



Judge Rules Connecticut Can Ban Lobbyists' Contributions

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HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) _ A federal judge on Friday upheld Connecticut's ban on lobbyists and state contractors making contributions to state political campaigns.

In a **98-page decision**, U.S. District Judge Stefan R. Underhill in Bridgeport said the General Assembly was justified in enacting such a ban given Connecticut's history of public corruption scandals involving high-ranking state politicians.

"I conclude that the legislature had a constitutional, sufficiently important interest in combating actual and perceived corruption by eliminating contributions from individuals with the means and motive to exercise undue influence over elected officials," Underhill wrote.

The judge maintained that the state's campaign finance reform law, which passed in wake of the corruption scandal that drove former Gov. John G. Rowland from office in 2004, does not "materially undermine" lobbyists' constitutional rights to free speech or to freely associate with candidates and political parties.

Some lobbyists at the state Capitol were outraged by the ban, saying they and their family members were unfairly targeted because of the scandal. Besides the lobbyists and state contractors, the law also bans their immediate and minor family members from making political contributions to candidates for legislative and statewide offices, candidate-affiliated political action committees and party committees.

R. Bartley Halloran, an attorney for the Association of Connecticut Lobbyists, which challenged the ruling, said he had not yet seen the decision. But he said the organization plans to wait until the remaining challenges to the law involving minor party candidates are resolved before deciding what it will do next.

"I suspect that we will appeal," he said.

Underhill is expected to rule in March on whether the law, which provides public funding for campaigns to qualified candidates, is unfair to minor party and petition candidates.

To qualify for public funds, all candidates must raise a certain number of contributions in \$100 or less increments from individuals. But minor party and petitioning candidates must satisfy at least two additional requirements _ obtaining signatures or having received a certain percentage of votes in the last general election.

The plaintiffs claim the system unfairly benefits major party candidates.

Laura MacCleery, deputy director of the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, worked to defend Connecticut's law. She said Underhill's ruling on Friday is timely given the controversy involving Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, accused of seeking kickbacks in return for choosing a successor to President-elect Barack Obama in the U.S. Senate, among other charges.

"I think it is a wonderful victory and it has been put in tremendous context by the events in Illinois," she said. "We really do need prophylactic rules that change the culture of dealmaking."