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ON THE WEB

Public Dollars Are Flowing to Candidates

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THREE years ago, the Connecticut legislature became the first in the nation to adopt public financing for state elections, a new system that banned contributions from lobbyists and contractors and created a pot of money from which candidates could draw for campaigns.

This November's general election, when 187 legislative seats will be up for grabs, will be the first one in which incumbents seeking re-election and their challengers will be tapping into the public financing system.

More than \$2.6 million has already been distributed to candidates, and state officials expect that amount to at least double by Election Day.

Some politicians say the change may well alter the way future General Assembly leaders are chosen. It is also quite likely to change the strategy of lawmakers seeking leadership slots, even if not right away, and increase the independence of newly elected lawmakers.

Gov. M. Jodi Rell, a House Republican leader before becoming lieutenant governor in 1995, said the old system inevitably created suspicion that politicians who controlled political action committees were buying the support of their colleagues by passing around some of the campaign largess.

"I think there was always that perception," she said in a recent interview. "I think that, spoken or unspoken, there was an attitude of, 'Hey, he helped me out, I'll do anything I can to help him out.' "

The new system was adopted after nearly a year of maneuvering between Mrs. Rell and Democratic legislators. Both sides had portrayed themselves as reformers after Mrs. Rell's predecessor, John G. Rowland, resigned in a corruption scandal and polls repeatedly showed a wariness of state government.

(Two other states, Arizona and Maine, approved public financing through ballot measures, and not legislative votes, as did Connecticut, and they do not ban the same kinds of contributions.)

Mrs. Rell, who had long been opposed to taxpayer-financed campaigns, agreed to support a voluntary program only if it covered legislative races as well as campaigns for governor and other statewide offices. Democratic legislative leaders finally agreed. Public financing for all statewide offices will take effect in 2010.

In the past, campaign contributions would be channeled into political action committees controlled by legislative leaders who could parcel out hundreds of thousands of dollars to friendly incumbents and candidates of their choosing.

Many top legislative leaders say the system was not about buying votes.

“I don’t think it generated a sense of obligation or allegiance in that sense,” said Martin M. Looney of New Haven, the Senate majority leader. Mr. Looney, a Democrat, argued that leadership PACs evolved to replace the money that used to come from town and state party organizations.

But others say money certainly influenced the insider voting for majority leader, minority leader, speaker of the House and Senate president pro tempore.

“When the leadership helps you, there’s that sense you need to reciprocate,” said State Representative Christopher Caruso, a Bridgeport Democrat and co-chairman of the legislature’s Government Administration and Elections Committee.

The longest-serving member of the state House, William R. Dyson, Democrat of New Haven, said that money “played a big role.”

Mr. Dyson, who is retiring in January after 32 years in the General Assembly, made two unsuccessful runs for House majority leader. He believes his chances would have been far better if today’s system had been in place back then.

The leadership election process, he said, “was driven by people who could raise money and those who needed it or thought they needed it.”

The campaign reforms approved in 2005 put new restrictions on how much money leadership and party PACs can contribute to candidates. But the limits are far higher than those set for other types of political action committees, like those for special interest groups.

This year, leadership committees can give up to \$3,500 to a House candidate in a general election, and a maximum of \$10,000 to a single Senate campaign.

The public financing system provides \$25,000 for a House candidate who qualifies and \$85,000 to a Senate candidate in contested general election races.

A more important restriction is that lobbyists and state contractors are now banned from contributing to leadership PACs or candidates.

Mr. Caruso said he's hearing that leadership committees "are having trouble raising the large sums of money they have in the past."

"I think they've got to work a heck of a lot harder at it," said the state House Republican leader, Lawrence F. Cafero Jr. of Norwalk.

Beth A. Rotman, director of the state's public financing program, is convinced the new system will eventually change leadership elections. "Certainly, those leadership and caucus PACs can't do what they did in the past," she said. Ms. Rotman believes that could free lawmakers from any sense of obligation over money.

"I think this is going to invigorate the way candidates think about and respond to their public," said Ms. Rotman, who was deputy general counsel to New York City's campaign finance program for four years.