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CONNECTICUT CANDIDATES LINE UP FOR PUBLIC FINANCING

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By SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press Writer



Beth Rotman conducts business during a meeting of the state's elections commission in Hartford, Conn., Thursday, July 10, 2008. Rotman, who heads the new public campaign financing program, says that candidates are signing up for it in large numbers. (AP Photo/Bob Child)

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) - Barack Obama may have abandoned public financing for his presidential campaign, but in Connecticut legislative candidates are lining up to get campaign cash from the state government.

About 70 percent of the Nutmeg State's candidates for General Assembly this year are expected to sign on to a new public financing election program. Not only does it provide hefty grants, it offers extra money to combat opponents who don't participate and a promise of more cash to counter negative ads from third parties.

"Some objected to it originally, but they're happy with it now," said state Rep. Al Adinolfi, a Republican from Cheshire. "It gives them more time to get involved with the issues, it keeps everybody on a clean playing field."

National advocates for public financing hope Connecticut's voluntary Citizens' Election Program - along with similar initiatives in Arizona and Maine, and limited programs in Vermont, North Carolina, New Mexico and New Jersey - prove that public financing could also work on the national level for presidential and congressional candidates.

"I think a high participation rate will show what's possible, especially amid the collapse of the federal system," said Nick Nyhart, co-founder and director of the Public Campaign, a

nonprofit group based in Washington that advocates comprehensive campaign finance reform.

First-year participation in the Maine and Arizona programs was about 30 percent, said Andy Sauer, executive director of Connecticut Common Cause, which pushed for the new legislation in hopes of ridding state elections of special interest money.

"For the most part, this is exceeding our expectations," he said.

Last month, Obama reversed his earlier stance and decided to raise millions of dollars on his own, bypassing the federal system that's been in place since the Watergate scandal.

President Bush was the first candidate to reject public financing of primaries when he ran in 2000, but no previous candidate had ignored the general election funds.

Obama said the system is outdated.

"We face opponents who've become masters at gaming this broken system," he told supporters in a video message.

Republican candidate John McCain said his campaign will take public financing.

Accusing Obama of going back on a promise, the Arizona senator said he wasn't worried about being outspent in the fall presidential contest.

Nyhart wasn't surprised by Obama's decision.

"We're essentially asking candidates to run a 2008 campaign with a '70s-era public financing system," he said.

"A modern design of a public financing system is going to draw candidates in and an antiquated program is going to watch candidates opt out," he added.

There's hope that if Connecticut's system is successful members of Congress might eventually adopt a similar program to fund their campaigns.

"I think that what I've seen so far in Connecticut is impressive. Some other states are doing some funding as well. We'll look at all of them," said Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Conn., an advocate of campaign finance reform. "In four to six years, I think we'll have a real story to tell."

Rocked by public corruption scandals in recent years, Connecticut passed a law in 2005 that created a voluntary system in which legislative and statewide candidates receive public funds to run their campaigns so long as they agree to strict rules about spending and fundraising.

They must collect a specific number of small contributions _ \$5 to \$100 _ from individuals, including many living in their districts, to qualify for the program. Contributors cannot be lobbyists, or current or prospective state contractors, or their family members.

A major party state representative candidate, for example, must raise \$5,000 to receive a \$25,000 grant for the general election. That candidate then agrees to spend no more than \$30,000 on his or her race. Additional money is available if a nonparticipating opponent outspends the candidate or if an independent group wages an attack campaign.

Unopposed candidates can be eligible for 30 percent of the grants. Minor party and petitioning candidates face tougher thresholds before they can receive cash.

About \$10 million is expected to be spent on this year's race. The grants are primarily funded by unclaimed property, such as old bank accounts and life insurance policies, that have accumulated over the years. Donations are also accepted.

"It is public money, but the fact that no tax revenue was increased has been very helpful to tell people," said Beth Rotman, director of Connecticut's public financing program.

The Citizens Election Program will include candidates for the state's constitutional offices, such as governor, in the 2010 election. A participating major party candidate for governor will be able to receive \$3 million for the general election.

Rotman, who previously worked with New York City's public financing program, said legislative candidates are signing up in droves because they saw firsthand how the system worked in several recent special elections held to fill vacant seats.

"There was such fear in the beginning of the unknown and the loss of control," she said, acknowledging she received a chilly reception from some candidates. But after the special elections, Rotman said there was a "sea change."

"They saw that it wasn't that bad," said Rotman. "Those special elections were really key in showing people that this could be done."

On the Net:

Citizens Election: <http://www.citizenselections.org/> (Copyright 2008 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.)

