates

participated in public financing, which is about what was predicted. That level of participation kept a lot of special interest money out of the campaigns this year. That leads to the second big goal of public financing — ending the corruptive nature of money on politics.

The Citizens' Election Program doled out about \$8.3 million on the general election. The money comes from the sale of abandoned state properties. That is money well spent to reduce corruption and boost participatory democracy.

Public financing didn't dramatically alter the political landscape this year. The Democrats maintained their dominance in both the Senate and House of Representatives. Republicans hold only 12 of the 36 Senate seats, and the number of Republicans in the House dropped from 44 to 37, out of 151 seats.

But there were upsets and

in each race the winner used public money, including Mr. Coutu. The Norwich Republican City Council alderman was among the first 10 candidates to qualify for public financing, raising the required \$5,000 from at least 150 district residents who donated between \$5 to \$100 each. Mr. Coutu received \$25,000.

He used the money for direct mailings, staffing phone banks and to cover the district with Coutu campaign signs and billboards. He also did a lot of hard work with an aggressive door-to-door campaign. Without public financing, Mr. Coutu said he couldn't have done it.

Now he will soon be headed to Hartford and is beholden to no one but the voters. It demonstrates that a candidate with public financing and determination can shake things up and that's healthy for democracy.

In its first year, public financing of campaigns did not generate dramatic changes in Connecticut, but it holds great promise.