

A NEW KIND OF POLITICS

Citizens' Election Program opening politics to Connecticut's citizens



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Abstract

The Citizens' Election Program has the potential to radically change the way politics is run in Connecticut. From interviews Connecticut Common Cause has conducted with 11 candidates, it is clear that the program has provided the opportunity to run for office to people who had neither the money nor the connections to fund a competitive campaign. In short, Connecticut's new public financing for campaigns program not only has removed the deleterious effects of special interest political contributions but opened up state politics to an entirely new class of people: Citizens.

Introduction

The 2008 legislative elections mark the first run of Connecticut's Citizens' Election Program, which provides election grants to qualified candidates running for statewide and General Assembly offices. The program, which was created in the wake of a series of scandals that plagued the state over a span of 10 years, was designed to provide an alternative to the time-consuming political fund raising process that dominated Connecticut elections in past contests. The program provides election grants to qualified candidates who agree, among other things, to abide by strict spending limits. By providing an alternative to the old method of fund raising, much of which consisted of contributions from individuals and institutions looking to curry favor with candidates, candidates could compete in any election without being beholden to any special interest.

Although this year's elections do not include statewide races like the gubernatorial race, which in the past commanded a price-tag close to \$9 million, they do feature legislative races, which have been dominated by political contributions from special interests that for the most part were directed at the Democratic majority that controlled the legislative agenda. Ironically, it is Republicans, who have been vocal in their opposition of the public financing of campaigns, who stand to benefit from the level playing field when they face off with Democrats on Nov. 4.

At the start of 2008, the Connecticut State Elections Enforcement Commission estimated that

78 percent of all candidates would be participating in the Citizens' Election Program – more than twice as much as Arizona and Maine during the first runs with their public financing program. As of Sept. 10, the participation rate of major party candidates is 78 percent, and there exists a strong possibility that Connecticut's public financing participation rate could surpass 80 percent by October 10th, the filing deadline to submit all qualifying contributions.

With such a high participation rate, the Citizens' Election Program has the potential to radically change the way politics is run in Connecticut. Whereas prior to this year's election, candidates had to be either politically connected or independently wealthy to run for office, the Citizens' Election Program opens up campaigns to any citizen willing to make the effort to qualify for election grants. From interviews Connecticut Common Cause has conducted with 11 candidates, it is clear that the program has provided the opportunity to run for office to people who had neither the money nor the connections to fund a competitive campaign.

How it works

Connecticut's public financing program for campaigns, the Citizens' Election Program, is similar to the public financing systems in Maine and Arizona. First, candidates must file an affidavit stating, among many things, they will abide the spending limits of the program and agree to lawfully use state funds. Then, candidates collect qualifying contributions between \$5 and \$10 from

Citizens' Election Program grant amounts

| Office | Primary | Primary In party dom. dist. | General election | Unopposed | Opposed by minor party candidate | Minor or pet. candidate with 10%* | Minor or pet. candidate with 15%* | Minor or pet. candidate with 20%* |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|--|---|---|---|
| Governor | \$1,250,000 | | \$3,000,000 | \$900,000 | \$1,800,000 | \$1,000,000 | \$2,000,000 | \$3,000,000 |
| Other statewide | \$375,000 | | \$750,000 | \$225,000 | \$450,000 | \$250,000 | \$500,000 | \$750,000 |
| State senator | \$35,000 | \$75,000 | \$85,000 | \$25,500 | \$51,000 | \$28,333 | \$56,667 | \$85,000 |
| State rep. | \$10,000 | \$25,000 | \$25,000 | \$7,500 | \$15,000 | \$8,333 | \$16,667 | \$25,000 |
| Spec. election state senator | | | \$63,750 | \$19,125 | \$38,250 | \$21,250 | \$42,500 | \$63,750 |
| Spec. election state rep. | | | \$18,750 | \$5,625 | \$11,250 | \$6,250 | \$12,500 | \$18,750 |

* of total votes cast in prev. election or of signatures collected to total votes cast.

individuals. Connecticut has a ban on lobbyists and state contractor contributions, thus making them ineligible to make qualifying contributions. To qualify for a state Senate grant, candidates must collect \$15,000 and need to have qualifying contributions from at least 300 individuals that reside in the towns of their district. For House grants, candidates must collect \$5,000 in small contributions, including 150 contributions from individuals that reside in the towns of their district. All contributions must include written documentation as to who has given the contribution (i.e. name and address) and all expenses made and not yet paid must be itemized.

For petitioning candidates and minor party candidates, there are additional requirements. If a minor party candidate has received a percentage of the votes cast in the previous election, a candidate can receive a partial grant. Alternatively, petitioning and minor party candidates can collect signatures for a full or partial grant, based on the number of signatures versus votes cast in the previous election. If a candidate receives a partial grant, they are permitted to privately raise up to the spending limit of participating candidates.

Once candidates are officially on the ballot, they can submit their applications to the Connecticut State Elections Enforcement Commission for approval.

The amount of money received depends on the race, the level of competition and the party affiliation of the candidate.

An election program for citizens

Prior to the creation of the Citizens' Election Program, political fund raising was a talent valued above all else in electoral politics. Gifted policy experts and wordsmiths held important roles on a campaign, but without the political dollars necessary to pay campaign bills, candidates faced a losing battle no matter how otherwise talented their staffers were.

Politically connected, "insider" candidates could rely on their party, legislative caucus and a hodge-podge of special interests looking to back their campaign. Independently wealthy candidates could fund their own campaigns. Candidates talented in fund raising in their own right could not only be strong candidates for the office of their choice but position the ability to amass political dollars as leverage for legislative leadership posts.

However, prior to the creation of the Citizens' Election Program, all other candidates – no matter how talented – were at a distinct disadvantage. Given that the program provides competitive grants to any qualified candidate, there was a presumption prior to the creation of the Citizens Election Program that the new system would attract more candidates.

Of the 11 interviewed by Connecticut Common Cause, six candidates said they would not have run if it were not for the Citizens Election Program. Others said that they preferred participating in the voluntary Citizens' Election Program rather than building a political war chest from private contributors. Every candidate interviewed said they

enjoyed the emphasis on grassroots organizing and citizen participation, and most candidates expressed appreciation that the program reduced the influence of special interest on their campaigns.

A few candidates were concerned about the growing role and influence of independent expenditures, which could represent a new outlet for special interests.

Arthur House



Arthur House, a Simsbury Democrat running for state Senate in District 8, said he is pleased that the Citizens' Election Program has freed him from courting lobbyist contributions.

"If a lobbyist raises \$10,000 for you, you make time to sit down with them". Freedom from lobbyist money allows Mr.

House and other CEP candidates to spend time listening to constituents, rather than feeling beholden to special interests.

House is no stranger to the political fund raising machine. House has been around politics in both Washington, D.C., and Connecticut for years, having worked in the Clinton administration and in the office of former U.S. Sen. Abraham Ribicoff.

The Citizens' Election Program, House said, changes the focus of campaigns. The requirement to collect local contributions – 300 in House's bid – forces candidates to make their pitch to their would-be constituents.

House utilized his contacts as a former firefighter and YMCA basketball coach to build a grassroots network to help him reach his threshold funding goal. His daughter, a high school senior, held a small event she called "Help Raise Money for Sophie's Dad", which House said helped to get the youth in his district involved.

"It takes work, but that's OK, politics is supposed to be hard work," House said.

"I love the prospect of starting Labor Day without fundraising," House added. "You can spend all of September and October just campaigning"

"Using tax payer dollars makes it a commitment to the taxpayers, rather than using the dollars of special interests, which results in a commitment to the special interest, not the taxpayers."

Cicero Booker,
Working Families Party candidate,
15th State Senate District

Cicero Booker



Cicero Booker, running as a Working Families Party candidate in the 15th state Senate district, has lived in one of the poorer sections of Waterbury all his life. Retired from the Marine Corps and the Waterbury police department, Booker has dedicated himself to helping members of his

community.

Booker, who said "my silver spoon was plastic," was happy that even disadvantaged people in his community could get involved and know that even their five dollar donation was significant. Many people in his district in Waterbury had never donated to a political candidate. Booker hopes the excitement that they feel in being invited into the political process will help translate into a November win for him.

He feels strongly that even poor people and people of color should have a voice in politics, and the Citizens Election Program helps to make that possible. "Government should do things for you, not to you," he said.

A common criticism of the public financing of campaigns is that public money – taxpayer dollars

– should be used in areas of need, not for politicians. Booker praised the use of public money to fund campaigns.

Rep. Tom Christiano



Rep. Tom Christiano, a Trumbull Democrat running for re-election in the 134th District, said he appreciates the freedom from special interests the Citizens' Election Program provides. "Suburban candidates have the ability to raise money so it doesn't change politics too much in the Fairfield County

suburbs from the money raising standpoint, but the source of the money is important because now you are independent from the groups that used to have control over your destiny."

As a resident of Fairfield County, Christiano said had no problem meeting his threshold funding requirement. While he knows he would have been easily able to raise all the money needed for his race privately, he feels that he is giving his donors the opportunity to get involved in his race.

From a local perspective, Christiano sees the advantage for municipal races. With the low qualifying contribution limits, local contributors have more money to give to municipal candidates that don't have the option of public financing. "In its purest form, the program allows people to save their money for the local town races."

Rep. James Spallone



Rep. James Spallone, an Centerbrook Democrat running for re-election in the 36th District, was instrumental in getting the Citizens' Election Program enacted in Connecticut and originally sought office in 2002 in part to seek campaign finance reform in Connecticut.

Spallone said the Citizens' Election Program has allowed him to engage his constituents

directly without being preoccupied with raising political dollars.

"The idea of not worrying about raising money while you are trying to door knock and attend community events is just fantastic."

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**Rep. James Spallone,
Democratic candidate,
36th House District**

Marc Garafalo



Marc Garafalo, a Derby Democrat running for state representative in District 114, said he was so enthusiastic about public funding that he vowed only to accept \$10 donations. Working to achieve that goal has meant a lot of neighborhood walking and door, but he continues his efforts so that he can keep that promise. He said his door-to-

door campaign was worth the effort and will help members of his community feel part of his campaign in a way not seen before. "It allows you to go out and listen to people's concerns," Marc said. If not for the Citizens Election Program, he added, "I wouldn't be running, because it was so difficult to beat an incumbent with the old system when they were funded by lobbyists."

David Stevenson



David Stevenson, a Bethel Democrat running for state representative in District 107, wants to be indebted to no one except the voters. "I am very grateful to the Connecticut Legislature and to Governor Rell for passing the program," Stevenson said.

Stevenson said he was inspired by Vermont Gov. Howard Dean's bid for the Presidency in 2004 and feels that the CEP program fits very well into his ideals of

the way government should be run. He is hoping to capitalize on the fact that his opponent voted against the program but is still taking advantage of it, Stevenson said, and added that his strategy of going door to door and meeting as many people as he can would not be possible if he had to spend all his time fundraising.

Vincent Marino

Vincent Marino, a Republican from Orange running for State Senate, was reluctant to run for office until he heard about the Citizens Election Program. As a town attorney for Orange, he was concerned that the amount of time it would take to raise money to wage a competitive campaign against a popular incumbent would be too onerous. When he learned that he would only need to raise \$15,000, from 300 people in his district, running for office became a “no-brainer” for him.



Marino decided to use the Citizens’ Elections’ qualifying requirement as a way to build up a grassroots network of supporters. He found it helpful to get “buy in from a lot of people early on in the process, from a grassroots perspective” which he thought “helped to build the network”.

In a way to inject fun and a little competitive spirit in the qualifying process, Marino challenged a few other Republican legislative candidates in the area to a contest to see who could qualify first. Marino won that contest and hopes the victory bodes well for his chances in the fall.

Nanci Seltzer



Nanci Seltzer, a Milford Republican for state representative in District 118, called the program “a blessing” and said that, as a single mom putting two sons through college, she would not have dreamed of running for office if not for public financing.

“Unless you have your own personal wealth, you can’t run” Seltzer said.

Nanci’s decision to run for office was based in part by the desire to work to keep Connecticut

“Unless you have your own personal wealth, you can’t run.”

Nancy Seltzer,
Republican candidate,
118th House District

clean of the corruption that in the past had plagued the state for years. The Citizen’s Election Program provided her the means she needed to make the effort to run for office, and reinforced her intention to help keep the Connecticut legislature free from improbity.

“Considering how much corruption there has been in Connecticut, (the program) keeps more people honest and honorable.”

Fred Camillo

Only one candidate, Fred Camillo, running as a Republican in House District 151, felt that he would have spent less time had he been fundraising in the traditional way.



“One of the responsibilities of being a candidate is fundraising,” Camillo said. “No one likes it, but it is part of the process. We should not always

look to government to fund what we can and should be doing privately.”

He did note however, that this was due to his district being one of the wealthier areas of Connecticut, and he expressed regret that fundraising was not as easy for candidates running in poorer areas.

Rep. Al Adinolfi



Rep. Al Adinolfi, a Cheshire Republican in District 103, was one of the only Republicans that voted for the Citizens’ Election Program in 2005. He said that he “used to spend months on the phone fundraising” and is relieved to be free of that need.

As one of the legislators that helped the SEEC develop the program and a beta tester for the eCRIS filing system, he hopes “that the program works for him, because I got a good opponent from it!”

Rep. Adinolfi says he has concerns with the program in the difficulty of monitoring the fundraising of non-participating candidates in a timely manner, and getting supplemental grants so participating candidates in enough time to make a difference in their campaign.

John Hartwell



John Hartwell, a Westport Democrat running for an open seat in Senate District 26, is reaping the fruits of his labor. As one of the leaders of the state chapter for Democracy for America, Hartwell worked hard to help create the Citizens Election Program, stirring up activists in the Fairfield County area and engaging legislators, some of whom were not proponents of public financing of campaigns.

“I think the program is fantastic,” John said, “I wouldn’t be running if it weren’t available.”

Hartwell was so excited about the Citizens Election Program that he recruited two more candidates to run for the State House in nearby districts. He used his network of friends and grassroots activists to be one of the first candidates to qualify for a CEP grant.

Conclusion

While some minor concerns have been raised about details of the Citizens Election Program, the candidates are overall satisfied with how things are going so far. A significant number of individuals who would not otherwise have run for office have been attracted to the process by CEP, and have had as much success as incumbents in meeting the program requirements. Most of the candidates have found their time freed up from constant fund raising by participating in the program, and are utilizing the extra hours by spending more time in their community talking to constituents.

In addition, the early identification and activation of grassroots volunteer networks has been helpful to candidates who need to be careful

about spending their grants, and will be utilizing more volunteers, which has the added benefit of involving more citizens in the electoral process. While candidates from the wealthier areas of the state have had an easier time raising the threshold funds than candidates from disadvantaged areas, all the candidates are confident of their ability to meet the requirements and receive a grant from the state.

There did not seem to be a large discrepancy in the ability of incumbents versus challengers to raise the number of donations needed to qualify for the program. Only one candidate felt that he would have preferred to campaign using the old system.

Most candidates had some level of concern about supplemental funds being delivered on time in order to have any effect. John Hartwell, in particular, said that since “fundraising and spending from parties and PACs is not apparent until the eleventh hour,” it may be too late for the supplemental grants to provide fairness. Representative Adinolfi also had concerns about this, saying that it is hard to monitor what non-participatory candidates are receiving when (in terms of funding).

Although the Citizens’ Election Program provides matching grants for candidates who are the victims of negative independent expenditures, it does not provide grants for candidates who opponent is the beneficiary of positive independent expenditures. Thus, a political action committee could spend an unlimited amount of money praising a candidate and potentially unbalance the level playing field that the Citizens’ Election Program has put in place.

Three of the 19 primaries held in August were impacted by significant amounts of independent expenditures. One campaign, that of Karen Houghtaling of Wolcott, attributed her 150-vote loss to the \$8,000 of independent expenditures made on behalf of her opponent.

Also, while Connecticut has a lobbyist campaign contribution and solicitation ban, lobbyists are free to contribute and raise money for PACs that make independent expenditures. So, for example, a lobbyist for the telecommunications industry could raise hundreds of thousands of dollars and channel those political dollars into advertising praising the work of a candidate.

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